

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.

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When he awoke, he lay in a warm bed.

He looked around, and saw by the light of a flickering log fire that he was in a small room. He was alone. He didn't know how many hours had passed since the wolves had attacked him, but through a crack in the curtains of a window, he could see that there was darkness outside. He tried to call out, "Is there anyone there?" but no sound came from his vocal cords.

I've lost my voice ... or lost my mind, he thought.

He tried again, with greater effort, and discovered that he could only make a rasping sound.

It's no use. No one can hear me, even if there is someone there.

He lay on a wooden bed, a little hard perhaps, but comfortable and warm, and several blankets covered his body. He wore strange dry clothes. On a table beside the bed, he discovered a cup of water and some bread.

So there is somebody here.

After he had quenched his thirst, he stuffed the bread into his mouth, and washed it down with some more water. His hunger was not sated, but he felt more contented and soon drifted off into sleep once more.

When morning came and he awoke for a second time, he heard the rattling of the door latch, and his heart leapt. He sat bolt upright and inched his body back towards the wall.

Wolves!

A strange woman came into the room. He estimated that she must have been in her early thirties. He didn't think she was beautiful, but her striking features – thin face, sharp nose, and long black straight hair, parted in the middle – gave her an air of elegance. She wore a simple light-brown cloak with a rope tied around her waist.

Of course, it can't be wolves. I'm inside a house.

The woman smiled, and his terror subsided.

"Who ... who are you? And where am I?" he asked with a hoarse whisper.

"My name is Helge." The man relaxed at the sound of her soothing voice. "I'm so glad to see you're alive. When you were brought here, you were cold and delirious, and close to death. I gave you some dry clothes, put you in this warm bed, and gave you a potion of healing herbs. I've watched over you for two days and nights."

"Where am I? And who am I? Can you tell me, please?"

"This is my cottage, situated in Hanlin Forest in West Thorland, and you are Squire. You have returned to us as the ancient prophecy foretold."

“Squire?” He wrinkled his brow, trying to remember if he had heard the name before. “I don’t know this name. I am not Squire, I am ... I forget who I am.”

“You are Squire. The prophecy spoke of your arrival.”

“What prophecy? I have no memory of these things. How do I come to be called Squire?”

“You have forgotten? Of course you have forgotten. I can see the confusion in your eyes.” Helge spoke with compassion, yet with a conviction. “You were the great leader of our people many centuries ago. You took the name Squire as others have taken the title King or Emperor. But you are not like a king or an emperor. You are the shield-bearer, and you serve your people rather than suffer your people to serve you.”

Helge drew closer and looked deep into the man’s face as if she were searching for some clue in his features that would confirm his identity.

Squire grabbed hold of the cloth of Helge’s cloak at the neck. “What do you mean? I am no Squire; I am neither a king nor a servant. Why are you telling me these things? I am not the person you think I am.”

The woman did not resist, but spoke again calmly. “These things are true, as you will surely come to know.”

He relaxed his grip on her cloak. “I’m sorry. You have been kind, and have looked after me. Thank you for your hospitality, but I don’t believe any of this nonsense. If I am indeed this Squire, as you say, how come I have no recollection of my former life here in, in ... ”

“Thorland.”

“Why did this Squire abandon his people, so he now has to be recalled just to satisfy some prophecy? I don’t buy it. Is this some kind of experiment, like rats in a laboratory? Not for me. Now, if you’ll be so kind as to give me my own clothes, I’ll be on my way.” As he spoke, Squire stepped out of the bed and made his way to the window.

After seeing the wintry scene outside, he turned abruptly with a bewildered look on his face.

“Where am I?” he asked again. “Am I a prisoner?”

“No, you are not a prisoner. You are free to leave whenever you like, but where will you go? See the snowdrifts are piled high against the house. The door will not open for the weight of snow. You are a stranger to this place, and wouldn’t last more than ten minutes alone in the forest. Even I would not venture out in this.”

A wolf howled in the distance.

Squire's heart missed a beat. He slumped back down on the edge of the bed.

"Then what am I to do?"

