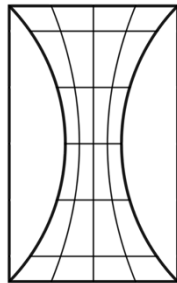


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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This book is a work of fiction woven around real history, real people and real science. Any references to historical events, people or places are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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Can Matilda avert the solar calamity?

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

2 June 1124

Matilda had been at the end of her tether when she returned to her mill, suffering mental whiplash from another day of being jerked all over Holford. She fantasised about a weekend escape back to her cave. Swimming in the stream, carving a chair and enjoying the forest solitude.

She needed the retreat. Unexplained acts of vandalism had become increasingly frequent as more strangers arrived in Holford. Her morale was chipped away as days of concentrated toil were ruined in an instant of mindless destruction. Matilda had asked Pa and his fellow jurors to investigate but the culprits remained at large.

Matilda was almost back at her mill when she noticed the unexplained mass beneath a hedge. She initially thought it was a wounded animal but ran when she realised it was a person. She reeled when she discovered it was Rachel.

Despite Rachel's history of antagonism, her story was heartbreaking and instantly filled Matilda with rage. Matilda's hands shook as she cleaned Rachel's battered face and she made for Holford the second Rachel fell asleep. Her fatigue was completely forgotten.

Rachel's house was dark and completely still when Matilda arrived. She vaulted up the stone steps and threw herself against the front door until it broke. Her efforts woke Alan who was standing dumbfounded by his bed when she entered. He smelt of stale beer, sweat and vomit.

The pair exchanged a momentary look before Alan sneered. The single expression, so reminiscent of his father, personified everything wrong with Holford. Rachel's bruised face. The mindless vandalism and endless work.

Matilda surged forward.

The coward tried to run, flinging objects and upending furniture in a vain attempt to slow Matilda but she took down her prey with the grace of a lioness.

Matilda showed Alan as much mercy as he'd shown his wife and their unborn child. She rained down punches and threw in her knee and boot. She didn't hold back. Alan landed several feeble blows of his own which only fuelled Matilda's rage.

"How dare you harm your wife?" she snarled between blows. "How dare you harm your unborn child? Scum!"

Alan eventually yielded and broke down in tears. Matilda landed a few extra blows for good measure before subduing him, bending his arm uncomfortably behind his back and forcing his head into the tiled floor. She smelled urine and saw a pool form on the floor tiles.

“You’re disgusting,” Matilda hissed, jerking Alan’s arm further back to get his attention. “You lay a finger on them again and I will be back. I won’t be so gentle next time, the world doesn’t need garbage like you. Do you understand?”

Alan wept into the floor.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes!” he’d cried. “I won’t touch her again.”

“You promise?” Matilda asked, pulling his arm tighter. She felt a pop.

“I promise,” the snivelling worm cried.

“I’ll be watching you,” Matilda said coolly. She threw him to the ground and stepped into the night without a backward glance.

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Matilda was dejected when Rachel was gone the following morning. She searched her mill and the surrounding buildings, hoping against hope that her guest had merely moved somewhere more comfortable or secure. But Rachel was gone.

A wave of weariness and remorse hit as Matilda recalled the previous night’s events. She’d exacted revenge and taken her anger out on Alan but it wasn’t becoming.

Eager to clear the fog from her head, she gave up her search and went to bathe in the mill pond. The cool water soothed her knuckles and the few places where Alan had landed decent blows. They hurt to touch but each flash of pain filled Matilda with vindication. Alan would be much worse off.

A cloud of red hair billowed around Matilda as she floated in the pond, calculating what to do next. She didn’t need to worry about Alan. He’d be feeling sore and sorry for himself, though his father wouldn’t be pleased. Rachel was Matilda’s priority. She would’ve either retreated to her parents’ cottage or returned home to her abusive husband. Knowing the social expectations of the time, Matilda feared the latter was more likely.

Matilda needed to act fast and while the odds of finding Rachel with her parents were slim, the cottage had to be her first stop. An overly judgemental reaction from Ma could do lasting damage but Matilda hoped that a discrete discussion with the family’s matriarch might prevent any additional trauma.

Matilda made her way into Holford, careful to time her arrival just right. Late enough that the others would’ve departed for their regular daily routines but before Ma left to visit the local women. Matilda sneakily approached from the rear of the property to avoid any unnecessary conversations.

