

## Chapter 1

The first thing you need to know is that I'm fifty percent Native American.

I know. I know. You're gonna ask, "What nation? What tribe?"

Here's the embarrassing part. *I don't really know.* There, I said it. I don't know. I can't help it that my grandparents pretended to be English when everybody knew that they were descendants of the red man. So I need to go with my best guess, and I'm thinking it can't be Ho Chunk because they run a huge casino right in the middle of Wisconsin, and I can't be related to that. I'm feeling like it's more Sioux or one of those tribes that hunted buffalo only for the meat and the hide until the white man came along and slaughtered them by the millions. The buffalo. Well, and probably my ancestors too, which helps to explain why my grandparents claimed to be English. It was a kind of do-it-yourself witness protection program back in the early part of the twentieth century.

So I can't blame them, but it does leave us with a mystery. I don't know what tribe I am.

I lived with my grandparents for a while, and they liked me, I think, because they gave me their house and their money when they died.

When I got the money, I didn't waste one minute. I went straight down to the courthouse and had my name changed from Doug Johnson to Straight Arrow. I wanted to honor my

ancestors, and I figured the time for witness protection was over.

I used the leftover money to get set up in the arrowhead business. It works out nice because my grandparents' house—actually my house now—is right on Main Street, and it's zoned commercial so I can sell anything I want any time I want right off my front porch. I put up a big hand painted sign that said "Indian Arrowheads." The City gave me grief about it, but, hey, they zoned it. It's not my fault they zoned my house commercial.

So you can buy arrowheads from me just about anytime except when I clean the bowling alley in Madison. I'm just doing that temporarily to pay the property taxes and buy a little food and gas for the car. Besides, I don't get a lot of arrowhead traffic between 3:00 am and 8:00 am, so the job really doesn't interfere with my business.

Of course, there's a lot more to me than just arrowheads. I do have a romantic side. But it's very focused. In fact, I only have eyes for one woman. Her name is Dove Fogico. I think she might be Native American also, although she says she's German, French and Swiss. I don't know. I guess it doesn't matter, but everybody says she looks like Jacqueline Kennedy.

I never met Jacqueline Kennedy, so I couldn't really say. She was the wife of a president, and they had kids who played in the White House and then grew up.

Anyway, Dove comes by the shop every so often and buys an arrowhead. Most people who buy arrowheads are either archaeologists, archers or regulars on the flea market circuit. I don't think Dove is any of those things, but she comes by anyway and shops around for a long time before she buys.

I think you could say she's my most regular customer.

She comes by and always stops to strum the piano on the porch. I forgot to tell you about that. I had this old piano. I mean it was the genuine article—ivory and ebony keys—none of this plastic stuff. But my nieces and nephews always liked to come over and bang on it, and, well, for some reason, they thought it was fun to tear the ivory off the keys. (Don't tell anybody. I don't want their parents to know. No point getting the kiddos in trouble over a little thing like a piano.) Anyway, one day the kids were over, and I had a crowbar in my hand, and we decided to tear the piano apart because it looked like fun, and then we got down to the soundboard, and I just didn't have the heart to tear it apart any more. Call me soft. I put most of the piano out in the strawberry patch where a feral cat had two litters of kittens before being adopted by the neighbors and surgically altered to take away the possibility of motherhood. I left the soundboard on the porch, partly because it's too heavy to move, and partly because it makes for a nice doorbell.

So Dove strums on the piano, and I come out and offer her a free Snapple. Somebody gave me like two hundred of these raspberry iced tea Snapples in exchange for a boatload of arrowheads—yeah, I know, probably not the smartest business decision, especially since I don't even like iced tea, but Dove does, so it all works out.

We talk about all kinds of things. Even though she calls me Crazy Horse, Dove is real easy to talk to. I like that because sometimes it's hard to figure out what to say when you're in the presence of a beautiful woman. But she acts like a regular person, so we just talk.

One day we were sitting on the porch together watching the leaves change color and talking about Alaska and the polar vortex, when I just really wanted to lean over and kiss her on the cheek.

I didn't, of course, because I haven't even told her that I like her.

But I plan to. It's on my to do list.

Should I tell her that I like her before the president comes or after? It's a hard decision. If I tell her before the president comes to Sun Prairie, then she might just get swept away in the excitement and decide to like me too. It could improve my chances. On the other hand, if I tell her while we're all getting geared up for the president to pin the Medal of Honor on my next door neighbor who's about to die from war wounds he got in Afghanistan—well, I don't know. Maybe she would be distracted.

She acts distracted sometimes. But mainly she's really, really nice.

You would probably like her too if you knew her, but, hey, I got here first.

By the way, I did go and visit my neighbor after he got into hospice. I didn't really know what to say because I've never gone to war and I've never died before, so I just prayed for him and gave him my favorite arrowhead.

I think he liked it because he was crying, and I was crying a little bit, and he said he would always treasure it.

He's a good kid. Wrestled for the Sun Prairie Cardinals. Went to state I think. So it's hard to see him now, all broken down. But I guess we all end up there sooner or later. Broken down. Like an old rusted out car that you keep taking back to the mechanic, but he can never fix it good as new.

My neighbor got cheated out of life. When I think about it, it makes me cry.

But the president is coming, and that should cheer everybody up, even if you didn't vote for him. I hope he doesn't notice that I don't have his bumper sticker on my car.

I don't like bumper stickers. They seem angry to me. The more bumper stickers—the more anger. And who wants that?

I guess some people do, because some people, especially around Madison have lots and lots of bumper stickers, and they say things like COEXIST, only they use religious signs, and I wonder who they're talking to.

I guess I don't wonder. I think I know.

So the president is coming, and because there's so much anger floating around, he has like a whole army to make sure that nobody—especially those who don't have his bumper sticker—tries to kill him.

So they came over and talked to me two or three times. By "they" I mean the Secret Service or the FBI or some kind of government men in black.

I offered them a free arrowhead, but they declined.

They also didn't like my idea of putting a table of arrowheads out in front of my house to sell to the passing throng while the president makes his visit. Too bad, because I thought it was a wonderful commercial opportunity.

I think they want me to keep a low profile, so I'm doing that. But I refused to take down my hand painted sign, "Indian Arrowheads." Hey, this is my business, you know.

I guess that's all for now. I need to go haul a couple hundred pounds of trash out to the dumpster, swab a dozen toilets, mop ten thousand square feet of floor, vacuum a couple miles of carpet and remove a pile of dirty fingerprints from the door.

Did I tell you that one night I broke in on some guys that were breaking in on the bowling alley? I guess they didn't expect to see a guy swinging a mop at three o'clock in the morning, and I was too stupid to even be scared. I was just trying to figure out why there were broken ceiling tiles all over the floor. Meanwhile, they were busy skedaddling back up onto the roof and down the ladder to the back parking lot. After that night, I always drive around the back lot and check for ladders before I go inside. You can't be too careful you know.

## Chapter 2

Okay, this is gonna sound a little sketchy. I'm telling you up front, just so you know.

Yes, the president came to Sun Prairie. It was crazy. Black cars all over the place. It looked like a cross between a parade and a funeral. The Sun Prairie Police were there, and the Dane County Sheriff's Deputies, and the Madison Police. Sirens everywhere. And lots of bumper stickers too. Lots and lots of bumper stickers. I hear tell that they made the Ammo Box close its doors even though they were at least fourteen blocks away. Just to be fair, they told Wal-Mart to move all their guns and ammo to the back room and lock it up. I know that because my nephew works there.

