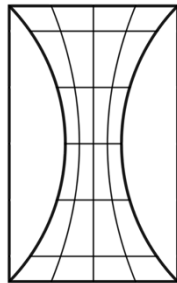


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

5 August 1124

After months of travelling, the Miller family finally abandoned their delusions of reclaiming their previous life. They settled in the large town of Taunton, where Arnold hoped the sheer number of people would mask his history. He took a labouring job at one of the town's three mills, which provided at least meagre food for his family.

They received permission to occupy an abandoned hovel on the outskirts of the town. The floor was littered with droppings from its previous animal inhabitants and large chunks were missing from the walls but it provided most of a roof over the family's head. The hovel was much rougher than Ma and Pa's cottage but it wasn't too large an adjustment for Margery. For the Millers, it was hell.

Joan struggled most with adjusting to her new lifestyle. She constantly complained about the smells and her routine tantrums continued even as their new life solidified. Not a day went by that she didn't remind everyone that she missed her mirror.

Her mother also partook in the whining. Edith regularly complained of boredom but did little to help herself. She refused to interact with the townsfolk – fearing it would reinforce her family's new position in the world – and instead hid away indoors. She only left for Sunday Mass and even then returned home as soon as possible.

Edith's confinement ate away at her. Mind and body. She seemed feebler with each journey and started to remind Margery of Mama.

The Millers now viewed Margery with open hostility, despite her continuing to shoulder all of the chores required to keep the house functioning. Edith always watched as Margery slaved away, criticising her technique or choice of ingredients but never helping. Edith always found something that Margery had done wrong and told anyone who would listen that she could've done better.

“You're chopping it too small!” Edith snapped as Margery prepared a scrawny rabbit for the evening's stew. “You'll ruin it. We won't be able to taste a thing and you know we won't get meat again until next week.”

Margery sighed and adjusted her chopping. It was easier that way, giving in. She let the little woman have her little wins and kept her head down. After all, she was fighting a bigger fight.

It wasn't long after Margery's evening discussion with the deaf priest that she'd resolved that her days with the Millers were numbered. Speaking her concerns aloud had been liberating and the mere act of vocalising them solidified thoughts that had rattled around Margery's brain for weeks.

Replaying her interaction with the Elderly Priest always brought a smile to her face. A part of her felt uneasy about the encounter but her memory was fuzzy and she couldn't pinpoint the exact cause. Margery instead savoured the conviction the discussion had provided which always flooded her with a calm sense of purpose.

Her feelings of guilt had also evaporated since the conversation. She no longer blamed herself for the Millers being driven from Holford. Merely setting foot within their hovel revealed the true reason. It was a spiteful place, full of negativity and, ever so slowly, regret. Although Margery was often the target of the family's displeasure, they were also prone to turning upon each other. Even Henry treated her poorly and the former friends barely spoke. Margery realised that the Millers' terrible personalities were the real cause of their problems. Holford had been right to expel such toxicity from their community and now Margery planned to be rid of them too.

Having travelled with the Millers for so long, she knew the hazards of the road and just how dangerous it would be to go alone. But it needed to be done, like lancing a boil. Margery prepared by pinching the odd coin from the family whenever shopping at Taunton's market, telling Edith that prices had been higher than expected. Margery surprisingly felt no guilt at the theft. It wasn't hard to argue that she deserved payment for enduring the Millers' wretched behaviour.

Margery still didn't know how to escape the world she'd so foolishly created for herself but she left the hovel as often as possible and analysed every situation in search of the ideal escape. Washing the Millers' clothes. Shopping at the market. Attending Mass at the church. Each offered opportunities to escape, though none presented a sure enough option to justify the risk. And so she always ended back at the hovel. Washing and cleaning and cooking.

Margery finished chopping the chunks of rabbit and slid them into the boiling pot over the fire before starting on the vegetables.

"Not the onion, save that for tomorrow," Edith barked. "And carrot tops are garbage, not food."

Arnold walked in, covered in dust from his morning's work at the mill. He sat heavily on the bench that Margery had just wiped down.

