

Sage

Part One of The Plainsrunner

Chapter Twelve - The Sentinel Tree

by

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It was after the sentinel tree that she met up with the traders. She was walking in the morning, about the time she would begin to worry about day fliers, if she hadn't just dealt with one yesterday, when she saw a tree growing away from the river. It surprised her because she hadn't seen that before. All the trees grew right close to it in a ribbon about fifteen meters on either side, and this one appeared to be about a hundred meters, allowing for the bends in the river.

“What do you think of that?” she asked her glider. “What do you suppose it's doing over there?”

As she walked, the tree got taller, until she realized it must be a sentinel tree. By the time she got close enough to see the bottom, she could see that it must be a good hundred meters tall, and twenty meters wide at the bottom. It came to a rounded point at the top and ran nearly straight down at the sides, until the branches flared outward a little at the bottom. The land around the trunk rose up toward it, as if the tree was trying to pull it up into the sky along with it.

She had never seen a sentinel tree this close before. There were none close enough to her village for her to have visited while she was growing up. All she had was the stories of the hunting and foraging and trading parties, who used the trees to mark their way. Then there were the people who had come to the village from across the plains, like Tallgrass's grandmother. They used them as guides on their months-long journeys.

Sage had seen a few on her own journey this past month. Her path had paralleled a long escarpment far to the west of her for over a week. It was far enough away to be below the curvature of the land in between, and she could only see the top of it coming in and out of view. On top of the escarpment, spaced well apart, she had seen three trees looking like their namesake. She felt as if they could see her, a tiny bug in the distance, following the river.

Now here was one up close – her first one – and she couldn't take her eyes off it. It was almost alien here; completely unlike everything around it. It stood apart, as if it were a world unto itself. She knew from the stories that many animals lived in and on these trees. That there were many different habitats in their different parts. From a distance, as she approached, she could see the occasional glimmer pop out of the upper branches, and plunge right back in. Fliers that never knew any other life than their own tree. Even when a sentinel tree dies, she was told, it goes on standing for many years, still providing a home for many of its inhabitants.

This one was nowhere near dying, as far as she could see. It looked lush and vigorous and strong, and it was hard to imagine that it could ever die. As she got closer she could smell it. She inhaled the redolence of it. She smelled the fecundity of the life it harbored. And along with it, the pungency of its own odor. This tree dominated its landscape in every way.

She had drifted away from the river and toward the tree as she approached it. There was something about it that drew her, and she unconsciously let it. But she wasn't so fascinated that she forgot to be alert, so she wasn't caught off guard when the day runner came out from under the tree and down the hill toward her.

She gave an exasperated sigh and, led by her spear, moved toward the runner. That surprised it and caused it to hesitate. She kept moving, thrusting and rattling her spear. “Go away!” she said. “I don't want to eat you. You taste awful.”

It finally broke and ran for cover as fast as its six scuttling legs could carry it. She trotted after it, shaking her spear and saying, “Hah! Hah!” It tucked in its rear end and ducked out of sight.

She backed downhill away from the tree, keeping an eye out for any sneak attacks, and was just turning to be on her way when she heard the voice. It said, “You don’t have to eat it, girly. You could just kill it and leave it for the others.”

Sage jumped and turned in one motion. She planted her feet and faced the new arrivals, her spear up and her knife in her right hand. She saw six people approaching from the direction of the river, cantering up in a group. She moved downhill toward them, stopping just before she reached level ground.

They pulled up about five meters short, two of them in front and the other four in a shallow arc behind. One of the two in front was big – possibly the biggest person she had ever seen – and he did the talking. He said, “Whoa, little girl. You don’t need to be pointing that spear at us.”

Sage didn’t say anything, nor did she lower her spear. By now she had guessed that these were traders, and she was remembering the careful suspicion her village always had when they visited. She remembered being scared of them, but she also remembered a kind of excitement. The traders represented strangeness and mystery. Something different from the boring familiarity of the village. She allowed the point of her spear to drop a little.

“That’s more like it,” said the big one, moving forward. He stopped and frowned when she rattled the spear at him. “Come on, now. There’s no need for that,” he said. When she didn’t move he said, “Put down that spear now, before I come and take it away from you.”

Sage didn’t know why she did it. At one against six, she would have been a lot better off trying to be nice. But after what she’d been through in the last month, she didn’t feel like being nice. Especially to this big lout who thought he could treat her like a child. Still, she couldn’t believe it was happening when she heard herself say, “Maybe you’d like to try it, Fatso.”

While his face showed surprise and the beginnings of outrage, the four traders in back laughed, and one of them said, “Fatso.” He was reaching for his weapons and coming toward her when the other one in front said quietly, “Hold on,” and stepped forward. With his hand on the big one’s shoulder, he said, “There’s no need for that.”