Ma was already outside emptying breakfast scraps into the muckheap. She gave a quizzical look as Matilda clambered through the vegetable patch, taking care not to trample Elizabeth’s crop.

“What’s wrong with the front gate?” Ma asked. “Surely you’re not that important yet?”

“Too many admirers out there,” Matilda joked as she awkwardly unhooked herself from a blackberry bush. “Have the others left yet?”

“They have,” Ma said curiously, staring into Matilda’s soul. “Come inside and have something to eat.”

Matilda followed Ma indoors and graciously accepted a fresh loaf before searching for a place to sit amongst the giant loom and racks of paper hanging around to dry. Ma stared at Matilda expectantly, waiting for her to spill whatever she’d come to say.

“You really don’t miss a trick,” Matilda said.

“It comes from raising a litter of rascals. What brings you here?”

Matilda picked at her bread as she decided how to put it delicately.

“Have you heard from Rachel?”

“She was here yesterday. Stayed for a good talk, just like old times. I gave her some pasta. She didn’t say much but I thought it was tasty.”

“Did she say anything about Alan?” Matilda asked delicately.

Ma’s mood darkened. “Look, I know you two aren’t friends but you shouldn’t snoop into other people’s business. It’s not proper.”

“I’m not snooping Emma, I promise. It’s just... Rachel slept at my mill last night.”

“That’s... unexpected,” Ma said with genuine surprise.

“It was for me too.” Matilda took a deep breath. “I’m afraid there’s been some problems.”

Ma didn’t look surprised. “I know, Rachel told me yesterday. It’s quite normal for newlyweds to have issues in the early months. It’s a big adjustment living with someone new. But it will be water under the bridge in no time.”

“I’m afraid it’s more serious than that. Alan’s beating her.”

“He never!” Ma exclaimed in disbelief.

“I’m afraid so. Rachel was collapsed by the side of the road when I travelled home. Well past the village boundary. Her face was bruised and bleeding.”

Ma looked grim. “I knew he was a ruffian but I never thought him a wife beater. My poor girl, it’s started so early. What of my grandchild?”

“The baby didn’t seem hurt,” Matilda reassured Ma. “But Rachel was gone before I woke up. I’d hoped to talk with her before she decided what to do next.”

Ma’s expression hardened. “You be careful there, young Matilda. Don’t you go putting dangerous ideas in her head.”

“But...” Matilda began.

“No, I won’t hear it,” Ma said firmly. “You’ve made some fine changes in this village, truly. But not this. Things might be different where you’re from but Rachel made her pact with God. She will stand by that boy, that dreadful violent boy, until death separates them. Don’t think I like it, I’m her mother for Christ’s sake. But

a promise is a promise. We can only pray that Alan sees the error of his ways, repents and redeems himself. The Lord will judge an appropriate punishment.”

Matilda toyed with telling Ma about her late-night encounter with Alan but thought against it. Better that someone else tell her, while Matilda was far away. Matilda knew that Ma wouldn't be swayed.

“Ok Emma. I won't tell her to leave Alan. But please, Rachel needs kindness. The life she described last night sounded agonisingly lonely. She could really use some company. Free from judgement and expectation.”

“You're a confident young woman Matilda,” Ma conceded, shaking her head. “Overconfident, I'd say. But I appreciate what you've done for my daughter. For the family. The whole village for that matter. Just know that we do things for a reason. You can't change everything.”

The finality of Ma's statement signalled that the conversation had ended.

“Now. If you'll excuse me, I'm showing some of the local ladies how to use Walt's loom. And Father Daniel needs this paper to print more exercises for tonight.”

Ma got up and showed Matilda the door. Matilda left, her bread still in hand. She was still processing Ma's blunt acceptance of Alan's violence as she meandered onto the road. She was trying to work out what to do next when a cry came from behind her.

“Oi, Matilda!”

Matilda turned to see Joshua Miller. “Oh, hi.”

“So glad I found you, you're harder to pin down than a rabbit in heat. I wanted to ask about...”

“Oh sorry,” she interrupted. “I'm actually in the middle of something. Can we talk before the meeting tonight?”

Joshua looked taken aback, like he'd had a prize snatched straight from his hands.

“I guess,” he said. “It's actually about that, and some mill stuff. Looks like there's going to be trouble.”

Matilda stopped in her tracks. “What makes you say that?”