Everybody wanted to see the president. Channel 15 had a van parked right in front of my house (blocking my sign), and of course Fox 47, and 27 and 3 and a few radio stations. Plus I think CNN was there, and who knows. Some guy told me he was an AP photographer. I told him about my collection, but he wasn't interested. It was worth a try, you know. A little free publicity never hurt anybody.

A guy in a suit with one of those curly telephone cords going into his ear walked into my house without even knocking. Maybe it was the arrowhead sign. I didn't ask him what was in the case he was carrying. You know very well he was carrying an Uzi or some other weapon of mass destruction designed to mow down a whole herd of assassins in about five bullet-spitting seconds. Two more men in black were in my yard. They

didn't ask permission either; they just moved in. No problem. I figured these guys wouldn't steal any arrowheads since I already tried to give 'em some and they turned me down. Plus, with a Secret Service guy in my shop and two more in my yard, nobody would dare steal anything.

So I put two folding chairs out in my yard—the blue striped one for me, and the pink flowered one for Dove (in case she came by, which she did). We sat there. She drank her Snapple iced tea, and I was sipping on a Sprecher's Root Beer in a chilled mug.

“I shoulda grilled some brats,” I said. I keep a giant maple tree in my back yard that throws branches at the ground every time it storms, and grilling Johnsonville Bratwursts is the best way I can think of to get rid of all those excess branches. But since the presidential limousine just pulled up, I figured it would probably be a bad time to start a fire in the back yard. People get touchy about things like that, especially people wearing dark suits and toting Uzis in their carry on luggage.

Dove nodded as though she had followed everything I was thinking. That's one thing I like about Dove. I always feel like she's right there with me.

What I couldn't understand at first is why the dark suit inside my house chose that moment to step outside. It didn't quite make sense. I mean weren't they playing zone defense? I don't know. I'm not a Secret Service Agent, nor am I a basketball player, but let me say it struck me as strange.

But sometimes the world is just odd like that, so you lean back, take it all in, and move on.

The man in black walked up to the press line as though he was looking for someone. Everybody seemed to be ignoring him. The press and all the people were looking at the limousine



waiting for the president to step out. The Secret Service guys were looking at everyone but the president.

But somehow, nobody was looking at my guy, and so nobody noticed when he set his bag down next to a camera operator, stood up on his tiptoes to get a look at the president, and then turned and walked away.

Without his bag.

The Boston Marathon. The president. The crowds. This was a bomb.

I looked at Dove.

She understood. We both understood what I had to do.

When I was a child, we lived on a dirt road in North Carolina. Bill lived across the street. Even though he was only six, he was already a chain smoker like his parents. His rottweiler followed him and his trail of smoke around wherever he went.

I didn't like his rottweiler. I liked Bill just fine, but the dog I could do without.

And so I decided to inform the animal. I held a small stick in my hand, looked the canine in the eyes and commanded, "Git."

The first time, he ignored me.

So I stepped a little closer. "Git!"

This was not okay with the rottweiler. The deep growl that came from his throat shocked me, and I think it surprised Bill. Then he sprang.

"Run," Bill cried, powerless to restrain the beast.

I didn't need any prodding from Bill. Seconds earlier, the back door to my home was a few comfortable steps away. Any illusion of safety was stripped away as I tried to squeeze through

time and space to make it to that impossibly small door a thousand miles away.

It was like that when I ran for the bag. The atmosphere clung to me thick and heavy, forcing me to swim through it. Hands reached for me, but I pushed them away as I grabbed the handles and started for the fence behind my home.

The hole in the fence was a subject of some dispute between the school district and me. They claimed it was on my land, therefore, I needed to repair the breach. I said that was crazy. Their fence—their repair. It was cut and dried: their problem. Maybe it was one of those deals where they wouldn't fix it because of the principle of the thing, but the hole remained, and, because of it, a few kids managed to sneak into the football games for free.

Squeeze through the fence. Get the bomb to the middle of Ashley Field. Maybe nobody would be killed. Except, quite possibly, me.

People were hollering, but their voices seemed far away. I think someone said, "Freeze." I think someone said, "I'll shoot." But I kept running.

The fence, like the backdoor when I ran from the rottweiler, seemed a million miles away.

I heard thunder. A blinding flash.

The fence turned gray, then all things were black.

### Chapter 3

“State your loyalty,” a man’s voice said.

“My husband is loyal to the Crown.” I heard a woman’s voice say that. No, wait, not just any woman. It was Dove. Her husband was loyal to the Crown.

What crown?

It was Dove. Her husband was loyal to the Crown.

Husband? What husband?

I opened my eyes. The world spun.

The Secret Service agent was wearing chain mail and plate armor and a helmet.

“State your loyalty,” he said again.

You can’t study for an exam like this. This was definitely a trick question, and I was pretty sure there were no right answers. Were we in Guantanamo Bay? How did I get here?

The Secret Service Knight didn’t like how long it took me to answer. He grabbed my shirt and hauled me to my feet. He was shorter than me, but very strong. He held my 180 pounds as easily as I would hold a baseball.

“State your loyalty!” he demanded.

Should I say Republican or Democrat? He’s probably mad because I didn’t have the president’s bumper sticker on my car.

Does he have my voting records? What happens if I answer wrong?

Dove's voice broke in. "Good sir, my husband was poisoned by the Goraudok assassins. His mind is in a fog. He will need time to break from their spell. But I assure you, he is loyal to the Crown."

Mr. Strong Man dropped me like a sack of onions. I fell back to the ground. I tried to sit up, but the forest was spinning. My head hurt.

He turned to Dove. "Goraudok assassins?"

"Three days ago. We blundered into their camp. It was about a day's march east."

Our interrogator shook his helmeted head. "Their camp will disappear. They're very hard to track. How many were there?"

"Five, maybe six that we saw. Could be more."

Wow. Dove was acting like she lied for a living. She could run for office. I was actually starting to get interested. I never knew Guantanamo Bay would be like this.

Mr. Questions whistled. "You're trying to tell me that the two of you took on six Goraudok assassins?"

Dove chuckled. "Good sir, my husband is an archer, but we would never be that foolish. Entering their camp was a mistake. Why they didn't set a watch, I don't know. Our horses tread softly on the pine needle floor."

I started to feel the need to take notes. If this was my cover story, then I ought to know it. *But what happened to the bomb? Did it go off? Why wasn't I injured? Did they disable it? How did I get here?*

"Where am I?" My voice cracked and croaked.

Dove answered. "Rest easy, Husband. You are in the Kingdom of Arken."

"We're not in Guantanamo Bay?" I cackled.

Dove laughed. "The poison has taken his mind. But he should be clear in a couple hours. I have worked as an herbalist and a healer. I've seen this before." Then she turned to me, and patted my hand.

The moment she touched my hand, a voice filled the forest. "Stay quiet, son. Follow Dove's lead."

"Huh?" I looked around. But the voice was gone.

I looked at Mr. Armor, but he didn't react. It was as though he hadn't heard a thing. I looked at Dove.

