

Sky Road Walker

Your Very Own Adventure - #1

By

S.M. Carrière

First published 2016 by S.M. Carrière. Copyright © 2016 by S.M. Carrière
All rights reserved. Published in Canada by S.M. Carrière and distributed by
Createspace.com.

This is a work of fiction. Places, characters, names and events are either the product
of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons
either living or dead, events or locations are entirely coincidental.

Cover art by S.M. Carrière Cover Art Copyright © 2015 by S.M. Carrière.
Cover and Interior design by Éric Desmarais: <http://www.EricDesmarais.ca>

ISBN-13: 978-0-9938509-4-3

ISBN: 0-9938509-4-4

Foreword

This book was an experiment. I had wanted for a long time to try this kind of project, and I'm very pleased that it actually worked! Hah!

For that, I have my readers to thank. Their participation during the two years it took to finish this project of mine ensured that the book was written. Without them, you wouldn't be reading this fearfully dull foreword. There wouldn't be a book at all.

What is this project? Well, for a while now, I've been wanting to give back. I really had no spare funds or any discernible talent for helping others. What I did have was the ability to write books. I decided, therefore, that I would create a book with the express purpose of raising funds towards local charity.

For the charity, I chose a group local to where I live (or lived at the time. Who knows when you're reading this foreword and what has happened since then). *The Ottawa Caring and Sharing Exchange* is a charity devoted to ensuring underprivileged families have all they need for a joyous Christmas season and their children have the supplies and food they need to attend and excel in school. They do wonderful work.

Desiring to involve my readership, I decided to create a book democratically. How does one write a book democratically? Well, I don't know how one does. I only know how I did. Who names their kid 'one' anyway? I digress.

The set-up was incredibly simple. I started off with the beginning of the book (this should surprise no one) as a blog post. I then offered the readers three actions that the character could perform. Readers voted on which option they liked the most. The option with the most votes was the course of action that would begin the next section of story.

I did this once a week for over two years until, at long last, the story was complete.

In truth, I had expected the story would take no more than a year to finish. I was expecting nothing more than an amusing novella. As it turns out, even with the involvement of a fair few other people, I am incapable of writing anything but a novel-length piece.

Oh well. No one is perfect.

There are a good many people I have to thank in making this book a reality. Not least of all are my readers, who made it work by voting every week. Honestly, I have the best readers a writer could hope for. It was fun interacting with them, and I adored how some of them listed their reasoning for their votes. It made me smile so very much!

Also in need of an incredible thank you is the interior and cover designer, Éric of *JenEric Designs*. Not only did he do a marvellous job with the interior formatting and the cover design, but did it for free for charity. Such a generous act cannot go uncelebrated. Thank you, Éric. I'm so honoured and proud to call you a friend.

You are wonderful!

And that leaves but one more thank you to make. This is to you, the reader, for picking up this book. With this purchase, you are helping underprivileged families acquire what they need to live and thrive. It means the world to me that you're willing to do so.

Thank you all so very much.

I do hope that you enjoy this story created with love by many hands.

Thank you again.

For Bill, who was the last man standing,

and,

For Anne, whose constant encouragement never fails to make
me blush.

Chapter One

I awoke feeling groggy on a broad plain, surrounded by tall, golden grasses. All I could see was the grass, stretching up to a clear blue sky, the pointed leaves waving in a slight breeze. I could hear the buzz of insects as they sang to one another in the hazy afternoon heat. I felt drained; the kind of tired that makes your limbs feel like lead, and the muscles ache when you try to move. My mouth was dry; chalky, as though I hadn't had a drink of water in over a year.

Gazing up at the sun, I tried to recall how I came to be here and realised with a sinking feeling that I had no memory of my life before this moment. Lost memories loomed like trees in the mist; obscured and obfuscated, never becoming clear. The mist in my mind grew thicker and the trees were lost forever. I tried to recall them, panic gripping my chest, labouring my breath as I fought to remember something. Anything.

I struggled to sit up. My head spun as I rose from the ground. Now instead of merely exhausted, I was also nauseated. The strong sun beat on my head. It was hot. Too hot. I needed to find shade. Struggling against the weight of my own limbs, I staggered to my feet and looked around. Waist-high grass stretched as far as the eye could see. It danced in my swimming vision. Raising my hand to my head in an effort to relieve the pounding, I touched something wet. I pulled my hand away and stared down at it.