“My new assistant said Alan was attacked last night. That Martin's out for blood. Alan's locked in the brewery, terrified that he'll be attacked again. People are saying it was someone from the Council but Alan's refusing to name them and my boy didn't know either.”

“Shit. Thanks for letting me know,” Matilda said, already starting to run away. “I'll drop past yours on my way to the meeting!”

Matilda had worked up a slight sweat by the time she arrived at Rachel's house. At least Alan was unlikely to interrupt.

She knocked at the door and waited, wryly noting that she'd stood on the same spot only hours earlier. She heard shuffling from within.

“Rachel? I know you're in there.”

The shuffling stopped but there was no response. Matilda grabbed the latch and started to open it.

“Rachel, I’m coming in.”

“No!” came a hysteric cry from inside and the latch slammed back down. “Go away! How dare you show your face here after what you did to my husband. I know it was you. Leave us alone!”

Matilda was confused. “But Rachel. What about last night?”

“Leave me alone!” Rachel screamed.

Matilda was used to Rachel’s outbursts but this was particularly manic. She wondered if Rachel had directed similar intensity at Alan or whether she railed at Matilda to vent unspoken frustrations. Either way, Matilda felt Rachel’s words lacked their usual scorn and just stood with her head against the door, letting Rachel wail until she tired herself out. Matilda let the silence settle.

“Ok Rachel. I’ll leave you be. Just know that there are people who want to help. Who want what’s good for you. Remember last night, you can always visit my mill if you need anything.”

Rachel remained silent, the latch shut. Accepting defeat, Matilda turned away to start what was left of her regular day.

She bounced between tasks with less energy than normal, stifling yawns as she provided advice and staying on her feet lest she fall asleep. She longed for her bed and vowed to take a multi-day retreat to the cave for a long overdue break.

As promised, she went to Joshua’s mill before the evening Council meeting. She helped diagnose problems with the mill mechanism and offered some of the spare parts Walt had made. He hung off her every word.

Realising they were late for the Council meeting, the pair ran to Martin’s brewery. Matilda was apprehensive about her reception but they found everyone sitting at their assigned positions in a particularly tense silence. Pa’s jury colleagues were also in attendance. An air of intrigue hung over the table and people looked everywhere but their injured companion..

Alan looked miserable. Astrid was tying his arm in a rough sling and his face was swollen. Both of his eyes were black. Alan’s father was furious.

“You mongrel!” Martin cried the moment Matilda entered the room. “How dare you attack my son! In his own house!”

The Council bristled.

“Martin!” Pa called out in rebuke. “That’s a big allegation. And of Holford’s most outstanding citizen too.”

“No Mark, it’s true.” Matilda replied without remorse. “I did it. And I’d happily do it again.”

The room fell dead silent and several attendees looked at Matilda as though she actually were a mangy dog.

“Oh,” Pa said, taken aback. “Matilda, that’s serious assault. What would possess you to do something like that?”

Matilda looked at Alan. “Would you like to tell them or should I?”

Alan glared at her through his swollen eyes.

“Suit yourself,” Matilda said with a shrug before turning to address her audience. “In addition to being a coward, young Alan here beats his wife. I found Rachel as I returned to my mill last night. She was lying in a heap by the side of the road. Her face was bloody and she cradled her unborn child as she wept.”

There were scattered looks of disapproval along the table. Matilda was surprised by their muted response and had to remind herself of Twelfth Century norms. Pa’s reaction was most visceral, standing stone still with his jaw and fists clenched.

“I brought Rachel back to the mill,” Matilda continued, “where she told me what had happened. Everything from her wedding until last night. It turns out Alan has been a far from honourable husband. So I went to visit him while his wife and baby rested in the safety of the mill. He showed no remorse and ran the second he saw me. Still took his fair share of swipes too. Hitting one woman wasn’t enough.”

She lifted her shirt and chainmail to show bruised ribs before looking at each of the attendees.

“I came here to help improve your village, you’ve all seen this. But improvement isn’t just about farming or construction. There’s room for social improvement too. Who of you stands for Alan’s thuggish actions? For the brutal treatment of a dutiful wife? Is that the sort of behaviour to be tolerated in Holford?”

She cast her gaze around the table. At Pa’s jury friends. There was a general mumble of disapproval.

“What happens within the privacy of a man’s house is of no concern to you,” Martin told Matilda. “No-one appointed you constable. Does knowing some cheap tricks entitle you to rule Holford with impunity?”