She smiled at me, and turned back to our Inquisitor. "Good sir, you are knight of Arken. You deserve a full explanation. Let me tell you everything that happened. Our horses reacted before we did. They took off at a full gallop. If they had not, we would both certainly be dead."

I nodded. It seemed like the right thing to do.

Dove continued, "I can only credit the mercy of God that their crossbows were unstrung. Only one arrow reached us. I knew the barbs were poison, as did my husband. It struck my husband's horse. In our haste to remove it, my husband grazed his hand. Barely a scratch, but as you know the Goraudok poison is strong. Our horse fell. We continued on for an hour on my gelding, but we could hear our pursuers behind us. To throw them off track, we abandoned my horse an hour before sunset. The horse ran north along the banks of the River Harmon. We forded the river and walked west all night. By morning, the poison had taken my husband. We've been here ever since. I've been treating him with herbal teas, but time is the real healer."

I hate tea.

“What are your names?” the knight asked.

“My husband’s name is Straight Arrow. And I am Dove Fogico.” She bowed when she said that.

Okay. She gave away our names. If this is witness protection, we’re not off to a very good start. On the other hand, I don’t need to memorize new names. What I can’t figure out is how we got married. I was dying to ask, but it didn’t seem like a good idea with Mr. Nosey standing right there.

“I am Lord Cedric,” the knight said. “I will take you to the king. There we will pass judgment on your account. If there are Goraudok assassins in the forest, the king’s party must be alerted. If, however, you are spies, you will die.”

Friendly place.

Cedric hauled me to my feet again. I took a wobbly step forward and sank to my knees. “You will ride,” he said motioning to a vehicle of some sort behind me.

Transportation. This is a good thing. I hoped it would be a car native to America, like a Buick. My grandfather always said it wasn’t a real car if it wasn’t a Buick.

I turned around. No, it wasn’t a Buick. Not even close. It was the largest horse I had ever seen, and he (or she—I didn’t check) was dressed just like Mr. Cedric, armor and all.

Oh.

Here we come to an embarrassing moment. I know my ancestors tamed the wild Mustangs of the plains, and rode into battle with tomahawks, bows and arrows. But I’ve never successfully ridden a horse. Actually, I’m a little scared of them.

Sorry to disappoint you.

I was trying to figure out how to tell this guy that I didn't know how to ride horses, when he picked me up and threw me over his shoulders like I was a spare jacket.

Help! I mouthed silently to Dove as she grew smaller and smaller.

Dove smiled.

Then Cedric yelled over his shoulder, "Do you think he can sit up?"

"He will be fine," Dove called back.

Cedric plopped me into the saddle. I'm not going to go into the details, but let's just say it was not a comfortable landing. Ouch!

I looked down. The ground looked far away, and my head was still swimming. I grabbed the horse's mane and squeezed until my knuckles turned white. Then I noticed my clothes. I mean one minute I'm running through my yard in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin carrying a bomb in a case, wearing blue jeans, a flannel shirt and sneakers. The next minute I'm in Middle Earth or Narnia or The Princess Bride wearing knee high leather boots, a jacket made of some kind of animal hide, an olive green cotton shirt and light brown trousers. "How did I get into these?" I mumbled but nobody paid any attention.

"I will carry your weapons," the knight announced.

What weapons? We have weapons?

Cedric picked up a longbow and a quiver full of arrows.

Oh, yeah. Dove said I was an archer. But that's a lie. I'm not an archer. I sell arrowheads. I don't shoot them. This could get really unpleasant, I said to myself. What if they ask me to shoot an arrow at a target? I couldn't hit a bull's eye—I couldn't even hit the target if I was standing over it. But what if they test me?

Visions of shooting an apple off Dove's head at 50 paces came to my mind. Just like William Tell. But I'm not William Tell. What if they test me? Then I started laughing out loud. So what if they do test me? All I would need to do is aim for Dove. No way I'd ever hit her. I'd probably shoot myself in the foot.

Cedric's voice brought me back to reality—assuming this is reality.

"This is an odd parcel," he said. Then he lifted up the case containing the bomb.

I froze.

Boston Marathon. Sun Prairie bomb. Kill-the-president device. Weapon of mass destruction. C4 and ball bearings with a clock and wires. Ticking away, all the while we were talking, lying in wait, ready to kill us all.

My mouth was open but no words were coming out. I was willing my body to move, but my muscles weren't responding. I don't like these kinds of nightmares. At least let me move.

Dove lightly snatched the bomb away from Armored Truck Man. "It's harmless," she said in a cheery voice. "A woman needs a bag to keep her things." Then she looked at me and said, "Now that all has been disarmed; let's go meet the king."

My cousin once spent three days in a coma. When he came out of it, he thought he was on a job interview at Quiznos. He couldn't quite figure out why they would need to do an EEG just to qualify him for selling submarine sandwiches, but he went along with the flow.

Now I know how he felt.



## Chapter 4

I'm not sure how Dove got Cedric talking about himself, but she did. She's good at stuff like that. Like my grandma used to be. Grandma used to fry catfish and taters, boil corn, bake bread and brew coffee. Then she set it before her family and friends, and faded into the background, putting everybody else on center stage. She was invisible. Like the angels.

I miss my grandma.

Anyway, Mr. Cedric told us all about his horse, Manford, his horse's mother and father, his horse's maiden aunt and distant cousins. He was tight lipped about his mission, his armor and his training. But he did let slip that he once killed fifty armored men in a single battle all by himself. He also captured a half dozen spies and saw to it that they were hung.

Just to keep the conversation flowing, I told him that my life-long goal was to set up a national monument in Arlington Cemetery: The Tomb of the Unknown Indian. I threw that out there, but it didn't seem to work up any traction, so I handed the reins of the conversation back to Dove.

She quickly changed the subject.

I guess I should mention that we passed a couple of other metal men just like Cedric. Like our guy, they had arms like tree trunks, but they didn't talk much. I guess they're too busy doing push ups.

After a while my head cleared, and my anatomy got pretty sore, so we managed to talk Cedric into riding and letting me walk. That was a relief.

I really needed to get Dove by herself so I could ask her some questions. Why wasn't the bomb going off? Were we really married? How did that happen without me knowing about it? How did I get here? And where is here, exactly? And how are we going to get home? But when I tried to whisper something to Dove, Cedric's voice boomed at us: "Speak plainly, Straight Arrow, so all of us can hear."

Hmm.

They say every twenty minutes there's a lull in a conversation—unless you're talking to me, in which case I can get to the lulls a lot quicker—but anyway, I timed it once when I was at a party, and it comes out to be twenty minutes almost to the second.

We were in a lull in the conversation, and Dove decided to start singing. It was some song about a flower that grows on the Arken hills and a princess that found that flower and brought it home. I had never heard that song before but Cedric seemed to enjoy it. I'm not sure because I was wasn't looking right at him, but I think he actually took off one of his gloves and wiped a tear from his eyes.

Dove has a pretty voice. I mean it's not American Idol material, but it's good enough to sing a child to sleep, in the same league as Katniss Everdeen of *Hunger Games*, only I think better. So I like to listen to her sing, but I don't sing along, because ... well, I just don't.