"Why's supper not ready? I'm starving!"

Margery trembled with pent up anger at his entitlement. She reached around him to scrape the carrots into the stew but knocked the pot's flimsy handle, causing it to drop and spill the contents into the fire.

"Oi!" Arnold bellowed.

"You stupid cow!" Edith wailed. "Why'd you do that!?"

"Sorry!" Margery cried as she tried to salvage as much as possible. Only half remained in the pot. "I've saved most of it. See?"

"You dolt," Edith cried hysterically. "You've wasted our rabbit! Just after I said it was precious, you did that deliberately. No, we'll take the pot. You eat whatever you can salvage from the flames."

Margery stood dumbfounded as Edith's words washed across her. Jean giggled and Henry looked away. She snapped.

"You're not serious!?" Margery cried. "Why would I do that deliberately after slaving away for you!? You expect me to eat ash!?"

The Millers all looked at quiet-spoken Margery in shock.

“Now you listen here,” Arnold told Margery, grabbing her tightly by the wrist. “Don’t you ever speak to my wife like that again. You’re lucky to have a roof over your head so be grateful you get any food whatsoever!”

Margery ripped her hand free using one of Matilda’s self-defence tricks and shocked the former Miller by continuing her attack.

“You call this a roof? You can’t even provide for your family, you impotent old man.”

Arnold’s face was frozen in fury but Margery pushed the big man hard in the stomach and fled from the hovel before the adults could compose themselves.

Not knowing where to go, Margery ran to the town square and hoped to get lost in the crowd. Taunton was much bigger than Holford, even bigger than Stowey. It still amazed her to see so many people in one place. Every day was like Rachel’s wedding.

Margery walked amongst the crowd until her heart stopped racing and she was sure that she hadn’t been followed. She cursed her foolishness under her breath. She definitely wasn’t getting any of the rabbit.

Deciding to give the hovel time to cool, Margery retreated to her favourite place in Taunton. The tavern reminded Margery of Holford’s brewery, with its long tables and walls lined with barrels. In a town as big as Taunton, the tavern was always busy and there was a constant stream of people coming in for a meal and a drink or three.

Unlike Holford, Taunton’s tavern could afford to hire permanent staff, paying decent coin in exchange for pouring drinks and waiting tables. Margery had proposed working there to bring in some extra money but Arnold and Edith had forbidden the idea, telling her it was an evil place that would corrupt her soul. That only encouraged Margery and she visited whenever she could.

Margery stepped into the tavern and was greeted by the familiar attack on her senses. The noisy patrons, the smell of stale ale, the heat of a fire that roared year-round.

It was quieter than normal and Margery ordered a mug of mead from a familiar serving girl before taking her favourite seat in a distant corner, out of the way but with a great view of the room and its constant flow of patrons. Margery sipped her drink and watched people pass by. She recognised regulars scattered around the room but a party of four unknown adolescents eventually claimed a nearby table.

They were around Margery’s age, give or take a year, which was a surprise as the younger crowd rarely had money and usually only arrived as night set in. Unlike Edith, Margery had made a point to know the townsfolk, particularly those around her own age. Anyone that might aid her escape from the miserable Miller family. Yet these folk were unfamiliar. Intrigued, Margery tried to eavesdrop.

“...it’s surely more than two days? Three at least,” a brunette girl said.

“Yes but they’ll already be on our tail,” the older boy said.

“Baron Hugo already snatched Paul,” a younger girl interjected.

“Exactly!” the older boy exclaimed. “He doesn’t want his serfs running away to work another lord’s land. But they don’t know where we’re heading. Taunton was a fair bet, it’s one of the larger towns. But where we go from here, they’ll have to guess. Down to Exeter? Up to Bridgwater perhaps? But surely they wouldn’t guess Nether Stowey.”

Margery almost dropped her mug when she heard the familiar town.

“Shh,” urged the smaller boy. “Quietly...”

“What I’m trying to say,” the older boy whispered, “is it’ll be harder for them to track us if we stick to the forest. It’ll take a bit longer but then we can muddle our way in slower time.”