Blood.

How did that happen? The whisper of a memory echoed in my head, then was lost to the mist with the rest of them. I was somewhere in the middle of a vast savannah, bleeding from my head, and I could not remember why or how.

Turning around I spied a lone tree. Its stunted limbs had few leaves. The shade it provided was, if I was being generous, minimal. Still, where a tree grows, there must be water. Funny how the mind works. I remembered that trees required water, but I could not remember my own name.

Lurching forward, I made my unsteady way to the tree and collapsed.

It was late afternoon when I woke again, if the position of the sun was any indicator. Long shadows made the area cooler, if only a little.

Placing my hand against the smooth, white bark of the tree, I hauled myself upright. Other than the angle of the sun, not much had changed. It was still hot, the insects still buzzed, and I felt like I had just come out of the wrong side in a fight with a raging bull.

I noticed a small patch of green in the otherwise golden expanse of grass near the base of the tree. Green flowering tufts of long grass sprouted around a rock roughly the size of my own head – if my head had been flattened some. Curious and desperate, I lifted the rock slightly. It proved a horrific effort and my stomach clenched in protest.

Brown water glistened as dark insects scurried from underneath the disturbed rock. Shuddering against the sight of the crawling critters, and heartened by the mere scent of water, I tossed the rock aside and knelt. Brushing the thin layer of film away from the top of the water, I cupped the life-saving liquid in my hands. Desperate for water, I drank.

It tasted like dirt.

As I drank, the pounding in my head eased slightly and my stomach settled a little. My mouth still felt chalky, but at least I was salivating again. It seemed to me that preserving my water supply was important, so I replaced the rock to save the water from the brutal sun. I turned to climb the tree. Perhaps I would be fortunate, and catch sight of a village, or another tree; somewhere that might lead to something other than a slow death in this abhorrent heat.

I never got to climb that tree. Upon turning, I stopped dead in my tracks. There, out in the grass, stood a dark-skinned woman leaning on a spear.

She wore almost nothing. Why would she, in this heat? The only thing she wore that might be considered clothing was a belt made from some kind of spotted pelt. It sat lightly on her slender waist. I could not help but stare. By any account, she was an incredibly beautiful woman, her heart-shaped face featuring a high, proud brow matched only by equally high and proud cheekbones. Her full lips were pursed, as if threatening a smile. Most striking of all were her eyes. Large and almond-shaped, they tilted up slightly at the end and were a shocking shade of pale green.

For a time we both simply stood and observed one another, me awkwardly by the tree and her leaning on her spear. We stood that way under lengthening shadows before I decided that if she had meant to kill me, she would have long before now. I ventured a greeting.

The woman tilted her head slightly and returned my cautious 'hello' with silence. I tried again, louder this time. Her smooth ebony brow creased in a scowl. She straightened and beckoned me over with a slow hand motion.

Barely hesitating, I walked over to her.

"It is rude to shout," she said softly once I was in earshot.

I apologised profusely. She raised her brows at me as if impatient for me to stop talking. I clamped my mouth shut. She cocked her head again, again regarding me in silence. She asked me for my name.

I had no answer to give her. What was my name? I did not know. I could not remember. The trees in the mist had faded so completely that even the mist seemed to vanish, leaving behind nothing at all. I did the only thing I could. I shrugged. The woman scowled and I explained everything; I had just woken up with blood all over my head. I had lost all of my memories. I did not know who I was, or where I was, or why or how I came to be here at all. When I finished my admittedly very short tale, she looked me over with an appraising eye.

Seemingly satisfied that I was telling the truth she said, "My village is not far from here. Come. It is not safe in the grass after dark."

What else could I do? Stay in a strange place with no means to defend myself all alone at night? I nodded, smiling in gratitude, and she turned, loping gracefully through the grass.

I was nowhere near as graceful. I stomped along behind her sounding like a herd of angry bovines. I heard her laugh and I grimaced. Unable to do aught else, I continued to crash through the grass behind the graceful woman, keeping my eyes firmly on the ground, watchful for anything that might trip me.