I'm not a singer. We sorted that out way back in elementary school when they were dividing the songbirds between blue birds and sparrows. They created a special category for me: the bat. While the blue birds and sparrows did their thing, I joined

the janitor out in the hallway and used my talent for echolocation to help him and his dust mop find the dirt. He was a great guy, about 150 years old, and he had a hearing aid in one of his giant hairy ears. We went from one end of the school to the other looking for dirt. It was loads of fun, but I noticed that all the teachers closed their classroom doors.

Our march through the forest had a dreamlike quality to it—the morning sun filtering through the trees, the quiet gurgle of a brook nearby, Dove’s beautiful voice. I was starting to relax and enjoy this place—whatever or wherever it is, when Dove suddenly screamed, “Cedric! Stop!”

Before I even knew what was going on, she had dropped the Boston Marathon bomb, picked up a stick and raked it through the fallen leaves. Her sweeping motion dredged up a snake in the process of striking, and catapulted him ten yards or so away from the horse.

Cedric was a blur of motion. I don’t know how someone that stout can move so quickly, but he was off the horse, his sword was drawn, and advancing against the serpent before I could quite take in what was happening.

Then I noticed that the horse’s reins were in my hand. I noticed because the 2,000-pound Clydesdale was making those horse noises that let you know that he’s about to have a full-fledged panic attack that will result in one of his hooves being buried in my chest after he lifts me fifteen feet off the ground. I knew from watching Cesar Millan that I needed to be the alpha horse right now, but, for the life of me, I couldn’t remember how to do it. “Nice horsey,” I squeaked three or four times, but it didn’t seem to be helping.

Meanwhile, Cedric’s blade was a blur. He picked up the severed snake head with a gloved hand while the rest of the animal’s body writhed on the ground. “A viper,” he said. “Very danger-

ous. Enough venom to kill twenty men.” He tossed the snake head aside and turned to us. “Sweep the area,” he said. “There may be more.”

Jittery Manford seemed to calm down when he heard his master’s voice. And Cedric took back the reins so I went looking for a stick. If I’m going to hunt this world’s version of a rattlesnake, I wanted a good stick in my hand.

With sticks in our hands and a sword in Cedric’s, we searched the area. No snakes.

When Cedric returned to his saddle, he said, “You showed great courage, Dove Fogico. I owe you a debt of gratitude. That snake would have crippled my horse or worse. I will not forget what you have done.”

I once saw a cow that had been bitten by a rattlesnake right on the milk factory. It was not a pretty sight.

Even though I’m fifty percent Indian—by the way I know it’s not politically correct to say “Indian,” but I say it anyway because it reminds me that the white man is never as smart as he thinks he is. You probably know the story. Christopher Columbus or some such explorer got here and thought he had found a shortcut to India or the Indies or whatever. Anyway, my point is: He was confused. So he looks at the rightful owners of North America and calls them “Indians.” So in my mind, whenever somebody gets cocky about how much they think they know, I just think *Indian*.

Even though I’m fifty percent Indian, I do have my white man’s genes to deal with, and so that means that I don’t walk like an Indian. Indians glide silently through the woods placing their toes down first, whereas the white man jabs his heels into the dirt like he’s prancing along the boardwalk at Atlantic City. More importantly, the Indian sees everything. He knows what’s going on around him. I have trouble in that department. I tend

to trip over things and stub my toes a lot. Sometimes I accidentally run into people at the grocery store. I mean literally run into them. I'm not proud to tell you that, but I think you deserve to know the truth. My grandma used to say that sometimes my mind wasn't quite connected to this earth. I don't know about that, but one day I was walking along a gravel road in Mississippi a week or two after Hurricane Katrina, and I almost stepped on a cottonmouth snake. Shorts, sneakers and cottonmouth fangs—not a good combination.

Knowing this about myself, I tried to pay extra close attention to my surroundings. If I'm going to march through a snake-infested forest, I should probably keep my eyes open.

Maybe that's why I was the first one to see the lions. Three of them, walking across our path, about 75 yards away.

My second grade teacher used to always say to me, "Use your words." She was female, and what the female population doesn't understand—in my opinion—is that sometimes you don't have any words to use. In this case I couldn't find any words, so I just pointed.

Cedric pulled on the reins, and Manford froze.

Together the three of us—well, four, if you count Manford—watched them walk through the forest. A shaggy maned male and two females. No fence. No moat. No signs saying, "Please don't feed the lions."

I know they knew we were there. They were downwind. They had to have caught our scent. Probably they watched us for a while, and then decided to move on. Maybe they were going to circle around and eat us for lunch.

I think our arresting officer, Cedric, was thinking the same thing, because he said, "Dove Fogico and Straight Arrow, I must now decide if I can trust you."

“My lord?” Dove asked. She’s really good at this Middle Earth thing or whatever we’re doing.

Cedric continued, “Two lions I can handle. Three is one too many for me. Your skill as an archer may be needed.”

I was about to say that I have no skill as an archer when Dove gave me the evil eye, so I kept my mouth closed.

“However,” he said, “I cannot give you these arrows if they are poisoned.”

I nodded. He and his horse had plenty of armor. He probably wasn’t too afraid of an archer, unless the archer was shooting poisoned arrows. Then even a shallow wound would be fatal.

“I need you to demonstrate to me that they are not poisoned.”

I see.

Actually I didn’t see. How was I supposed to do that? Shoot something and see if it died a quick natural death or a slow painful death?

Here’s the delicate part. I had no idea if they were poisoned or not. I had never seen those arrows before in my life.

Dove spoke up. “Good sir, I can assure you that my husband does not poison his arrows, and I will happily demonstrate for you. Pick out any one of the arrows and hand it to me, if you please.”

This time Cedric nodded. He stepped off the horse, reached into the quiver with a gloved hand, retrieved an arrow and handed it to Dove.

I wasn’t exactly prepared for what Dove was about to do. She held up her hand, held up an arrow and used the tip to slice a two-inch gash in her hand. Blood was flowing freely when she handed the arrow back to Cedric.

My mouth was hanging open. Wow! This was one tough woman.

Officer Cedric handed me my bow and arrows. I say “my” loosely because I had never seen them before. I thanked him because that seemed to be the polite thing to do, but what I really wanted was an AK47 or a Jedi light saber. Even a Glock 40 would be nice. Have you ever shot a Glock 40? When I get a little money ahead, I plan to buy one for the shop. I get my inspiration from Ray Charles. You might recall the scene from *The Blues Brothers*. I haven’t read all the statistics, but I gotta believe that an armed cashier cuts way down on shoplifting.

Anyway, I had my bow and arrows, and now that we were marginally safer, we marched on with renewed confidence.

We took turns every few moments doing a 360 degree visual sweep. That wasn’t hard for me—that’s the way I normally walk when I’m visiting someplace new. The point is, we stayed alert.

Maybe that kept the lions at bay.





## Chapter 5

Okay, the next part is a little jumbled up, so bear with me while I try to explain what happened.

About the time I was really starting to get hungry, we came across a whole pile of metal men just like Cedric deep in the woods. I guess we got where we were going, because Cedric stepped off his horse and several guys gathered around him like he was some kind of celebrity. For a few minutes, he ignored us.

That gave me a chance to ask Dove a few questions.

“Are we really married?”

“No, Silly. But we gotta stick together here. It’s the only way we’ll survive.”

Oh. I guess that makes sense. Sorta.

“Where are we?”

“The kingdom of Arken.”

“Where’s that?”