“And what about bandits?” the younger boy asked him matter-of-factly.

“I’d rather risk the possible chance of bandits than the guaranteed threat of Baron Hugo.”

“Is this even worth it Guy?” the older brunette asked. “Risking all this just for a *chance* of better work? Based on nothing but the word of a tinker?”

“You saw his knife, didn’t you? Not a speck of rust. Granted, it’s not much to go off. But surely you don’t fancy the life of our parents, slaving away for a Baron who raises taxes each year on a whim. I don’t. The tinker said there’s work in a copper mine. We’ve only just arrived and have already learned it’s near a village that evicted its miller and that there’s a mysterious red-headed foreigner involved. It’s the talk of the town!”

Guy’s mention of Matilda was all Margery could take. Emboldened by her mead and the confrontation with Edith, she moved towards their table and interrupted their conversation.

“Excuse me,” she said timidly. The group stared up at her. The younger boy looked terrified at being interrupted but the older two just looked annoyed.

“What do you want?” Guy grunted.

“I couldn’t help but overhear. The town with the redhaired woman? It’s Holford, not Nether Stowey.”

The younger boy was practically fell off his chair but Guy looked at Margery sceptically.

“How would you know that?”

“I’m from there, originally. I’m living here with their old miller and his family but my little brother was the one who first invited the Foreigner to Holford. Her name’s Matilda by the way.”

Realisation that she was telling the truth dawned on the group’s faces. The younger boy’s mouth hung open.

“I could take you there if you want,” Margery offered casually, feeling a little more confident. She gestured to the older girl. “She’s right, it’d only take a day if you really pushed and I can show you a way through the forest.”

Guy weighed her offer.

“Why the sudden desire to go back?” he asked. “Why are you even here in the first place?”

Margery felt her face flush with embarrassment.

“Leaving with the Millers was a hasty decision. A big mistake. Life hasn’t been pleasant since I joined them but it sounds like things are much better in Holford. I miss my home. And my family.”

Guy still looked unsure.

“I could introduce you to her,” Margery added hastily. “To Matilda. My brother and her were close friends. She lived at our house. She could help you get work.”

“Ok,” Guy said after a pause, “but we leave today. I won’t risk being captured by Hugo, not when we’re so close. We can camp in the woods this evening and make our way to...Holford in the morning. That fine with you?” he asked with a serious stare.

Margery breathed a sigh of relief and didn’t need to think twice. Within a heartbeat she promised herself never to set foot in the Miller’s hovel ever again.

“Let’s go!”

“You’re not going to collect your things?” the younger boy asked.

“There’s nothing for me back there but misery and scolding. Best we just leave now. I know a cave where we can set up camp before night falls.”

The older girl insisted that the group at least finish their drinks before leaving so Margery used the time to get acquainted. Guy was the oldest male and as such, the group’s default leader. The older girl was Gemma. She was slightly older than Guy and the younger boy Adam was her younger brother. The quiet girl was Guy’s little sister Anabel.

Although the others quickly warmed to Margery, Gemma remained wary and watched the newcomer closely. The rest of the group happily shared what they’d heard about Holford – most of it fanciful – and Margery told them more about Matilda’s arrival in return. They spewed a flood of questions and their collective excitement continued to grow well after their drinks were gone. Adam squeaked with excitement when Margery shared that Matilda had taught her how to read.

Margery was beginning to revel in being among friendly and energetic people, so different to the Millers, when the tavern door burst open. Her stomach dropped to the floor.

Arnold.

Without a word, she slid under the table and crawled behind her new companions’ feet until she was wedged against the wall.

“What you doing down there?” Anabel asked excitedly.

“That’s the Miller!” Margery whispered, gesturing wildly at the door.

Gemma kicked Anabel and resumed their conversation, pretending Margery wasn’t there. Margery looked past Adam’s feet and saw Arnold’s boots marching around the room. The friendly serving girl’s skirt moved to intercept him.

“Can I get you a drink sir?” she asked.

“No,” Arnold responded gruffly.

“Would you like anything else?”