"We believe that the time has now arrived for this prophecy to be fulfilled and that you, Squire, are the key to its fulfilment. We didn't know quite when to expect you, but the signs told us that it should happen soon. There is much trouble, and forces of evil are at work throughout Thorland. Spies of Gordeva are said to inhabit every town and village."

His brow furrowed. "Who is Gordeva?"

"She is the wicked wizard, and sister to the good wizard Tobin."

Squire sagged back onto his pillow. "Good wizards, bad wizards, female wizards? None of this makes any sense."

"All will be revealed to you in time."

"Is this a dream?" he asked. "I know, I've got it ... you're not really here. There is no forest, no wolves, no giant eagle, no ... you. Soon I will wake up and know that it's all been a flight of fancy."

She gave him a sympathetic smile. "You're not dreaming," she replied. "Dreams always come to an end. This will not end until the prophecy is fulfilled. So, you do remember the eagle. Tell me more about the wolves and how you were brought to my cottage."

Squire began relating the tale of his arrival in the woods.

When he came to describe the voice he had heard saying, 'Squire, it's me, Quexitoxeri,' a look of shock came over Helge's face.

"Did you say Quexitoxeri?"

"Yes, she addressed me as Squire, and talked of the prophecy. But I thought that was just part of the dream. Who is Quexitoxeri?"

"She is the living prophet of the Creator. The first Quexitoxeri, Sohan, was the daughter of Squire ... your daughter."

"What do you mean, 'the first Quexitoxeri'? I don't understand."

"There have been many called by that name. The one who spoke with you waits in Kand-e-Har on the far side of the Air Mountains."

"Waits for whom?"

"She waits for you, and she is also waiting for the skull. Now that I have heard these words from Quexitoxeri, do they not convince you that I tell the truth?"

Seeing the perplexed look on his face, she gave him a small, empathetic smile. "I understand you are confused and you don't think you belong here, but we believe that you are Squire who lived once before in Thorland, and that now you have returned to us. The ancient

stories tell that Squire had a small scar above his top lip on the left side. Do you have such a scar?"

Squire hesitated before replying.

Why hadn't she looked for this already? he thought.

Then he felt the thick growth of hair both on his chin and above his top lip. His face had remained unshaven for several days.

"Please fetch me water and a razor. I need to shave."

Helge returned after a short time with a bowl of warm water, some soap and a razor. She had no doubt that this man was Squire, but eagerly waited for confirmation.

"I'll leave you to shave while I go to prepare you some hot food," she said. "Then you can tell me the rest of your story."

He stood in front of a full-length mirror and examined the unfamiliar features of his shaven face. A pair of blue eyes stared back at him.

Is this me?

The scar over his top lip glistened in the sunlight. Despite this, his face looked round and handsome. His hair was sandy-coloured, quite short and thinning in the middle. He must have lost some weight over the last few days, but he appeared muscular and he stood erect.

I must be in my mid-thirties.

He noticed that he wore a similar cloak to Helge's, but the one she had given him was coloured grey.

While he studied his face and thought about the scar, a waft of hot spicy food reached his nostrils, and he realised that he was very hungry.

Then he saw the woman standing behind him. He hadn't heard her come back into the room. Although he was not short, he noticed that she was slim and, for a woman, very tall, much taller than he was.

"You are very tall," he said.

"I am from Atmos."

Squire resisted the temptation to probe further. "You were right about the scar," he conceded, "but how could you have known this?"

"We are witnessing the beginning of the fulfilment of the prophecy."

Is this the dream, and the other reality?

"If this is a dream," he said, "then I will eventually wake up."

Is this reality, and the other the dream?

“On the other hand, if this is real, then maybe ... just maybe ... it is my destiny to do as you ask and help save the Land.”

“This is not a dream, and you must help your people.”

“My people? I am not from this place. These are not my people. This is not my problem.” His raspy voice reached a crescendo.

“You must eat now,” she said. Helge lowered a tray with a plate of steaming stew and vegetables, and placed it on a table, inviting Squire to sit and eat.

