

Space

Part Four of The Plainsrunner

Chapter Fifty-Four - Going Home

by

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“Emissary and the Prime, this is Hooves of the Prophet, over.”

“Hooves of the Prophet, go ahead,” said Supervisor Steel.

“Supervisor Steel, this is Pilgrim One. We’re clear of the landing bay and preparing for acceleration, over.”

“Understood,” said Steel. “We’re closing the bay door now. Commence at your discretion, over.”

“Will do, thank you.” Pilgrim One unkeyed his microphone, but they could tell that he had more to say. He opened it again and said, “Supervisor Steel, it has been an honor to meet you. I have had my eyes opened, to say the least. I will do everything in my power to ensure good relations between our peoples.”

“Thank you, Pilgrim One. I will do the same. I’m glad that I met you and your crew, and my crew feels the same way. Good voyage and good luck.”

“Understood,” said Pilgrim One. “Please tell Archie and his people that we appreciate their help, in all its forms.”

“Certainly,” said Steel, “but he’s right here, so you just told him.”

“Of course. Thank you. Hooves of the Prophet out.”

Steel lowered his microphone and said, “Quite a change since they first arrived.”

Archie said, “He’s had an interesting couple of weeks. He just needed to adjust to it.”

They watched on the silent monitor as the fragile-looking cubical spacecraft made a few final minor adjustments to its attitude. Then the disposable rockets installed by Archie’s people lit up and Hooves of the Prophet dwindled rapidly and disappeared.

The chatter swelled as the crowd turned away from the window and drifted away from the wall. Archie led Tallgrass and Steel and the crew across the Square toward the little café they favored. Having just seen the Sunwardians off, it was time to start thinking about tomorrow and the departure of the Emissary.

At their favorite table, Archie sitting on a stool and the Grasswindians standing, both held in place by setae, Tallgrass asked, “What do you call this drink again?”

“Coffee,” said Archie, “although it’s not real coffee. We found a way to more efficiently replicate it with algae.”

“And these muffins. You said they’re made with iceberries? Do you actually grow berries on ice?”

“Yes and no,” said Archie. “We grow them on ice, but they’re really the fruiting bodies of a kind of fungus. They have all the necessary ingredients to support our metabolism, and most of what you need.”

“Delicious,” said Tallgrass. “I’m going to miss them when I’m gone.”

“Well,” said Archie, “they’ll still be here when you return.”

“If I return,” said Tallgrass. “I hope they let me.”

“I suspect that will be up to you,” said Archie.

Suddenly Tallgrass was filled with questions again, and overcome with a sense of haste and disappearing time. He started and stopped several times, then got a grip and said, “I guess we had better retrieve Mom’s glider before we go.”

“We can do that for you,” said Archie. “We’ll send a robot out. Maybe Scarface himself.”

“Scarface,” said Tallgrass. “He’s almost like a person, isn’t he? Not like the other ones. Maybe it’s because he has a name.”

“Could be,” said Archie. “He also went through a lot with us, so he’s special that way.”

“Then there’s the way he looks,” said Tallgrass, “with that dent and that scar. That makes him stand out.” They nodded agreeably for a while, then he said, “Speaking of the glider, I guess it’s a good thing we brought it, since it was the key we needed to get in.”

Archie chuckled. “Not really,” he said. “We would have let you in anyway. It was just another puzzle to make things interesting for you.”

Tallgrass laughed. “So, they’re not keys. they’re not messengers from the heavens, and you didn’t even know about the harmonics. I guess we’ve been making a lot more out of them than is really there, haven’t we?”

“Again, yes and no,” said Archie. “They really were messengers. We were hoping they would stimulate curiosity, and they did. It might have gone in directions we weren’t expecting, but they ultimately served their purpose.”

“Yes,” said Tallgrass. He shook his head. “You did all that,” he said. “You brought the Prime all the way here, and then you waited for centuries for us to notice. I don’t know if we would have done that if we were in your position. You lost so much. You could have just kept it all.”

His crewmates, munching muffins and sipping coffee, nodded solemnly.

“It’s because we lost so much,” said Archie. “We know what it means, so it makes sense to do this.”

Tallgrass took a sip. “I think I get it,” he said. He took another sip, then asked, “Do you think they’ll be all right? The Pilgrims, I mean.”

“They should be,” said Archie, “barring anything unforeseen. We repaired their engine and replaced any suspect parts with new ones. Better, too. We reinforced the structure and the hull.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe they sent people out in that thing. I’m surprised they made it as far as they did.”

“They had to,” said Tallgrass. “They wanted to get here first. You know, we left before we planned to, too, for the same reason.”

Archie nodded and took a sip. “Okay,” he said, “you had your reasons.” He didn’t sound as if he thought they were very good reasons, but he didn’t argue. “So anyway,” he said, “yes, I do think they will be all right. Their vessel will get them home. Whether they will be all right after they get home is another matter, I think.”

“What do you mean?” asked Tallgrass.

“I think I know what he means,” said Supervisor Steel.

“Do you?” asked Archie.

“Yes,” said Steel. “You think they might be punished for failing, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Archie. “That’s part of it. Anyone who would send them out here in a prototype obviously doesn’t value their lives. But I think there is a far more potent reason in their beliefs.”

“Ah,” said Steel, while his crew looked puzzled.

“That’s right,” said Archie. “They, that is the Sunwardians, believe that the gliders are ‘Heavenly Messengers,’ and that the Prime’s presence has some cosmic significance. They won’t want to hear anything different and I’m afraid the Pilgrims might pay the price for that.”