Arnold stopped scanning the room and looked down at her angrily. “I’m looking for my...daughter. I know she comes here, when she’s trying to hide. Blonde, about your age. Have you seen her?”

“No sir, I haven’t. I’ll keep an eye out.”

Arnold gave the serving girl a dismissive huff and took a final glance around the room before striding outside without another word.

“That was close,” Margery said with a giggle as she clambered out from under the table. “Thanks for that,” she said as the server cleared their mugs.

“No problem at all,” she said with a wink. “It happens more often than you’d think and us girls have to stick together. You’d better get going, in case he comes back. But remember this if I ever come looking for a mining job!”

Margery promised she would. They quickly paid and darted out of the tavern.

Margery’s new friends had left their own meagre possessions behind a large rock on the outskirts of the town. They collected their things before cutting across fields towards the Quantock mountains in the distance.

Margery felt freer than she had in years, running alongside newfound friends. Towards her family and home. She didn’t look back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

5 September 1124

After months of preparation, Matilda's quest to generate electricity was almost complete. She returned from Matthew's forge laden with spools of copper wire and a small package wrapped in Ma's rapidly dwindling paper. While the package made Matilda crave fish and chips, it actually contained a most precious and delicate cargo.

Matilda passed a gaggle of women carrying bolts of cloth dyed with Ma's newest colours. She juggled her awkward load to wave but received a mix of smiles and scowls. The mood in Holford remained sombre in the weeks following the mine collapse and the village was divided. Some praised Matilda and William's intervention while others blamed her for the incident occurring in the first place. A loud few, led by the Brewers, had even called for her expulsion.

The critical reaction particularly hurt because Matilda agreed. She could've paid more attention to the mine, if she hadn't been distracted juggling Holford's many other projects.

She'd had plenty of time to ponder potential alternate timelines during the week that she tended to William's tormenter in Edric's cabin.

Yet even then she failed, so intent on seeing Roger live that she had delayed returning to Holford. By the time she arrived, the man with shattered legs was in a bad way. There was no winning. Matilda was forced to amputate one of Gregory's gangrenous legs and the other was unlikely to ever fully heal.

A solar eclipse on the day of the operation had done little to enhance Matilda's standing with the village. Matilda cursed herself for losing the other half of her Book, which contained several decades worth of upcoming celestial events.

When half of the sun disappeared in the mid-morning, plunging the countryside in darkness, neighbours saw it as a sign from God that the amputation should not go ahead. It was only when Matilda emphasised to Gregory that he would otherwise certainly die a painful death that he reluctantly agreed to the procedure.

A big crowd had gathered for the amputation. Most came for the gory spectacle though Astrid led a small group who were determined to learn from the ordeal. Astrid hated herself for buckling under pressure at the mine and had done everything in her power to improve her craft, going so far as to personally lead a group in dissecting animals to better understand the body.

Matilda's patient had glared at her with unbridled hatred as she prepared his leg, maintaining eye contact throughout the procedure until he eventually passed out from the pain. The surgery went surprisingly well, given the unsanitary conditions, but Gregory's hatred still smouldered when he eventually woke. Not even Matilda's promise to make him a wheelchair softened his mood.

Margery's return was the only thing to cut through the lingering gloom. Holford still buzzed about the heart-wrenching reunion, when Margery casually strolled back into the village and Ma screeched through the streets with uninhibited delight as she sought when her prodigal daughter. Margery claimed not to understand

what all of the fuss was about but Matilda thought the faraway look in the girl's eyes hinted at unspoken traumas. Nevertheless, Margery maintained her stoic façade and wouldn't dream of sharing her problems with her family, not when they were so happy to have her back.

Margery was appalled to have missed so much and told Matilda that Holford was almost unrecognisable. She was scandalised that so many had overtaken her ability to read and threw herself into the plethora of reading material that Father Daniel had churned out with his printing press. Matilda quickly had yet another additional follower vying for a scrap of her time.

