

CHAPTER 1

ARRIVAL

The man awoke to a morning twilight of eerie noises and bitter cold; from a dream, half-forgotten, a river in flood, rushing waters, cries for help, a fall and a bang to his head. Yet, it had seemed more than a dream.

When he opened his eyes, flakes of snow drifting down clouded his vision, but he could just make out the silhouettes of tall, pyramid-shaped trees reaching up high above. He noticed a sharp object, maybe a stone or the root of a tree, pressing into the small of his back and he felt very cold. A thick blanket of snow covered the ground and most of his body.

As the man tried to stand up, snow fell from his clothing – clothes that were inadequate for these harsh conditions. At that moment, many thoughts passed through his mind.

Where was he, and how did he come to be there? Why was he only wearing a pair of jeans, a thin cotton jacket over his shirt, and canvas shoes on his feet?

He stumbled and fell down again. Terror gripped him. His teeth began to chatter, though whether from cold or from fear he wasn't sure.

Is this the dream, and the other reality?

As he lay motionless, he heard a whisper in his mind, "Squire, it's me, Quexitoxeri. Soon the time will come for the fulfilment of the prophecy. The skull shall be made whole once more, and you will rule again in the Land."

Is this the reality, and the other the dream?

Several minutes had passed since he had awoken. Once again, he tried to stand, but his muscles seized, and his bones were chilled to the marrow by the paralysing cold. He grabbed hold of a branch from a small tree nearby. Despite the cold, he sweated profusely from the effort of easing his way into an upright position.

The forest remained in dusky darkness, but he noticed thin shafts of light penetrating the thick canopy of trees to reach him on the forest floor, and knew that twilight was giving way to day. In these murky conditions, the only plants he could see peeping out from under the blanket of snow were some ferns and a few herbaceous plants.

When his eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, he perceived a pair of green, luminescent eyes peering at him from behind a nearby bush. Someone or something was watching him. A chill of fear passed through his body. But the eyes disappeared just as quickly as they had appeared. He rubbed his own eyes and looked once more, but this time he saw nothing.

It's an illusion, or another part of this nightmare. I must get away from this place.

He jumped up and down a few times to dust the snow from his garments, and to try to free his limbs from their temporary paralysis. After a while, he managed to force one foot in front of the other and began to walk. He could see coniferous trees stretching endlessly in all directions. He didn't know which way to head.

To the south the ground seemed to slope downwards a little, so he struck off in that direction.

If I can find a stream, then I can follow it and discover a way out of this forest, and maybe find some people to help me.

The snow was several centimetres thick underfoot, which made progress slow, but he was thankful that it had stopped falling.

As he pursued his downwards path towards the anticipated stream, a need for survival took over, urging him to put one foot mechanically in front of the other. Whenever he fell, which happened often, he forced himself to his feet again, and trudged on. He became oblivious to his surroundings.

It's all a dream.

An ear-piercing howl aroused him from his reverie.

Wolves!

Panic took over, and the man began to run. He could hear other noises now of the wolves disturbing the undergrowth not far behind him. Pushing himself to the limit to escape from the predators, he felt his heart beating faster. A feeling of dread consumed him when he sensed the bloodthirsty animals snapping at his heels. He fell again. With his last ounce of strength, he forced himself back onto his feet.

He staggered on a few more metres until he stumbled into a small clearing in the trees. He felt more vulnerable than ever. His head darted around, looking for a place to hide. Cowering, the man backed towards the nearest big tree. The leading wolf came charging towards him through the undergrowth. He was a tall beast with a long, slender body covered

with a sleek, grey coat and with long thin legs. Saliva drooled from his open mouth displaying a vicious set of teeth and a dark pink, lathering tongue.

I'm done for.

In desperation, the man picked up a small rock and threw it at the aggressor. The beast yelped and backed away, but the pain seemed only to infuriate him further. He let out a deep fearsome howl, his ears pricked up, and he prepared for the kill. Cringing, the man hid his face in his hands. His snow and ice-encrusted beard felt cold and hard, and gave him no solace.

I'm going to be torn to shreds.

Amidst the fear and desperation, he heard another sound – the sound of wings beating – and felt a disturbance of the air around him. Deflated into a state of total submission by this latest horror, he peered between his fingers. He was bewildered to see a giant eagle swoop down and carry the wolf away in its talons. He could hear the wolf's screams as the bird lifted the beast high into the air. A few moments later, the wolf wailed again when the eagle dropped him, and he fell far below to his death. When the other wolves saw what had befallen their companion, they abandoned their prey and loped away.

The man remained in his cowering position for several minutes until, realising that the first danger had passed, a foreboding of other unknown perils gripped him. Once more, he began to run for his life. Once again, his heart began to pump as he strained every sinew and every muscle to escape the danger. He kept running, downhill, down, down, and down, picking up speed and losing control. Without warning, he tripped on a sharp rock. However, his body did not strike hard ground or even the softness of new-fallen snow. Instead, he found himself tumbling through the air down into an abyss.

Am I going to die just like the wolf?

His descent into the unknown depths lasted only a few seconds, but it seemed that several minutes had passed. Images of darkness, silhouettes of trees, snow, and slathering wolves snapping at his heels passed through his mind.

Where am I? What's happening to me? It's all a delusion.

More images of a raging river, a screaming child, and a tree root. Whispers of a prophecy, a skull. He expected at any moment to wake up from this nightmare. He was free-falling now, and anticipated that his body would soon smash into the rocks below.

Once again, his fortune changed as someone or something grabbed his clothing from above and arrested his downward plummet. Now he flew like a bird. At the same moment, he lost consciousness.