Quietly, Tallgrass said, “You mean they might do something to the Pilgrims to protect their beliefs, even when they know that those beliefs are mistaken?”

“I hope not,” said Archie. “I hope they have the wisdom to incorporate the new data into their belief system. To update it to fit with new knowledge. But I don’t have much hope. I have seen the lengths people are willing to go to to keep their beliefs unchanged.”

Tallgrass was shaking his head. “I don’t believe it,” he said. Their laughter surprised him, then he got it. “Okay, that’s funny, but I don’t. How can anyone deny hard facts? How can they go on ... how can they hurt people when they know they can’t justify it?”

“In my experience,” said Archie, “they can always find a way to justify it.” He held up a hand and said, “But that’s all speculation, and I hope I’m wrong. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay,” said Tallgrass, “how about our return to Grasswind? I don’t suppose you’d consider giving a few upgrades to Emissary? A few improvements?”

“We could,” said Archie, “but they aren’t necessary like they were for Hooves of the Prophet. Your vessel is in fine shape and it should get you home safely.”

“Yes, but ...”

“We think,” said Archie, “and Supervisor Steel and others agree, that it will be for the best if you complete the mission on your own. Replenishing your consumables notwithstanding.”

“I get that,” said Tallgrass, “but the technology. There’s so much you can show us. So much we can learn.”

“I know,” said Archie, “but there will be time for all that. You will be coming out here to retrieve resources for a long time to come, and we will be staying to help you during the transition. We have an inventory of everything to help you fairly divide it between your two worlds. That will give us plenty of time to teach you what we know.”

Blunt, who had been uncharacteristically quiet since his injury, said, “I think it should be first come, first served.”

They all scoffed at him. That had already been settled. Steel and Pilgrim One had recommended it to their people back home, and a provisional agreement was in place. Representatives of both worlds would be brought out to live on the Prime and oversee the distribution and removal of resources. Archie suggested taking into account the availability of different materials on each planet when allocating them, and both planets agreed. It looked as if everyone was in favor of fairly sharing, so they dismissed Blunt’s suggestion. He dropped it. At least, he didn’t bring it up with them again.

Tallgrass carried on with Archie. “Are you really saying that you’re going to teach us everything you know?”

“Yes,” said Archie. “As you can assimilate it, of course. We won’t just dump it all on you at once. We’ll lead you through the science that led us to the things we know.”

“The instant communication? The nanotools? The hibernation?”

“Yes. It might take a while to adapt the hibernation to your physiology, but we’ll get there.”

“Then we’ll be able to fly between the stars like you.”

“Yes, which is why we didn’t teach any of this to the Makers. The ones who made this possible.” Archie indicated the Prime.

“Because they were too violent, right?” said Tallgrass.

“Yes. And unstable and erratic. We didn’t want them showing up at the comets. You wouldn’t want them showing up here.”

“So you isolated them on their own world.”

“More like we didn’t help them leave it. And they did the rest themselves. Their best feature, as far as the rest of the galaxy is concerned, might be their propensity for self-destruction.”

Tallgrass and the rest chuckled appreciatively, and he said, “But you’re not worried about us.”

“No,” said Archie. “We might regret it. Who knows? I am a little concerned about the current state of Sunward’s politics, of course, but I’m hopeful that looking outward and working with you will sort that out. We think it’s worth the risk, anyway.”

“They should be influenced by your example, too,” said Tallgrass. “Your generosity in coming here. Your openness in sharing your knowledge, when you could easily keep it from us.” He sighed. “I know I find it greatly inspirational. I am looking forward so much to working with you. And with the Sunwardians. I’m lucky to be alive now. I want to make the most of it.”

Blunt guided Emissary out of the airlock and into the vacuum. There, straight ahead of them, shining brightly in the sunlight, was Grasswind. Home. A million kilometers away. A distance that seemed so far a few short weeks ago, but that now was almost within arm’s reach. Their minds had been stretched to encompass much greater distances.

Tallgrass stared at the bright disk, letting his mind wander. It chewed on his recent experiences, the way his ancestors had chewed their food while lying in the grass. His historical flight out here. Meeting aliens. Meeting their long-lost cousins from Sunward. Seeing the Prime, that impossibly huge spacecraft. He realized he was grinning. He was looking forward to getting home. He wanted to see his mother and tell her everything. And he couldn’t wait to share everything he’d learned with Seagrass. Home sounded good, but he knew he would be coming back out here.

Tallgrass was still grinning as Supervisor Steel gave the command, “Take us home, Specialist Blunt.”

Afterword

Writing *The Plainsrunner* was quite a departure for me after writing the Green Comet trilogy. Those three books are quite big, averaging over a hundred-twenty thousand words each. When I began this one I decided to try to write a shorter book, aiming for eighty thousand words. It came in at a little over ninety thousand, so pretty close. It was a good exercise, forcing me to try to tell the whole story while using far fewer words. I enjoyed it so much that the next book will be aiming for sixty thousand words, half as many as the books in the trilogy.

You can download the books in the Green Comet trilogy – *Green Comet*, *Parasite Puppeteers* and *The Francesians* – at the Green Comet website. <https://greencomet.org> They are all licensed Creative Commons (CC-BY-SA) so they are free to download and read and share. You will also find links to the audiobooks there, also free.

I hope you enjoyed *The Plainsrunner*. I know I've enjoyed the time I spent with Sage and Tallgrass. If you want to learn more or drop a comment or ask a question, please visit the website, or drop me a line at arjaybe@greencomet.org.

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