Margery's new friends were another bonus and a welcome addition to the village. Each was passionate and pragmatic, eager to assist and grateful for every opportunity. Margery took them under her wing and they moved into one of Walt's recently constructed workers' huts. Each contained a pair of bunk beds which gave Matilda flashbacks to her dorm at the Institute. She apologised for the basic furnishings but the four youngsters gushed thanks as though she had bequeathed the Tower of London.

Matilda passed Walt's organised grid of huts as she left Holford, the contrast of their unweathered timber contrasting with the landscape. Walt's apprentices had started using an assembly line and each new building went up quicker than the last. Almost quick enough to keep up with Holford's new arrivals.

Matilda was surprised at the scarcity of interruptions as she returned to her mill. One positive of the mining accident was that Holford had marched on without Matilda's guiding hand. Council meetings continued and projects progressed while she tended to Roger. They'd made some mistakes and she would've done some things differently but it was reassuring that Holford had continued to grow without her. Thoughts of resuming her mission to London were no longer tinged with guilt.

Matilda's arms burned when the mill finally came into view and she rushed towards the millhouse. Labourers in the surrounding buildings were packing up for the day, oblivious to the magic Matilda and William planned to unleash that evening. The setting sun reflected off Timothy's newly installed glass windows and the mill's giant new waterwheel continued its tireless rotation. The new wheel was much more efficient than the tiny original design. It already drove both Walt's sawmill and Matthew's bellows but that evening Matilda would connect the most impressive project yet. A true glimpse of the future.

"You took your time!" William called as Matilda lay down her cargo. He was seated beside the millhouse hearth, coiling endless loops of copper wire. He lay down his spool of wire with a thud and walked over as Matilda unwrapped her precious bundle to reveal hundreds of jet black loops.

"That's Elizabeth's bamboo?" William asked. "More like your hair after the mill burnt down."

"Not far off," Matilda agreed, the fire still painfully fresh in her mind. "They're called filaments. Matthew roasted them in his furnace for days. Each should provide as much light as a candle, maybe more."

William tried to inspect one but the graphite disintegrated at his touch.

"They're very fragile," Matilda warned. "The tungsten in my satchel would've been better but the Bishop stole that. Let's finish putting this thing together and see if it's worked."

The pair resumed their coil winding, working through sunset and then by the firelight. The last of the labourers left the yard and closed off the mill pond, stilling the waterwheel and its attached machinery. The room was eerily quiet at night without the rattling of the waterwheel, the scrape of the grinding stone and the rasp of the sawmill.

The pair worked on in determined silence. William finished first.

“Done!” Matilda cried with a final flourish. “Let’s see if it worked.”

William helped her fix the rudimentary generator onto the mill’s main shaft before running outside to reopen the water channel. Matilda checked that all the lodestones were in places and the wires attached correctly before hollering to William. The waterwheel began to spin but the only hint that the experiment might’ve worked was a slight smell of burning from the primitive technology.

William ran into the room but gave Matilda a quizzical look.

“Did it work?” he asked. “It seems...underwhelming.”

Matilda had to agree and tried to think of something that would convey the true gravity of what she was about to show him. It eventually came to her.

“Take my torch and sit by the hearth,” she said as she doused the fire with water, closed the shutters and collected the two copper electrodes. She returned slowly to let the atmosphere build.

“Switch it off,” she said, her voice fey.

William did, smothering them in complete darkness.

“Ok. In the Bible, Jesus says you are the light of the world. This invention will make that true. Literally.”

Matilda made sure she had a good grip on the wires.

“Other than me,” she continued, “you are the only person who knows this secret. Savour this moment, it will be remembered in history for centuries to come.”

Matilda’s assistant was silent but the darkness was charged with anticipation.

“William, what was God’s very first commandment?” Matilda asked in little more than a whisper.

William was puzzled. “Huh? Oh, Genesis? Let there be light?”

At that, Matilda brushed the two wires together, emitting a flash of light that made William whoop with excitement. She moved the wires slowly together and allowed the electricity to arc through the air.

“Unbelievable!” William exclaimed, crying out with each flash of light. “Lightning! You’ve made lightning! Just like Thor!” He paused. “But where’s the thunder?”