“I don’t know.”

“That makes two of us. How did we get here?”

“I don’t know.”

“How are we getting home?”

“I don’t know.”

“How come you know so much about this place if you don’t know anything about it?”

“I’ve been here twice before.”

I sure wanted to know more, but at that moment our arresting officer seemed to remember that he had prisoners, even if one of them was still armed.

“We will see the king now,” Cedric announced.

The men parted, and Cedric led us forward, threading his way around the trees. I didn’t see a king, but I did see a blond girl about fourteen years old dressed up in some kind of fancy white embroidered dress talking with a woman who was dressed in plain clothing.

Then complete chaos.

Black bodies started dropping out of trees everywhere. I mean, they were alive. They were dressed in black and painted with black.

Cedric’s sword was out. He was running. “Save the king!” I heard him cry.

A man painted black, dressed in black was running toward me with an axe high over his head.

Dove put her hand on my shoulder and The Voice filled the forest: “Son, your bow.”

I was shaking so hard I could hardly get an arrow nocked in my bow. I pulled back hard and let fly. The man in black was still charging. I pulled another arrow from the quiver and scrambled to fire again. I pulled back hard, tried to aim, but the arrow went harmlessly past my assailant. There was no time to get another arrow. The axe man was upon me.

I was a dead man.

Then like a freight train, Cedric took him out. I mean it. I once saw a video of a train flying through a semi at sixty-five miles an hour. The semi exploded. Cedric came in from the side. The next moment, axe man was a motionless pile of broken bones.

I whirled around. I saw at least five men in black. They were all on the ground, and the best I could tell, they were all dead.

Dove was weeping. She came up and threw her arms around me. “Crazy Horse,” she said—that’s what she calls me—Crazy Horse, “I am so proud of you.”

The Voice filled the earth again. “You did well, son.”

What did I do?

By now I was crying, and looking for a place to hide.

“What did I do?” I asked Dove.

“Didn’t you see?” she asked. “You took out two assassins.”

“He did more than that,” Cedric’s voice boomed. “He intercepted an arrow meant for the king, knocking it out of its flight. No doubt it was poisoned. And his second shot took out the assassin as he was reloading his crossbow.”

Cedric shook my hand. “I’ve been around archers all my life,” he said. “I’ve never seen shooting like that.”

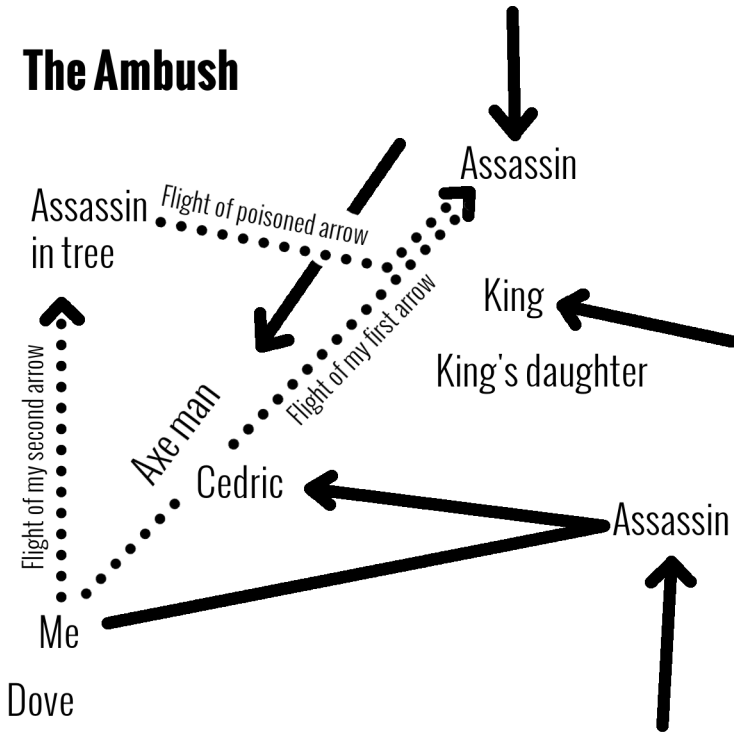
For some reason, a line from Henry V came into my mind just then:

*And be it death proclaimed through our host*

*To boast of this or take the praise from God*

*Which is his only.*

I shook my head. No, I wanted to say, I cannot shoot like that. Those arrows were guided by God.



But Cedric was already gone, hurrying back to the king.

I heard men talking. Twenty Goraudok assassins. A suicide squad. Here for one purpose, to take out the king. All dead. Two of ours had fallen. A third had a shallow wound, but it was almost certainly poisoned. He probably would not survive. The healer was attending to him. A horse and rider in black were seen fleeing. Someone said, "The king said not to pursue. Our battle horses can't match the Goraudok hunters for speed.

We would only be led into another ambush, and more would die.”

I thought about my arrow going through the leaves and branches of a tree and piercing the heart of a man. A human being was dead

When I was a boy, living on a dirt road in North Carolina I received a BB gun for the first time in my life. In my excitement over this new toy, I shot the BB gun randomly through the branches of a tree. I heard a thud, and then from the tree dropped a mourning dove. I had hit her in the chest. I stood over her dead body, a ten-year-old boy with a new power that suddenly made me sick. I carried her body into the woods across the street and buried her. I never told anyone—no one—about this until now.

“Here’s the man who saved the king,” someone said in a voice way too loud.

People were pointing at me. I didn’t want anyone pointing at me. I was wiping away tears. I was shaking. I just wanted to go away and hide.

When I was a kid, my dad was driving us through Lansing, Michigan when our little Rambler was struck by an oncoming truck. My parents didn’t make it. That’s how I ended up living with my grandparents. I remember my mom saying, “Honey, I don’t think...” Then I heard a long scream. I saw a patch of green, and I woke up staring straight up into the rain coming down. My head was inches away from a telephone pole, and our car was just a twisted piece of metal a long ways away. Life is like that sometimes. You don’t have time to get ready, and all of a sudden everything has changed. A lady in a station wagon

drove me to the hospital where they picked pieces of glass out of my face and put a cast on my arm. I didn't want to go to the hospital. I wanted my mom and my dad. But the man standing there said I had to go to the hospital, and I couldn't have them. So I sat on a chair in that hospital, and all I know is that I kept shaking. I couldn't stop shaking. I thought I was cold, but the nurse told me I wasn't cold. I was just shaking.

I don't like shaking. A real man never shakes. He does battle, and then goes on to the next thing on his to do list. But I was shaking, and probably the whole world saw me shaking, and the king was walking up to me, and I didn't know what to do.

*Get it together, man.*

Proper etiquette? Do I bow? Do I lay down my weapons? Do I say, "Your Majesty, suffer thy servant to offer his humble service"?

Dove was bowing. I bowed.

But the king extended his right hand. I guess they shake hands here. So I shook his hand, and hoped he couldn't feel me trembling.

His eyes looked into mine, and they seemed strong, but not angry. I looked down.

He spoke. "I owe you my life."

I shook my head.

"You have great skill with a bow, Sir Archer."

I tried to say, "No," but the words got stuck in my throat.

"Tell me your name," he said. His voice was fatherly even though he couldn't be much older than me.

"Straight ... Straight Arrow, Your Honor."