After Squire had eaten, Helge said, “Can you continue with your story? What happened after you heard Quexitoxeri’s voice?”

Helge didn’t interrupt again until Squire got to the part about the pair of green, luminescent eyes that peered at him from behind a bush.

“A cougar,” she gasped, frowning so much that her thick black eyebrows almost met above her deep brown eyes.

“I thought it must have been an illusion, or another part of the nightmare. I knew I had to get away from that place.”

Squire continued with his story. Finally, he concluded his description with the words, “I flew like a bird. At the same moment, I lost consciousness.”

“It was the eagle,” Helge said. “I have heard many stories of this giant eagle. It is also spoken of in the prophecy.”

After a few moments of silence, he asked, “What exactly does the prophecy say?”

“The ancient legends of our people foretold of your return to Thorland in the following verse:

*In times to come when things are dire
A Saviour will come again to Thorland,
His name: Squire.
From eagle’s talons he will fall,
And by his hand –
With the help of woman tall,
Twins, archer, three others and a mule –
He will reunite golden teeth with golden skull,
Seeking them out in parts of the land
Yet to be revealed.
And when this is done, all will be healed.*

“The eagle carried away the wolf, and the eagle saved you and brought you here to my cottage. Do you not see now that the words of the prophecy are true?”

“Why me?” he asked. “I don’t have any special powers. You say the ancient legends foretold that I should ‘return’. I have no memory of ever being here before. I’m not from this place ...Thorland.”

Squire studied the woman whose future she believed to be so intertwined with his own.

“You are the tall woman?” he asked.

“Yes.”

* * * * *

Squire remained at Helge’s cottage for several weeks until he had regained his strength. During that time, he began to trust the woman and they had grown much closer. He could still not resolve the conflict of who he was or how he had come to be there, but he gradually came to accept that there was no other way forward. Cooperating with Helge seemed to be his only chance of finding a way out of Thorland and possibly back to his own world, wherever that might be.

By that time, the snow had disappeared and signs of spring were apparent as the days grew longer. Flowers began to bloom, and migratory birds returned to the forest. He enjoyed the rest, but remained perplexed about the past he could not recall and apprehensive of the uncertain future than he faced.

The cottage was a simple timber structure, built in a clearing in the forest and surrounded by a strong wooden fence to keep out the wolves and other predators. Within this compound Helge had planted potatoes, beans and other vegetables. For meat, she relied on her hunting skills and in particular her prowess with the sling that she always carried with her.

Every morning he walked around the inner perimeter of the compound to get some exercise.

One day he announced that he was going to explore beyond the compound.

“I advise you against that,” she said. “There are many dangers in the forest, not just wolves. Besides you will easily lose your way and, if you stray from the track, you might not be able to find it again.”

“I will not leave the track,” he said.

“There are other carnivores and dangerous animals, such as wild boars that have tusks as sharp as razors. Added to which, we don’t know what creatures Gordeve might have set loose against you.”

“Gordeve? I don’t believe in Gordeve. I don’t believe in your prophecy. I sometimes wonder if I even believe in you.” As he spoke, Squire raised his voice. “I can’t stay a prisoner within the fence of this compound forever. I will go and explore ... one of these days.”

“I am warning you one last time. Do not stray outside the fence.”

Despite these warnings, there came a day when he could no longer contain his curiosity to find out more about this new world. On the lower branches of a pine just outside the gate, he spotted a splendid parrot with red and green plumage. To get a closer look, he opened the compound gate and crept towards the bird. He had almost reached the tree when the parrot flapped its wings, launched itself into the air, and flew to the branches of another tree further along the trail that led eastwards into the forest.

He pursued the parrot, intending to walk for just a few minutes, but the bird eluded him. However, it was a beautiful, sunny day and soon he had forgotten about the parrot and Helge’s words of caution. Having lost all sense of sound judgement, he decided to go on a little further. Then he heard a distant rumbling sound that attracted his curiosity. As he proceeded further, the noise grew louder, and he recognised the sound of rushing water.