Matilda laughed. “There’s still work to do before I can claim to be a Norse god but it’s a start. A neat trick. But let’s try something more practical. Here, have a try while I grab the filaments. Just be careful.”

She set off with the torch and William was still cackling with glee when she returned. Matilda sat back and watched, savouring his simple pleasure. She admired how quickly he progressed from aimless playing to experimentation, slowly moving the electrodes closer until he too discovered the point that arcing began.

“That’ll do, let’s try the real experiment.”

William let the wires droop. Matilda cleared the floor of sawdust and debris from the floor before laying down a spare glazed tile. She wouldn’t risk another fire.

“You’ve asked how all this could possibly justify so much work. And the deaths. Well, this lightning is electricity, just like the torch. Anyone might find it an intriguing piece of magic but as you’ve seen yourself, there’s nothing special to it. Anyone can do it. Yes?”

William hung off her every word. He nodded.

“Lightning is fun but we can control the energy to make it more useful. The filaments can become a candle that will last for months but that is just the beginning. You could do all sorts of things. Horseless carts. Speaking to people in London as if they were right here. Creating cold in summer and heat in winter. There’s endless possibilities, but first we need to control it. And so, the humble filament.”

Taking the uncharged wire from William, Matilda carefully wound it around one of the delicate black filaments. She gently placed it back on the tile.

“When I tell you to, touch your wire to this end,” she said, showing William how to complete the circuit. Matilda switched off the torch, plunging them back into darkness.

Matilda’s heart raced, reminding her of another poorly lit history-defining experiment that started her whole adventure. She held her breath. She’d done the experiment many times before, both at the Institute and at home with her father. The stakes had never been higher.

“Do it now William.”

She heard the Boy fumble around but then he stopped. Darkness combined with the weight of expectation to smother her from all sides.

And then she saw it. An orange glow. Faint at first but it flared to full brightness in a heartbeat, momentarily illuminating William’s concentrating face and the room around them.

William cried out in surprise and accidentally broke the circuit, plunging them back into darkness.

“No!” he commanded. “I’ve got it, hold on..”

The light returned, longer this time. Long enough for Matilda to catch William’s eye and return his toothy grin. The filament burned out and the room went dark once more. The pair cried out in celebration.

Matilda hurriedly switched on her torch, its light cold and sterile compared to the warmth of the bamboo filament.

“That was bloody amazing!” William exclaimed, each word dripping with awe.

“There’s plenty more where that came from,” Matilda reassured him with a gesture toward the remaining package of filaments.

She placed another on the tile and William reapplied the electrodes. Matilda switched off the torch but William had already bathed them in a warm orange glow. The current was far from steady and the filament lasted just long enough for Matilda to notice a slight flickering before it once again burst into flames.

“They should last longer than that. Let’s try something different.”

The pair experimented with the electricity late into the night, eventually achieving sustained success by using one of Timothy’s glass flasks to enclose the filament. Most of their filament stockpile remained intact.

William and Matilda sat around their makeshift light globe, basking in its orange glow. William was full of questions and already thinking of the next big development but Matilda brought him back to earth so they could plan their next step.

The reveal.

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Over the following week, Matilda and William worked like they were possessed. Matilda spread word of a gathering to celebrate Holford’s many achievements. All were invited. She called in favours from across the village and William ran around collecting everything they needed to create a night to remember.

Matilda placed the mill under a shroud of secrecy, entrusting only a select few to help with the preparations. Margery and her friends became custodians of the generator, insulating wires to hang from the warehouse rafters while Matthew created more filaments and a weary Timothy slaved away to produce more glass jars. He apologised for the sloppy work but each handcrafted bulb was a work of art. Walt built large trestle tables that ran the length of the tiled warehouse, blustering with frustration when Matilda denied him entry to set them up.

Gossip and rumourmongering swept through the village. Why had Matilda insisted on hosting the event at dusk? How had she paid for it all? Why, after almost a year of slaving away, were they suddenly being rewarded for their efforts? Holford’s more sceptical villagers saw Matilda’s party as an attempt to win back good will after the mine debacle. Others just looked forward to a free meal.