“Straight Arrow,” he said smiling. “A fitting name for so fine an archer. And from where do you hail, Straight Arrow.”

I’m pretty sure that’s royal talk for: Name your hometown.

“Sun Prairie, sir.”

His brows knotted in confusion. “Prairie of the Sun. I have not heard of this land.”

“It’s a great distance away,” I said. In reality, I’m not sure it’s even on the same planet, but I how could I explain that?

The king appeared to want more information. So I added, “It’s right outside of Madison. It’s in the state of Wisconsin.”

The king laughed, and placed his hand on my shoulder. “Brother at arms,” he said, “Do not speak disparagingly of the land of your birth. It may be ‘mad as sin,’ but do not use words like ‘con,’ and ‘sin,’ and...” (he paused here) “...and ‘wiz’ to describe your homeland. These are evil words. You may have reasons for seeking fortune in a new land, but we will always honor the Prairie of the Sun for our new brother hails from that land.”

I nodded. How could you argue with that?

“And what of your parentage?” the king asked. “Your line of descent?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. “Definitely NOT Ho Chunk,” I said.

“I am relieved to hear it,” the king replied.

Good. I was on a roll. “I’m thinking Sioux, and, of course, Apache.”

“Sue and Ipatchy,” the king repeated. “These are strong names. You will always be welcome in my court.”

I liked the king. He and I understood each other in a convoluted sort of way.

Just then the young woman I had seen before the ambush walked up and wrapped her arms around the king. She looked up into his eyes and said, “Daddy, is this the archer who saved your life?”

I shook my head. “No, your highness,” I said. “I did not save your father’s life. God did. He just used my arrows.” There I said it. Now I just needed to figure out a way to tell them that they were standing in front of the most incompetent archer they had ever met. But they seemed so nice, I hated to disappoint them.

The young woman was talking, “My father says it is a wise man who who acknowledges the acts of the Almighty.”

I nodded. “Your father is a wise man.” It seemed like the right thing to say. You never know when you’re dealing with royalty. You just gotta give it your best guess, and hope you don’t end up starting a war or getting sent to the gallows.

The princess turned to Dove. “And who is this?” she asked.

“Dove Fogico, your highness.”

“I am Princess Gabriella,” she said. “Welcome to Arken.” With that she leaned forward to shake Dove’s hand.

It was at that moment that I again heard The Voice. It echoed through mountains and valleys. It shook the forest, and filled the earth. I heard The Voice, but I could not understand the words.

Princess Gabriella was smiling, but tears were running down her cheeks.



I didn't know what to say, but the princess spoke. She addressed the king: "She carries The Gift," she said.

"Are you certain?" the king asked.

The princess nodded. More tears. "Yes," she said quietly, "yes, I am sure."

Then the king spoke. "This is a rare honor, Dove Fogico. Tell me, how did you come to carry The Voice?"

Dove shook her head. "I don't know, your majesty."

The king nodded. "We welcome you, Dove Fogico, Carrier of The Voice. Not one soul has walked with The Gift in the Kingdom of Arken since Gabriella's mother, Queen Adelaide."

We nodded. The king was talking about the queen in the past tense. This isn't good.

"She passed beyond our reach three years ago," the king said quietly. Then he brightened. "But you, Dove Fogico—you have been sent by heaven bearing The Gift to the people of Arken. A time of healing has come."

I think that was the thing that did it. The president comes to Sun Prairie. Someone plants a bomb. I pick up the bomb and run. The bomb explodes or I get shot and end up in Guantanamo Bay, only it isn't Guantanamo Bay, it's Middle Earth or Oz or a galaxy long long ago and far far away. I get hauled around by Hercules in a tin can. I meet the king. I not only meet him, I accidentally save his life. I nearly get killed by an axe man. Cedric saves my life. I'm married to Dove, only we're not married. Now she's carrying the voice of God wherever she goes.

Normally, I'm a pretty tolerant guy, but I officially hit my quota of weirdness for one day. The king and the princess went out

of focus, the world spun around, and I pitched forward into the dirt.

## Chapter 6

The next thing I knew, someone was trying to pour tea down my throat. Talk about disgusting!

The king came into focus. “Apologies, Straight Arrow. We had no idea that three days had passed since you had taken food.”

A young woman put a plate of berries in front of me. “Here, my lord,” she said to me, “eat these. Your strength will return.”

More food and fresh water was brought to me. The king and the princess moved on. They had other people they needed to talk to. Pretty soon it was just Dove and me sitting on a fallen log in the forest.

It seemed like a good time to move forward in our relationship.

“I’ve never been married before,” I said, looking for a place to start the conversation.

“Me neither,” she replied. Did she sound, I don’t know, wistful? Did she wish she was married? Did she like the idea of being married to me? These are important questions, but I wasn’t sure how to ask them.

“But I always imagined being married,” I forged ahead with that admission.

She nodded.

“I just never imagined it would be like this.”

She laughed out loud. “Crazy Horse,” she said, “you are a medical miracle.”

She says that a lot. I’m never quite sure what she means by it, but it seems friendly so I always smile.

About then, a horn of some sort blasted. Somebody said it was time to move on, so we started marching along with everybody else.

“Where are we going?” I asked Dove.

“Someone told me that we’re traveling to the king’s winter castle. They left his summer palace four days ago.”

“Oh.” I guess when you’re king you can have two houses. Kinda like spending the winter in Florida or Arizona or Hawaii. It’s not really for me. I spent September in Florida a couple times. They have the scrawniest squirrels down in Florida. You couldn’t even make a decent sandwich out of a Florida squirrel. It’s all because the leaves don’t turn color down there. Everything is green including the alligators that sit outside your pop up camper at three o’clock in the morning and hiss so you don’t dare walk across the lawn to go inside the house and use the bathroom. I know pop up campers have a toilet, but the owners didn’t want me to use it. Suffice it to say, I didn’t get much sleep down in Florida.

Cedric and his battle horse rode out far ahead of our column, cutting a path of safety through the forest for all of us. That whole “Army of One” business—if ever there was a living example, it was Cedric. He was the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines all rolled into one. He took out the axe man like he was swatting a fly. One moment the axe man was a charging bull of slicing rage. The next moment, he was bug guts. All because of Cedric.

He saved my life.

He saved my life and ... I neglected to thank him.

Ouch! I hate it when I do stupid things like that. Charlie Brown used to wear a bag over his head. I get that.

“Dove,” I said, “I forgot to thank Cedric. I mean that guy with an axe would have killed me.”

She smiled. I love it when she smiles. When Dove smiles, then I know the world is okay. “Later today,” she said.

Dove smiled at me. Maybe she likes me.

Yes, maybe she likes me. That thought made everything feel a whole lot better.

We marched on into the delicious afternoon, Dove and me. The early autumn breeze picked up wisps of her long dark hair and blew them in swirls around her. It made me think maybe the angels were dancing as we walked along beside them. I would dance too, if I knew how and if I wasn't scared to try.

“So you've been here before?” I asked.

“Twice,” she nodded. “The first time I was praying, and I had this vision of a little girl who was dying. So I started to pray for her, and the next thing I knew I was in her room. I placed my hands on her to pray for her, but then a voice from heaven was speaking to her and to me. I don't how to explain it, but I could see the disease leaving her. Her fever broke, she sat up in bed and hugged me. She looked up and said goodbye. The next moment I was back in my house on South Street in Sun Prairie.”