Then the trees began to thin out, and the path he followed came to the top of a small grassy knoll. He stopped in awe when, to the left of his vantage point, he saw cascading down the rocks an enormous waterfall that he estimated must have dropped 120 metres from top to bottom.

What a beautiful view.

Squire sat down on a small rock to rest. He filled his lungs with the fresh, moist air, and felt invigorated.

Above the falls and to the right, a rainbow of myriad colours refracted the sun’s light. At the bottom, a foam of cascading water obscured the rock face behind. Opposite to his vantage point, he could see a ledge that overhung precipitously above the swirling waters. As the river continued its journey towards the sea, torrents of water rushed between rocks of all shapes and sizes. Further downstream from these rapids, where the waters appeared calmer, he could see trout playing near the surface. Even further away, he saw what appeared to be a wild boar wallowing in the mud.

Squire sat enjoying these scenes for some minutes before he became aware again of a pair of luminous green eyes observing him from behind a nearby rock.

He trembled as he called out, "Who's there?"

Once again, the eyes disappeared, and he never saw them again that day.

In view of this unpleasant experience and the lateness of the hour, he decided that the time had come for him to retrace his steps to Helge's cottage. By now, he had been away for almost three hours, and he knew that she would be worried about him. He set off with mixed emotions of contentment and nervousness.

He had covered about half the distance when he heard again the sickening sound of howling wolves. Since they seemed far away, he didn't panic like the first time. Nevertheless, he began to quicken his pace. However, when he heard a disturbance in the vegetation a short distance away to his right, he sensed they were coming closer. He glanced over his shoulder, anticipating an attack from behind, but the trail appeared empty. When he turned a corner, he half expected to see a wolf on the path in front of him, baring its teeth and snarling. There was nothing there.

He was about to sigh with relief when he heard a loud grunting sound. A wild boar came crashing through the undergrowth, its tusks down as it charged towards him. It had a dark grey coat with a ridge of hair along its spine and a large head with a long, narrow snout.

Memories of that dreadful morning several weeks earlier came flooding back to him. Once again, fear consumed him and he stood petrified.

Those tusks are short and sharp like a dagger. They look like they could pass straight through my belly and out of my back.

He shut his eyes and waited. After a few seconds, he heard a thud, the animal bellowed, and then silence followed. He opened his eyes a slit and saw the animal collapsed motionless in a heap on the path. The next moment Helge appeared from her hiding place in the nearby trees. In her right hand, she held her sling, fresh from doing its deadly work.

Squire relaxed. "Am I glad to see you," he said.

"I've been following you all day," she confessed. "I was worried that you may have fallen prey to some danger. I hope that you now realise that there are many perils, not only in this forest, but also throughout this land. I beg you to never wander off on your own again." After a pause she continued, "Those are the Veil Falls. They are the most spectacular falls on the lower reaches of the Moon River. Opposite the place where you sat watching the waterfall, there's a ledge. It's the same ledge you fell from after your encounter with the wolves on that first morning. That's where the eagle caught you in its talons as you fell, and brought you to me."

“This afternoon I was reminded of another unpleasant incident from that first morning. While I sat near the waterfall, I noticed a pair of green luminous eyes staring at me again. I only saw them for a moment, but do you remember I told you I saw them before on the first morning when I was very confused and frightened. I thought it might have been an illusion, but now I’m sure it was real.”

“The cougar!” she hissed. “This is very disturbing news. Gordeve’s hand is already stretching out and working its evil in my forest. We can wait no longer. It’s time for us to leave.”

“I agree,” he said. “Perhaps I will then find out who I am and where I come from. So, where will we go?”

“First we must travel north to Wellborough,” she replied. “Then we will turn east and journey to Tobin’s castle. There we will be introduced to the golden skull, and receive the instructions for our quest.”

“And some answers to my questions, I hope.”

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One week later, after they had packed provisions and made all necessary preparations for their journey, the two companions set forth on their quest. On a bright spring morning Helge locked up her cottage, secured the gate to the compound, and they set off on the road towards the north, and to unknown and unexpected adventures ahead.