The big day finally arrived and guests flooded to the mill. Martin Brewer begrudgingly cracked kegs while Ma coordinated a gaggle of Holford women as they finalised an enormous exotic feast, for the entire ever-expanding village and then some.

Food and drink were flowing by the time Baron Walter and Sir Phillip arrived at dusk. Awaiting sunset, Pa gave the guest of honour a tour of the site before guiding them inside the warehouse at Matilda’s signal. Once they were seated beside villagers at one of Walt’s tables, Matilda started the formalities from the front of the room.

“Welcome everyone. Thank you all for trekking from the village this evening. It will be a dark walk home but I promise it will be worth it.

“Tonight is a chance to give thanks for all your hard work, particularly to those who helped restore this brilliant building. I haven’t seen so many people here since the day it burned down. A dark day, one of many since I arrived in Holford. But it is great to have you here under better circumstances.

“We are joined by Baron Walter...” Matilda paused for the villagers’ polite applause “...who generously approved the mill’s renovation. He’s becoming a familiar face in the village and will no doubt celebrate Holford’s increased productivity.

“On a more personal note, I want to thank the Archer family. You welcomed me into your home as a guest, then extended an invitation for me to become one of your own. We’ve been through so much together.

“Finally, dear William. You were the first person I met while journeying through these lands and it was you who brought me to Holford. Your thirst for understanding is unquenchable and you’ve helped shape Holford’s fortunes more than anyone.”

Matilda raised her goblet to him.

“And because of that, I invite you to reveal the results of your personal project. The real reason we’re all here tonight.”

At Matilda’s signal, Margery and her friends extinguished the torches around the room. There were some disconcerted cries, including a yelp from Walt, but the audience held their breath in anticipation.

There were mutters in the darkened room as William made his way to the light switch by the millhouse door. Matilda’s disembodied voice filled the uneasy silence.

“William has worked for months on a project to...further illuminate the village. He has bounced tirelessly between the forge, the carpenter and yes, the mine. Everyone’s efforts have contributed to this work, in some way. So William, over to you.”

The Boy paused and let the crowd mill uncomfortably in the dark.

“Father Daniel,” William eventually called out. “What was the Lord’s very first commandment?”

“Ah?” Holford’s elderly priest stammered, not expecting to be called upon. “Let there be light?”

William flicked the mill’s rudimentary switch, powering the hundred glowing glass spheres that dangled from the rafters above. The room filled with a mix of screams and cries of delight as the crowd was instantly bathed in a warm pulsating light. Baron Walter almost fell out of his chair in surprise.

Matilda stared up and judged the bulbs. They were far from optimal designs and would be lucky to last the evening. A couple had already burned out. But the crowd didn’t notice. They were mesmerised by the gently pulsating lights and every neck was craned up toward the rafters.

Matilda gave William an encouraging thumbs up and was pleased to see him basking in the audience’s awe. He gave her a cheeky smirk and flicked the switch once more, plunging the room back into darkness. There was a collective cry of disappointment.

“Not to worry!” William reassured. “It’s easy to put back on! Who else wants to try?”

He flicked the switch again and the glow resumed. There was a sudden scramble to join William by the door, starting an endless flickering of lights that lasted the rest of the evening.

The Baron barged his way to William and enthusiastically flicked the lights on and off, singlehandedly destroying at least ten of the weaker bulbs. Satisfied with the invention, he graciously passed the control on to the next villager in line and summoned Matilda.

“I’ll be damned. I’d have sworn it was sorcery if I hadn’t made it happen with my own hands. I don’t know what I did to deserve you Matilda but praise the Lord you stumbled across this little village. First you save my finger, salvage a ruined mill and now this? I want one, you hear. Back at my castle. You will make it happen?”

“I’m afraid not, my lord. This design requires the mill to work and we’ve exhausted our entire stock of copper, for now. But with longer summer working days, I can start on a wind-powered design and begin construction for you once we’ve mined more copper. We may need extra timber as well...”