My lungs burned and my legs felt like jelly by the time we cleared the grass. We found ourselves on red dirt. Looking up, I spied a village entirely surrounded by wooden walls. Four towers broke the monotony of the palisades around the village. Two guards stood atop each tower.

“Come,” the woman said and she ran inside the village through the open gate. With no other option, I followed.

The sky was streaked in the brilliant plumage of the final phase of sunset on the horizon directly before me. Behind me, sapphire night had taken hold. Inside the village, young children chased each other around the circular houses, shrieking and laughing. A man walked confidently forward with a flaming torch, lighting the torches delineating the dusty streets.

The woman I followed was evidently a woman of import. People respectfully moved out of her path as she strode forward. She did not acknowledge them. I followed meekly behind. Despite the obvious naked, but proud people and my own clothed, dishevelled self, no one paid me any mind. Only the children stopped their play to peer at me curiously.

I followed the woman to the largest of the circular buildings. The door, little more than a hide covered opening in the hut, was flanked on either side by tall, muscle-bound spearmen. They were also naked, save for red twin belts that hung loosely on their hips. The woman disappeared inside. Thinking that I was supposed to follow her still, I moved to enter the hut, but the firm hand of one of the spearmen stopped me.

The guard glared, and I stepped back, unsure of what to do.

In the end, I stood in awkward silence, waving away the flies that sought purchase on my face and enjoying the cooling breeze that occasionally moved through the village. After what felt like an age, the woman returned and beckoned me to follow. I did.

It was dark inside the large round building. The light from a large central fire did nothing to help me see until my eyes adjusted to the smoke and shadows. Before me sat a large, muscular man on a woven wattle throne. He held an especially long spear and peered at me with curiosity.

From her position behind him, a grey-haired woman gasped. She shuddered and opened her mouth. Her entire body convulsed. Then she spoke these words through dry, wrinkled lips:

“The seeker’s son has taken one.

The seeker’s son has two.

The seeker’s son takes another one.

The seeker’s son seeks you.”

To say that her actions and proclamation were disturbing does great disservice to the chills that crawled up my spine and along my arms, puckering my skin and making my hair stand on end. I stared as the woman convulsed again and sagged as if she had just finished a great labour. Her eyes opened and she raised her weary head to look at me. There was no hostility in her gaze, only a deep, reserved thoughtfulness. Swallowing back my discomfort, I fidgeted with the hem of my tunic. Where did I get this tunic? I had no idea. Silence enveloped the room.

“You,” the man said in an impossibly deep voice. “Have no memory, yes?”

I nodded.

“You have no name?”

I shook my head. The man on the throne grunted and leant back, eyeing me suspiciously. I hazarded a glance at the woman who brought me here. She sat on a chair to the side, looking relaxed.

"Where you going?" the man on the throne asked.

I shrugged again.

"You must come from somewhere. Therefore, you must be going to somewhere."

"I don't know," I replied. "I don't remember anything. I don't even know how I came to the grassland."

"Humph." The man considered. "We house you a night. Maybe two. Then you go. Yes?"

"Go where?"

The man shrugged.

"Fine," I mumbled. As if I had a choice.

"Good. I give my guest a gift. Here. Choose."

The old woman reached behind her, grabbed something and scurried forward with a package wrapped in cloth. She laid it on the ground at my feet and, kneeling, arranged the objects on the cloth. She rose and stepped back. I looked down and paused. There were three objects, a small flint knife, large chips marring the blade, an ancient-looking wooden mask, and two gold coins.

"Just one," the man said.

I stared down at the objects spread on the blanket. I considered carefully. For all I knew, this was some kind of test. What were they testing? What could my choice mean? Was this some strange ceremony by which they decided to kill me or not? It was a long, unnerving moment I spent, staring down at these things. With no answers available to me, I tried my hand at logic. What could two gold coins get me in this place? Probably no more than a hot meal and a flea-ridden bed. The wooden mask looked intriguing, but what purpose could it possibly serve? Was it magic? If so, was the magic a blessing or a curse?

The knife. The knife seemed the best option. It might have been broken and small, but I could probably still kill something with it. I bent down and picked it up. The flint blade gleamed strangely in the firelight. I

thought I saw a streak of blue flash down the blade. I stared at it, wondering if my mind had played a trick on me. I could understand a flash of orange or yellow; a reflection of the flickering firelight. But blue? The shining black blade now reflected only the fire. I convinced myself that the blue flicker had been nothing but my imagination, strained as it was in this strange place with these strange people and no memory to guide my thoughts or actions.

