

Beyond the Bounds

They had been marching hard for seven hours. Little warmth from the early morning sun penetrated the dark shadows spreading across the sky. All around them the valleys were filled with the wind's moaning. A sharp gust chilled the sweat coating Poppy's back. Her eyes scanned automatically as she walked: ground – no holes or boulders; left and right – nothing approaching; the sky – clouds circling around them. Back to the ground. Back to the clouds.

She remembered one of her mother's sayings: 'Eat the wind and swallow bitterness.' What did that mean anyway?

The clouds hung in the sky watching her, waiting for her to make a mistake. She hated them for controlling what she could do and when she could do it. Now they were drawing in around her, still miles away, but she was afraid.

Ferocious rains had cut deep gashes in the loose soil that were dangerous to cross. Allen marched steadily ahead of her, jumping over narrow gullies, his feet sending rocks clattering down into their shadowed depths. She had the strange feeling that something was watching them but couldn't see anything tracking their path.

The weather was drawing in quickly.

Allen's tattered coat tails flapped at his heels as he walked. It had been ages since he looked back to see if she was alright. She jogged to catch him up: "I'm scared, Allen," she said. "Look at the clouds; it's raining ahead and behind us. We're going to get caught out here. We never should have left!"

Allen sighed under his breath, flicked a glance at her but kept moving across the broken ground. "The wind is blowing across our path. By the time we get to Flaxham they'll be long gone," he said, giving her the briefest of glances.

Poppy saw the stubborn set of his jaw and the way he was sucking on his cheeks. It wasn't wise to push him when he was in this mood but she was scared and needed to talk: "It's got a lot more blustery and we're a long way from shelter," she persisted.

"Oh, for God's sake, Poppy! You haven't stopped worrying since we set out! You chose to come, I didn't force you!" he snapped angrily.

Poppy started to cry. "I know that! I love you! But I'm scared! You know what the rain and wind can do!"

Allen cringed at her tears. The wind was patrolling the edge of the chalk escarpment, lifting dust devils into the air, blocking a return to the difficult valley that now separated them from home. He knew the danger they were in, but he couldn't let her see that he was scared as well.

He stopped walking and pulled her close. The wind was blowing tufts of her lovely light brown hair across her face. He tucked them back under her hood and gently kissed her lips. "We'll be alright, you'll see," he said. He waved his hand at the sky: "This stuff will pass by quickly; we just have to be confident enough to keep going. OK?"

"Alright, but can we rest for a minute? I'm feeling pretty tired," she replied, giving him a weary smile.

He kissed her again and then steered her towards a rough bush in a small depression in the ground ahead. Settling behind it, he was secretly grateful for a moment's relief from the gusts that seemed to probe deeper with each passing minute. They huddled closely in silence, sharing body heat and those small comforting gestures that lovers know so well.

"We should have listened to the Mayor. He has good reasons to forbid travel beyond the bounds," Poppy muttered.

"The Mayor is a jackass whistling Britannia at the rain!" Allen snapped back before continuing more quietly: "The old people don't know anything. They're too afraid of their stories about how we're being punished now for the damage done in the past!"

Poppy stayed quiet for a moment. Allen was both quick to anger and quicker to forget; that was part of what made him exciting, but it scared her as well. "Maybe some of their stories are right," she continued. "It's one thing to be safe indoors at home, where we're above most of the clouds and the rains can't hurt us. Out here we're right in the path of whatever happens."

"Sheena's out there. The Mayor can't stop us from going after her."

"No... but he can stop us from returning," she whispered.

"I think the Mayor has nearly finished his term of office." Allen's voice was soft yet menacing.

"You'd better choose your moment well if you are going to challenge him."

"No problem."

"Allen..." she took a breath, struggling to hold back a sob, "... it's not safe out here. The animals have had hours to find her... she... she... m.... must be dead already."

"No. She said she wanted to try scavenging in the next valley, where the rivers meet. When it started raining I reckon she'd have turned towards the old factory instead. It should be dry in there and she'd be safe upstairs. After all, we've been meeting there for years; it's the only place where we can be young, and dance, and fall in love..."

She squeezed his hand, reassured by his loving words.

The wind suddenly pummelled them from behind, shrieking angrily through the gorse.

Poppy's heart hammered. Terrified, she struggled to choke air past the lump in her throat.

Allen carefully looked over the bush towards the scarp. A seething, rolling wall of black clouds was streaking towards them, dumping lashing rain on the wracked landscape.

“Quick! Help me get the shelter up!” Allen shouted, tearing his rucksack open and heaving its contents onto the ground.

“Oh, God! We'll never get it up in time!” Poppy cried over the rising gale.

“Just do it!”

Allen grabbed the metal poles that formed their shelter's frame, hurriedly snapping them together with shaking hands. In less than a minute it was assembled and he began staking it down.

Poppy was struggling to unroll the cover in the rising wind. Her eyes were locked on the maelstrom surging towards them: “We're not going to make it, I can't get this spread out!” she shouted, almost hysterical.

Allen grabbed the covering and thrust the hammer into her hands. “Yes we are! Finish the frame! Hurry!” he shouted back.

Poppy started frantically banging the remaining spikes into the ground.

Allen fought to keep hold of the covering as he spread it over the frame. It was raining now. He felt its drops of death pressing on his back as he fumbled to snap down the clips sewn into the metal-lined cloth. Poppy silently grabbed an edge as he pulled it towards the front and they heaved together to lock it in place.

“Get in!” Allen shouted.

Poppy pulled the entrance flaps open and fell inside. She turned and knelt to hold them open for Allen. He was carelessly piling their tools back into the rucksack. “Allen, come on!” she screamed.

“Coming...,” he shouted back.

She saw him stand straight to heave the bag towards the entrance.

She heard him grunt.

She saw him fall to his knees.

She saw him collapse in front of her, the wind-driven rain lacerating his prone body with small rocks and grit.

There was no time to put on protective clothing. She reached out to try and pull him inside. The downpour immediately pared the skin from her exposed hands and forearms. She had to pull them back inside and watch as the rain slashed his clothes and began cutting thick slices from his flesh.

His fingers and feet twitched. A red puddle spread from a small hole in the back of his head.

Her grandfather had told her about the cutting wind on the hills, but she'd never really believed him until now.

'Eat the wind and swallow bitterness.'

She was sixteen and now she was old. It was all true. People had broken the world's weather centuries ago and they were still paying the price.

Her sister had ignored the rules and was probably dead.

Allen was dead.

She slumped back and listened to the wind pummelling the shelter, screaming its hunger to devour her as well.

She'd finally learnt the hardest lesson of their existence. There were no happy endings here; no easy ways out, no tricks to escape your judgement if you make a mistake.

She needed to survive and return to the village, before other children laughed at the old people's advice and stepped across the bounds.

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