Oh. Prayer and a parallel universe. Zipping through those space-time portals just as easy as ordering breakfast at Sir Hobos on Main Street. Who is this woman?

“Wow,” I said.

Okay. Let's sort out the facts. Dove visits a little girl. The girl is dying, but then she gets better. So how does Dove do that? I mean I pray for people. Do they get better? Nope. Clearly, I must be doing something wrong.

Dove visits this girl. It's a short visit. Only a few minutes and only in the little girl's room. And somehow she knew she was in Arken. Did her room have a "Welcome to Arken" sign in it?

"How did you know this little girl was in Arken?" I asked.

"Actually I didn't—until I returned, a few months later. It happened like this. I came home from work. I was starving. One moment I was standing in my kitchen trying to decide what to make for supper, and the next I was sitting at a table in an inn, with a bowl of soup in front of me."

"Didn't even get a chance to look at the menu?" I said.

Dove smiled. "No. But the soup was good."

That's what I like about Dove. She's flexible.

"Anyway, there was a family sitting at the next table, and they were talking. This is what I heard: 'I hear they never found her body,' the man said. 'That's, right,' his wife said, 'Maybeth's sister works at the summer palace. She saw the queen fall overboard. Couldn't swim, poor thing. They put swimmers in the water, but they couldn't find her. The sharks were circling the boat. One of the men lost his leg all the way to the knee. The king was frantic. But what could he do? His own men would be eaten alive. He had to call off the search.' The people at the next table had a son about twelve years old. He piped up with, 'Yeah, she's nothing more than shark food, no doubt about it.' 'Hold your tongue,' his mother cried. 'I will not have you speak of our Queen Adelaide in this manner.'"

Hmm. Shark food. Not a pleasant way to go. I don't know about you, but I don't want to go like that. That's way down

there with getting buried alive, drowning or being bitten by a brown recluse spider. My cousin got bit by one once. His whole leg turned black and nearly fell off. I'd much rather get put in front of a firing squad. Or maybe take a nap and wake up in heaven. Less dramatic, but more relaxing.

Dove was still talking. "Then the boy turned to his mom and said, 'Tell me again how Queen Adelaide came to carry The Gift.' His mother smiled. 'That's a good boy. Remember it well, my son, for this is a story you will tell your children and grandchildren. Queen Adelaide was not of royal birth. She was born to farmers who could barely keep food on the table. When the Queen was a young child, she fell ill. Her parents could not afford a healer, so they did their best and prayed for a miracle. When no miracle came, her father went outside to raise his fist against heaven, and her mother wept until no tears were left. They thought they would come in and find their daughter dead, but instead they found her awake, alive and healthy as a young goat. When they asked her what happened, she said a beautiful woman with long dark hair ...'"

"That's you!" I blurted out.

Dove blushed. "A woman with long dark hair entered her room. The disease left, the woman vanished, but The Gift remained.' The woman looked at her son and added, 'Heaven bless that woman; she was the angel who brought The Voice of healing and wisdom to the Kingdom of Arken.'"

"Are you an angel?" I had to ask. I mean, I like her. Maybe she likes me. We're pretending to be married. That could mean that someday we might actually be married. If you're going to think about getting married to someone, it pays to verify that they are indeed human.

"No, Silly. Of course not. I'm the same person I've always been."

That's a relief.

Dove went on. "I found that I had a purse with me containing gold and silver coins. I took a room at the inn. During the day, I helped the owner's wife cook and clean. At night, I sat at the tables and listened to the gossip. I was there for about a week. Then one night I fell asleep in my room, and the next morning I awoke to my alarm ringing in my home on South Street. I got up and went to work. Even though I had spent a week in the Kingdom of Arken, I was only gone from Sun Prairie overnight."

This is a good thing. I was really wondering how I was going to get someone to cover for me at the bowling alley. I mean how do you place a call from Middle Earth when there's no cell coverage?

Then I remembered the bomb.

"What happened to the case?" I said to Dove. "I mean the you-know-what."

"Oh," she said, "I left that with the supply master. He tied it to one of the pack horses."

Visions of horse meat flying over our heads came to mind. "Are you sure that's safe?" I asked. Turning a horse into Fourth of July fireworks did not seem like a nice thing to do. Especially since we're in a foreign country.

"Unless he opens it back up and rewires it, we should be fine. I stopped the clock and pulled the wire."

Oh. She stopped the clock and pulled the wire. Then she flossed her teeth and made up a grocery list. All in a day's work.

That's another thing I like about Dove. She's really smart, but she never acts like it. She just acts like a regular person.



We marched until we came to a large clearing. There we set up camp. I'm not big on camping to be honest with you. I mean I like a grilled hamburger as much as the next guy. But smoke and bugs and animals on the prowl—not my thing. I gotta tell you I once went camping at Devil's Lake with some friends. We had brats, of course, and watermelon. And I thought all the leftover food would be perfectly safe in the cooler we brought. So I locked up the cooler and left it on the ground outside our tent.

Big mistake.

A little after midnight, I heard this snorting sound, like a herd of hogs had invaded our campsite. The people I was with elected me to go out and check it out. I guess they knew I was part Indian. So I took my flashlight with the unreliable batteries and stepped out of the tent.

Our campsite was overrun with gangster raccoons. The scrawny creatures they send out to get flattened by cars do nothing to prepare you for these monsters. The locked cooler was open. These mammals on steroids were crunching their way through raw eggs and raw sausage, shells, packaging and all.

I was stupid enough to think that I could run them off. Another guy joined me and we kicked leaves in their faces for about twenty minutes. They backed up a foot or two, but they weren't too happy about it.

I am not a camping fan.

At least tonight the raccoons would probably leave us alone. To get to us, they would need to get past guys who would happily make them into raccoon soup. For tonight, the prowling animals would leave us alone.

On the other hand, the restroom facilities were far from acceptable. Forget about privacy. And apparently these people had never heard of toilet paper. I didn't ask what they used instead. I really didn't want to know.

I remember Les Stroud faced this challenge on *Survivorman*. He discussed the process of selecting the right leaves, and the importance of testing those leaves first.

That made a lot of sense to me. When I was a kid, I once went fishing along the banks of the Mississippi River. How was I supposed to know that I was sitting in a patch of poison ivy?

There are some things in life that you'd just as soon forget.

Since Dove and I were supposed to be married, I was a little concerned about what our sleeping arrangements would be. But married or not, all the women slept in tents in the center of the camp. The men slept out in the open in a ring around them. And the watch formed a ring around the men.

We had some kind of beef jerky and barley soup for supper. Then I got a bedroll from the supply master, found a level spot on the ground, and decided to call it a day. I mean, what else was there to do. No Netflix. No cable. No Facebook. I didn't see so much as a deck of cards or a chess set.

Since I had no way of knowing whether I would wake up in Arken, in Sun Prairie, in heaven, or not at all, I got down on my knees to say goodnight to God.

I wasn't alone as I knelt. I noticed others doing the same. Some were making the sign of the cross. Maybe they were Catholic. I would never make it as a Catholic. Too much choreography. Sit, stand, kneel. You need a program—and even then I still wouldn't get it straight. I've tried doing the sign of the cross just in case it adds anything, but I can never get it straight. I always end up going around in a circle.