Sage automatically adjusted her stance so she could cover both of them, but now she watched the new one. She could tell that he was the leader, rather than the big one. She could tell by how he carried himself, and by how the others all kept one eye on him. He wasn’t big or scary looking, and he didn’t strike any poses, but he was well put together and carried himself with calm assurance. He looked her in the eyes and said, “I think I know you. What’s your village?”

When she grudgingly told him, he said, “I’ve traded there. That’s where I’ve seen you.” He looked at her, thinking, then said, “I think I know your father. He’s a good man.”

Sage agreed with him, although with some conflict due to his inability to prevent her banishment. She lowered her spear a little, but kept it pointed in the general direction of the big one. He glowered at her, but she kept her attention on the leader. He had a good face, with a strong brow and boldly defined nostrils. He glanced at her spear, and at her neck.

He said, “Are those day flier talons?”

Before she could answer, the big one said, “Where’d you find those? Some old skeleton?”

She ignored him and said to the leader, “Yes.”

He said, "They're obviously important to you. How did you get them?"

She looked at the talons on her spear before speaking. She saw the big one sneering, while the four in back were beginning to look bored. Finally she said, "I killed a flier."

The big one snorted and said, "Liar." There was some murmuring in the back now, and they moved to get a better look at her trophies. The leader just said, "I'd like to hear that story."

So she reluctantly told them how she killed the flier. And how she dealt with the other ones. And why she ate a bit of each day runner. It was good to have someone to tell it to, other than her glider, but she kept it brief and to the point. Boasting was something else she'd been brought up to avoid.

The leader nodded and listened and asked questions to encourage her. The four in back looked impressed, and told each other about it. Even the big one showed a little grudging respect by the time she was finished. By then her knife was back in its sheath, and her spear had made the rounds, each one shaking it and complimenting her on the repairs.

"Sage," the leader said, handing her the spear, "it's an honor to meet you. I don't know if any of us could have done what you did. It's hard enough in a group, and you did it alone." Even the big one was nodding now. "We'll tell your story at every village we stop at. People are going to remember you."

Sage didn't care about that, but there were some people she hoped would remember her. She said, her throat suddenly aching, "Would you tell my father you saw me?"

"Of course," he said.

"And Tallgrass," she said. "Tallgrass, too."

"Yes," he said, and he never asked about the glider lashed to her right pannier, or why she was out here alone. He didn't ask and she didn't say.

They told her how to find the trailhead, and their leader walked over with her. "It's hard to find if you don't know where it is," he said. He seemed to sense her discomfort and didn't walk too close to her. "We use this sentinel tree as a landmark. You can see it from down below, too."

"Down below?"

"Yes," he said. "The trail runs down to the river valley, and the delta. Once you're down there, there's a road that takes you to the city."

Delta? Road? Once she thought about it, of course, it made sense that you'd have to climb down to the river. She'd been doing that anyway for the last week or so. When she wanted to catch a fish, the distance down to the river was increasing every day. It stood to reason that a trail would have to drop down to get to it. But when they went through the trees, which were sparser than she was used to, she was shocked to see how high above the river they were, and how wide the valley had become.

He noticed and said, "We're about ten meters up. There's a waterfall a ways upstream. That's why it's higher than you expected." He pointed to the right, where the land rose sharply. "It gets higher. This is the last good place to use." He pointed down the trail. "There's the road, see?"

She did see. It looked like the trail, only going across flat land. So now she knew what a road was, but she still didn't understand why they needed one. She had never needed one on the plains. She shrugged. Maybe city people needed something to follow so they didn't get lost. Now, what was that other thing? Delta? She couldn't see anything, so she asked him.

“The delta,” he said. He pointed at the broadening valley. “You can’t really see it, but it’s where the river widens out before it enters the sea. Before the city was here, the river broke up into many streams that meandered all over the place. Now it’s in channels. Controlled.”

His answers only provoked more questions. Controlling rivers? It was obvious to her that she had a lot to learn, and she wouldn’t learn it all standing here. She turned to thank him, and realized that she didn’t know his name.

“Street,” he said. He shrugged and said, “My mother was living on the street when she had me.” He saw her blank look and said, “A street is a road in the city.”

She frowned and said, “Why don’t they call it a road, then?”

He laughed and said, “Sometimes they do.” Seeing her frown deepen, he said, “You’ll figure all that out. Don’t worry about it.”

Her frown held for a moment, then smoothed out. She would figure it out. She had to, therefore she would. “Well,” she said, “thank you. I’d better be on my way.” She turned to start down the trail.

He stopped her and said, “There’s a shelter at the bottom here. It’s secure. A good place to stay.” He pointed in the distance. “It’s most of a day’s walk to the city, and this is the last good place to stop.” She thanked him again, but he had one more thing to say. “Be careful, Sage. There are bad people in the city.” He saw her face harden, so he added, “But there are good people, too.” One last look and he turned and headed back to his mates.

She watched him trot away, admiring his confident grace, then she turned and started down the trail.