Baron Walter looked at her incredulously. “Woman, you can have the whole forest for all I care! Everything you touch turns to gold! Get to work, we’ll talk again soon.”

The Baron and his entourage exited the building, leaving the villagers to revel in the flickering lights. Sir Phillip gave an encouraging wink. With the Baron gone, a weight lifted from Matilda’s shoulders and she could finally enjoy the festivities. She gathered some food and sat to watch Holford gather around the switch. Even her most ardent critics were in line.

“A nifty trick,” came Timothy’s deep voice from behind Matilda, causing her to jump. “I never dreamed I’d see something like it in my lifetime. Truly blessed.”

The old man sat down on the bench next to her.

“And to think I’ve contributed! I wish you’d told me though. The light amplifies all the imperfections in my work! I’m proud Matilda. Amazed and truly proud.”

Timothy couldn’t know how much his approval meant. The pair sat in companionable silence and savoured the joy in the villagers’ faces as they flicked the lights on and off.

“Matilda,” Timothy said seriously, breaking their silence. “As grand as it is, one can’t help but wonder at the cost. Of all this.” He pointed to the far corner of the room where Gregory sat in his wheelchair, deep in discussion with Astrid. “There’s several lads that can’t enjoy this wonder. Most were new to Holford but I’d known Edric since he was a boy. He would’ve cherished seeing his precious copper being put to such great use.”

Matilda felt a lump rise in her throat.

“What I’m saying,” Timothy continued, “is that I’d wager more of them might’ve lived if that medical know-how wasn’t locked away in your head. Only your head. Astrid did her best, bless her, but Lord knows she could’ve done more.”

Matilda nodded thoughtfully. "You're right, Timothy. I've been so caught up in everything around Holford but it could save lives and needs to be prioritised. I could've taught her more. About the body. And the medicine and tools."

"Tools sounds like something for young Matty Smith and I think Astrid knows her fair share about the medicine by now. But the body... Perhaps that's something I could help with?"

Matilda looked up at the old man, confused.

"Look girl, let's talk straight. We both know my days are numbered. I've had a good life and have seen such wonders, particularly over this past year. You taught me how to make glass!" He gave a booming laugh. "But I think I could do one last bit of good, after I go. Your students might benefit from seeing what a real person looks like inside. Not some pig or goat or chicken."

An awkward silence settled over their conversation.

"That is...very generous," Matilda stumbled. "But what about the afterlife? The resurrection?"

"Ha! Surely you remember our first conversation, the day of the grandmother's funeral? You see the world differently, when you've been around as long as I have, and seen the things I've seen. Once you've asked the scary questions and let them rattle around for a decade or so. I like to think that a merciful God, capable of creating the heavens and Earth, would be capable of stitching me back together. If He's all-knowing, he'll see that it was done for a just cause."

Matilda paused as she considered what he had said.

"Ok Timothy. I graciously accept your offer, but only because you're right that it will benefit the whole village. You'll get the chance to give one last gift. When the time comes. But until then, and may that be many moons from now, have Astrid take a look over you. Just to make sure nothing's amiss."

The old man bowed gratefully and departed without a word, humming jollily to himself as he limped away.

The conversation left Matilda feeling uneasy and the rest of the evening passed by in a blur. Matilda continued to feel out of sorts when she woke up the next day. She dreaded the thought of her dear friend's departure. And having to fulfil the morbid promise he'd asked of her.

Matilda spent the following weeks bouncing more slowly around Holford, developing plans for the Baron's windmill and taking time to build upon Astrid's evening medicine classes.

Almost two weeks after their conversation, Timothy Potter died. Matilda was up early changing some bulbs that had blown during the previous evening's anatomy lesson when one of Timothy's apprentices ran into the mill and delivered the news. Matilda dropped everything and sprinted to the old man's house, vaulting over the bucket that still sat by the doorstep. A stained glass window lay unfinished on his table. Matilda approached the bed and saw that the precious man had passed away in his sleep. His face looked content.

Without pause, Matilda complied with Timothy's final wish and put out word of another special gathering at the mill the following evening.

A dissection.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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