

THE STORM PLAIN

GRAEME LARMOUR

~An excerpt from the novella~



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All night the storm continued to rage against the land, delivering apocalyptic retribution upon all it encountered. In the town all the lights were off, the power lines having fallen in the face of the weather. They would remain down, and the houses would remain invisible, until the storm abated.

And the storm showed no sign of abating. In the distance, the first rumble of thunder rose from beneath the rain as the elements waged war on each other.

Even the animals were hiding. The ragged birds that usually huddled in the branches of trees had taken flight ahead of the storm's arrival. The stray dogs that would normally spend the night patrolling the streets in search of scraps had gone to ground. Nocturnal prey and nocturnal predator alike dared not venture into the storm.

It had never been known to rain this hard, not even in rainy season. Like a marauding army the storm moved in from the north, invading the land then advancing upon the vicinity until nothing was left that would not surrender to its command.

It beat an incessant march across the valleys, bending the saplings in the lowlands like blades of grass. The tributaries burst their banks long before reaching the river, washing aquatic life into flooded field and rinsing the last nutrients from the dissolving earth.

Rubbish was swept from the back streets and alleyways, then carried in fast-flowing rivers down main roads, before converging in a lake of litter in the town square. The shop roofs sprung leaks as the rain pounded down from above, forcing its way through beams and rafters to destroy the goods below.

On the far side of town, the rains beat upon the open courses and rising plains. It saturated the soil, the grip of root on earth loosening until grass and shrub were set free. Overhead, great swathes of grey cloud shifted against each other in oceanic skies. Rolling in ominous waves, the thunder moved closer.

Savage winds howled across the gorse and bracken of the prairie. In a hail of liquid bullets the rain hammered holes into the mud, the sodden lichen turning the long grass into swamp moss. The black-eyed skies above became a conduit for nature's feral

electricity as the lightning – first blue, then silver – cracked open the heavens. The thunder rumbled incessantly, each peal shaking the earth to its very core.

On the prairie there was no sign of life. Even the town was visible only when the lightning sparked. The land remained deserted. No-one in their right mind would set foot outdoors tonight.

Against the hostile storms, a lone figure then emerged from the darkness. Struggling towards the prairie, the wild winds threatened to throw him to the ground. Still he kept on walking. Driven by a force stronger than the chaos surrounding him, he fought his way forward through the gale.

The overcoat he wore flapped at his ankles, now so thoroughly soaked it did nothing to protect him from the rain, and only served to hinder his journey. He could no longer see in the darkness, and raised a hand to shield his eyes from the relentless onslaught of the rain. But the rain continued to blind him, each bitter drop hitting his face like a shard of sharpened ice.

Apart from those fleeting seconds when the lightning illuminated the horror, he saw nothing. No sane man would brave the prairie on a night like this. No man who valued his life would dare tread on the plains while the land was at the mercy of the elements. And tonight the elements showed no mercy at all.

They destroyed all in their path, leaving no form of industry untouched. Roofs had collapsed, dams had broken, the tracks on the railroad torn asunder. All that remained was nature; a feral nature, as violent and as dangerous as any wild beast with a hunger.

The figure on the plains had long since come to understand nature. He knew that nature could be beautiful, but he also knew that nature could be cruel. All men knew that, yet all men turned a blind eye to the full extent of nature's cruelty.

Mankind harnessed the elements, used them for his own benefit, then laboured under the misconception that the environment was under his control. But no man could ever control nature, and this unpredictability forever gave nature the upper hand.

Nature handed its gifts to man; and what nature gave, mankind

took. And mankind continued to take and take and take, gnawing greedily at the feeding hand until nature took it all back.

And nature would always take it all back. Always. It was only ever a question of when it would take it. Tonight nature was calling in its debt, and mankind had no choice but to pay.

On the storm plain, the fierce skeleton of a giant sycamore loomed against the angry sky, the sole shadow upon the horizon. Tendril wires of creeping ivy crawled from the tree's roots and slithered around its trunk, slowly strangling it of life. Though the two were bound together, the survival of one resulted in the choking death of the other. This was nature's way. There could be no other.

Having reached the prairie, the lone figure stopped where he stood. His feet sank slowly into the putrefied soil, while the rain and hail assaulted him on all sides. He had no defence left against their attack, no defence left against the demons in his head.

He had to come here. This was where he needed to be when his mind was in turmoil, when he needed to be alone because he could no longer bear to be alone. Especially tonight, when the weather was as ruinous as his soul.

On nights like this he was ageless, no more than a vessel bereft of all he once held dear. All he'd learnt, all he'd done, meant nothing. His actions were merely the reactions of a powerless man. The only power he had left was the power of surrender.

'Let me choke to death within this savage ground,' he cried to no-one. 'Let this raging earth swallow me whole!'

As if in answer to his call, the thunder crashed with a ferocity that threatened to tear the heavens apart. In the sky, no stars were visible through the portentous clouds sinking lower and lower. Once more the lightning flashed and he saw the world the way it really is, the way it always was; venal, violent and virtueless.

Tonight, everything carried an element of horror. The bark of a savage dog. The seed of evil that takes root in a selfish heart. The realisation that Mother Nature kills her babies.

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