“Interesting,” the man upon the throne said.

“Yes,” the woman who brought me here noted, the sarcasm in her voice so thick I needed that knife to cut through it.

“Daughter,” the man said to her. “Find a place for our guest tonight. Ensure the stranger is fed and rested.”

The slender, elegant woman stood. She bowed slightly to her father and left the room, disappearing into an opening that stood directly behind the woven throne. All eyes fell on me. I just stood there, uncomprehending. The woman returned.

“Are you coming?” she asked haughtily.

Moved into action, I scurried across the room and followed the woman out. I entered a dark, tunnel that sloped steadily downwards. It was carved from the dense red earth upon which the village rested. A large door stood at the far end, flanked on either side by flaming torches. The woman took them both, and handed one to me.

In strained silence, we walked through the door and down some earthen stairs.

Either these people were really odd and slept underground, or I was being taken to a dungeon. I wanted to ask the woman leading me where we were headed, but I had the distinct impression any talk would be extremely unwelcome.

After more walking in increasingly unpleasant silence, the woman stopped and opened a small door. “Here,” she said. That was all she said.

I peered inside. I couldn't see anything in the dark. The woman rolled her eyes at me and walked into the room. The light from her torch revealed a small, but comfortably furnished room, complete with a small fireplace. It looked nothing like a prison.

Relieved, I walked forward, smiling. I mounted my torch and, thanking the woman, collapsed on the pile of woven mats that served as a bed.

I awoke the following morning to the tantalising smell of barley stew. A hearty breakfast had been laid out on a blanket on the floor of the room. The green-eyed woman stood silently at the door, leaning on her spear and watching me.

"Creepy," I noted, then winced. That was not supposed to be spoken out loud.

The woman smiled slightly. "You must eat well this morning. It is a long walk to the nearest city, and there is little food in the grass."

I suddenly realised that I was very hungry. It stood to reason. When was the last time I ate anything? Who knows? I certainly didn't. I slid from the bed and sat on the floor to eat. The woman joined me. I ate as much as was able and still half the food remained. It was a very large breakfast. The woman smiled, covered the pot with a lid and tied it down and wrapped it all up in the blanket.

"You will take with you," she said.

I thanked her profusely, and accepted the wrapped food. For all that was there, it packed very neatly into a small cube. I tied it to my belt.

"Water waits for you at the gate. Follow."

I did.

At the gate of the village sat a small table with three water skins.

"Take them," the woman said. After a brief hesitation I obeyed, slinging them around my torso.

"You must head that way," the woman said, pointing north. "Keep the sun on this side of you. You will find tall brown grass. Do not go in. It is the hungry grass and it will eat you. There is a path through the hungry

grass. Do not stray. In the night, you will see grass dogs. They are hungry. They will eat you. But they are stupid and easily fooled, and they cannot climb. If you are clever, you will be able to escape them. It will take three weeks to walk to the city. Good luck.”

With that, she left, returning to the centre of the village. I stared out over the red dirt for a while, my eyes falling to the horizon where the tall grass grew. “Do not go in the brown grass?” I muttered to myself. “Everything here is brown grass!”

Sighing, and feeling the gazes of the villagers at my back, I walked forward. For three days and nights I walked. In the night, I got very little sleep. Yips and barks, though far off, kept me awake, fretting about an encounter with a hungry grass dog. Whatever a grass dog was.

On the fourth morning, I came across a vast stretch of dark brown grass and paused. This brown was not the dry golden brown of the other grass. It was a dark, sickly mud colour and the leaves shone with a thick layer of wax. I wrinkled my nose as the stench of stagnant water and rot assaulted it.

I scanned the grass. If the woman had spoken true, there should have been a path. After a brief search, I spied it... and a grass dog at the same time.

As it turned out, grass dogs are, in fact, lizards. Roughly the size of a small pony, and with legs shaped much like that of a hound, I could be reasonably sure these giant lizards were faster than I. I froze as the lizard flicked its bright purple tongue into the air, tasting it.