So I knelt there without doing the sign of the cross and thought about kneeling beside my bed when I was a small child. Every night I knelt down beside my bed and prayed:

*Now I lay me down to sleep.*

*I pray the Lord my soul to keep.*

*If I should die before I wake,*

*I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

I often got the keep and the take part mixed up, and I had no idea what it meant, but I prayed it with great sincerity, and I believe God heard every word.

Now that I'm here in Middle Earth or Arken or wherever I am, I find myself rethinking that prayer. Did God finally answer it? Did He take my soul? And, if He did, where did He take it? This can't be heaven, but I'm pretty sure it isn't the other place, so what gives? Is this like a stopping off place—not really purgatory, but instead some kind of place where I need to learn something before I move on?

“Dear God,” I prayed, “I don't know where I am, but You seem to be here, and I guess that makes it okay. I'm a little concerned because I have no way of cleaning the bowling alley tonight, so I give that problem to You. But I thank You for keeping Dove and me safe today. I pray that You will please get us home safely real soon, like maybe tomorrow. Amen.” I almost stood up, and then I remembered one more thing: “PS. Dove and I are married here! I mean sort of. I don't know what to say about that; I just thought I'd let You know.”

That put a smile on my face. Suddenly, I realized how very, very tired I was. I was one of the few men exempt from watch duty that night, so I climbed into the Arken version of a sleeping bag. It was wool, and I don't like wool—it's too scratchy—but I was too tired to care. I knew that bugs or worse would

probably crawl on me during the night, but I couldn't keep my eyes open. I closed my eyes and didn't know another thing until I was smelling coffee ten hours later.

They say you need sleep because it helps you file away everything that happened all day so the next day you can start fresh. I guess I had a lot to file away because I don't normally sleep for ten hours.

I rolled up my sleeping bag, and took it to the supply master who put it on a pack horse. As I walked through the camp looking for Dove, I overheard snippets of gossip. No Goraudoks all night. A couple of lions, but they were in the distance. The watch commander found one man sleeping. He would be punished, but I didn't catch how. We were moving on in an hour. The valley narrowed further on. Another ambush was expected, but our scouts would scale both sides and check every tree.

I was just starting to get settled in for a new day when the camp erupted with the news.

The king's daughter was missing.

And there was no sign of Dove Fogico.

## Chapter 7

It didn't make much sense to me. I mean, I'm the crazy one. If anyone would be likely to wander off and get lost, it would be me, not Dove. She's sensible. We sort of balance each other out like that.

At first it was chaos—everyone hollering “Princess Gabriella!” and “Your Highness!” Then the word got circulated that maybe that wasn't the brightest idea with the woods crawling with Goraudok assassins and all. Of course, it didn't really affect me because I was calling, “Dove! Dove Fogico!” So pretty soon other people were hollering for Dove with an occasional cry of “Gabriella!” thrown in there.

The best trackers in the Kingdom were at the winter castle, but that didn't help us much because we were still a two-day march away. So we did our best without them. We searched in groups of five, with a knight assigned to each group for security.

As the day progressed, I got more and more uneasy. At first I was sure that it was just some sort of mix-up. Eighty people were traveling together. Dove and Gabriella would show up. But they didn't show up. They just went for a short walk. They'll be back. But they didn't come back. They wandered off, lost their way. But Dove and I had watched *Survivorman* plenty of times. She knew—we both knew—if you get lost, you stay put. Someone will come along and find you. But nobody came along. Nobody found them.

Over and over again, we tried to figure out how it could have happened. The women's outdoor toilet was curtained off, but it was still inside the perimeter of the watch. There was the guy who fell asleep on watch, but even if Dove and Gabriella had walked right beside him, the watch was redundant. They would have been spotted by the others. The clearing was tested for tunnels; none were found.

By the time the day was over, we had followed every animal trail, every logical path, and quite a few not so logical ones within a two-to-three hour radius of the camp.

As evening shadows lengthened, we stumbled back into the clearing no further ahead than we had been that morning.

All day I kept praying for them. I asked God to give me some reassurance that they were all right, but all I got was silence.

Some kind of witchcraft was at work. That was the general consensus. The more everybody talked about it, the sicker I felt. I was already worried about Dove. We were in some kind of parallel universe where all the rules were changed. What kind of dark powers were available here? I didn't know. I just know that people who are into that kind of thing in my own world do all sorts of unsavory things with their victims—things I would rather not contemplate. I tried to put those horrors out of my mind, but they kept coming back like that feral cat that kept having kittens out in the strawberry patch. She'd have her litter of kittens, and then she'd go into the back yard and take down a Wisconsin squirrel. She was a tough cat.

Dove and the princess were gone. There was no good human explanation. Devilry. Witchcraft. That's what everybody was saying, and I didn't think to disagree with them until they started pointing fingers at me.

“What do we know about this man?”

Not much, but now didn't seem to be the right time to fill them in.

"Where does he really come from?"

"Isn't it strange that he shows up at the exact moment of the ambush?"

"But he saved the king."

"How do we know that wasn't a show, put on to deceive us?"

"But he's an archer."

"No archer can shoot like that. He knocked the poison arrow out of its flight. That is beyond the skill of an archer. He is a practitioner of the dark arts. Black magic guided his arrow."

"But he killed two Goraudok assassins."

"They would have gladly sacrificed twenty just to put their agent close to the king."

"I heard the princess say that his wife carries The Gift."

"Or she's a witch."

"They show up. She disappears with the princess. Don't tell me that isn't strange."

"It would explain a lot. She uses her dark arts to put a man on watch asleep. She darkens the eyes of the other watchers. She puts the princess under her spell and they walk out. They could be halfway to Goraudok by now."

"Why didn't I see this yesterday?"

Anyway, you get the idea. It wasn't long until I was standing in front of the king—stripped of my bow and arrows, with a ring of accusers all around me. Only one person came to my defense—Cedric.

“Your Majesty, Straight Arrow saved your life, and Dove Fogico may well have saved mine. I don’t have any reason not to trust him.”

I looked at the king. His face was etched with lines of worry, fatigue and exhaustion.

He motioned for me to talk, so this is what I said, “Your Honor, it is true that I am a stranger to the Kingdom of Arken. But I come here not as an enemy, but as a friend. In my own land, I am a merchant. I sell arrowheads. But God sent me here because He wants me to do some good here. By God’s hand I was able to save your life, and I would happily do it again if God gave me the ability to do so. Likewise, Dove is not an agent of evil. She is a gentle soul, a kind woman who only desires healing. If she is with the princess, I know she is doing everything she can to protect her. And I am terribly worried about her, just as you are about your daughter.”

I thought it was a pretty good speech. I would be convinced. Back when I was in high school, I was on the debate team, and I was pretty good—like going-to-state good. People said I would make a fantastic attorney. They said I would never lose a case.

I lost this one.

“I’m sorry,” the king said, “but we don’t know whether you are who you say you are or not. For our safety, I need to put you under arrest until things become more clear.”

Someone pounded a stake into the ground in the middle of the clearing. They made me sit down with my back to it, and then they tied my hands behind my back to the stake.

This was not going to be a comfortable night.



Here's where you can find the rest of the story

<http://dwightclough.com/books2/dwight-clough-books/the-man-from-sun-prairie-dwights-novel/>