The massive grey and gold head swung towards me. The lizard snarled, revealing two rows of sharp teeth, the back row longer than the front. Before I had time to wonder at an animal with two rows of razor sharp teeth, two more dogs appeared, flanking the first in a movement that was uncannily just like a pack of dogs; giant, cold-blooded, hungry dogs.

My eyes flickered to the path and my mind launched into a frantic spiral of thoughts. Could I make it? Would it do any good? I slowly pulled the flint knife from my belt.

Time seemed to slow, as if the world paused after a deep breath.

The lizards leapt forward.

So did I.

Sprinting for the path, I noted that one of the grass dogs had run into the hungry grass. It would have been clever, having one lizard cut me off further up the path. Only the beast was too stupid or too famished to realise that this was hungry grass.

Terrible sharp yelps filled the air.

The other grass dogs stopped abruptly, turning their attention towards the sound of their hunting partner being attacked by the grass. One of them hissed.

I didn't stop. I ran for all I was worth, even long after the grass dogs vanished from sight as I flew headlong down the path through the hungry grass. I kept running until my legs felt like mush and my lungs burned.

As the terror waned and I slowed, I noticed something the woman did not warn me about; a three-tined fork in the road.

Worried that the giant lizards in the grass were still hunting me, I paused only briefly before sprinting down the middle path. The ground below my feet was hard-packed and dry, but I could smell water rot emanating from the greasy brown grass all around me. Their tall blades loomed in towards me as I ran; the plant equivalent of a predatory leer. One or two blades sliced my face, drawing blood.

Adrenalin kept me running long after my legs abandoned all feeling. It took me some time to notice that I was no longer running on hard-packed earth, but on an archaic and rotting path of wooden slats. I slowed down, noticing a worrying wobble to the now wooden path.

It rose slowly from the ground, slanting upwards into the air in a shallow slope. There were no support structures that I could see. It was as if each wooden slat merely hovered in the air, held there by magic, or the wind, or perhaps invisible hands. There were no guard-rails either. Nothing connected one slat to another, and yet they rose up into the sky as if part of the same structure. I glanced around. Everywhere else, save the path stretching back behind me was a sea of hungry grass. I

didn't particularly fancy wading into that, and going back to face the grass dogs on my trail seemed equally as appealing. There was nowhere for me to go but forward. And up. Moving cautiously now, I walked forward. The slats creaked and groaned, swaying slightly in the air as I began the slow climb into the sky.

Up and up and up I went until a chance glance down revealed that I was miles in the air. It was then that I discovered that I detested heights. My legs seized in fear as I stared down at the patchwork of brown and golden grass in the expansive plains below. A sparkle caught my eye. Looking over to my right, I noticed a lake shimmering in the hazy sunlight. A small town sat on the far side of the lake.

Surely if such a town were occupied the woman would have told me? Perhaps it was a ghost town, a fishing village abandoned for some reason? Thinking about the village and imagining all kinds of scenarios regarding its fate eased the muscle-seizing fear that had gripped me. Keeping my mind on that tiny village and not on the great height at which I now stood on floating stairs helped me take a step, and another, and another.

The wood was dry here, but that only meant it suffered from dry rot. Despite my caution, a plank snapped beneath my feet and I stumbled backwards, almost falling off the path altogether. My arms wheeled in the air in a comical impersonation of a windmill as I struggled to regain my balance. Those moments hovering at the edge of life and death seemed to last for an eternity, though it was in all likelihood not more than a few seconds. Once I had my balance back, my legs again seized, refusing to move. I closed my eyes and thought of the little abandoned fishing village. It helped. Shaking, I stepped over the new gap in the path and walked forward at a crawling pace.

Before the day was out, the path began to slope downwards again. I looked left and saw the vague shape of a ruined tower looming through the heat haze. Wondering briefly at it, I continued my cautious march down.

Another slat broke. This time I was more prepared and I leapt forward to avoid having my foot plunge down into nothingness.

I tripped.

Unable to stop screaming, I tumbled down the path. As land and sky summersaulted in my vision, I heard a sing-song voice chant:

The seeker's son has taken one.

The seeker's son has two.

The seeker's son takes another one.

The seeker's son seeks you.

My uncontrolled fall threw me off the path. Screaming, I plummeted through the air.