There were mumbles of agreement at his second statement, including from Pa.

“No, I am not above the law,” Matilda agreed sheepishly. Humanity had a tendency to allow a privileged few to exert influence over the masses. She couldn’t allow her Council to promote that. “But you don’t deny that your son struck his wife? And their unborn child?”

“So you should be punished!” Martin cried victoriously. “And Alan no doubt had reason for his actions.” He looked to his son for confirmation. Alan gave a slight nod.

Matilda couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“What of the Jury? Which of you would see such an assault punished? We can call upon Rachel to provide further evidence but I fear she needs rest now more than ever.”

Pa’s colleagues grumbled their agreement and everyone but Alan and Martin raised their hands, earning Edric a scowl from his brother.

“Please, just the Jury. Which of you would see Mister Alan disciplined for his cruelty?”

The Jury raised their hands again.

“And who of you,” Matilda added, “feel that the punishment already served was sufficient?”

There was some surprise from around the table, most of all from Alan himself.

“I’d say you gave the boy the wallop he deserves,” Walt said with a smirk.

There was a murmur of assent from the crowd and the matter seemed resolved.

“And who agrees,” Pa added with a certain twinkle in his eyes, “that *no-one* should be taking justice into their own hands from now on?” Matilda was sure to look appropriately chastised.

“Very well then,” Pa declared. “Assault will not be tolerated. Alan has served his punishment and the Jury will decide a suitable penance for Matilda. But for now, let’s get on with it.”

The rest of the meeting went smoothly, though Alan and his father remained sullen and both contributed little more than grunts.

Everyone shared updates of their projects. Matthew and Walt had tested the saw mill on some smaller branches and waited on Matilda before they tested a full trunk.

Though it didn’t flush, Timothy’s first toilet had proven a great success and he’d also started shaping his finest samples of glass into lenses. He proudly withdrew a rough pair of spectacles that comically magnified his eyes. Matilda couldn’t help but laugh, exactly what she needed after such a trying day.

They concluded the session with a round of reading and writing exercises using Father Daniel’s worksheets. Matilda was impressed at the rate they had all picked up the skill. Even Martin kept up with the class, determined not to be outdone.

It was Pa who called the meeting to a close, noticing Matilda’s increasingly frequent yawns.

“That will do for tonight. Time to retire.”

Matilda shot him a silent look of thanks and helped Father Daniel collect his worksheets as the rest of the Council filed out. Only Martin stayed seated and he tightly grabbed Matilda’s thigh as she walked past to collect his paper.

“This isn’t over,” he hissed under his breath.

Matilda was shocked at his venom and swatted his hand but he dug his fingers in deeper. Seeing that no-one else was watching, she wrenched her leg away and flicked Martin on the forehead. His eyes went wide with shock.

“Yes it is. Grow up old man and realise when you’ve lost. Your time has passed and there’s a new way of doing things around here. Go with the flow and you might retain some influence. Oppose it and you’ll be swept away like the old driftwood you are.”

Matilda gave him a sickly sweet smile and was on the other side of the table before her words had even sunk in. The Brewer hobbled hastily out of the room, his son in tow.

“What was that about?” William asked as they left.

“Nothing, just reminding him of how things work.”

“You’re not stirring trouble again already?” Pa asked.

“Me?” Matilda replied sweetly. “Never!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

4 August 1124

The morning sun was still climbing but sweat already trickled down William's back as he walked towards the mine. He enjoyed the walk, a chance to escape the chaos of village life. Holford was a hive of productivity and William rarely found time to relax between project work, Council meetings and helping Matilda. He often thought back to the dull monotony that was his life almost a year earlier. Even on the busiest of days, he couldn't dream of going back but it was nice to have the odd chance to escape.

Despite scattered objections about his age, William was a recognised leader in Holford and responsible for coordinating several projects of his own. Villagers came to him whenever Matilda couldn't be found and he was increasingly vocal at Council meetings. He'd learnt so much just by following Matilda around for months and she bestowed increasing responsibility upon him as her faith in his abilities grew.

The metal-related projects at both the mine and the blacksmith was an area that made particular sense for William to manage. His friendship with Ralph had been the main driver but he'd also developed a strong relationship with Edric. The Miner had a soft spot for William and still joked that the Boy had literally helped him get back on his feet.

Edric's transformation was as magnificent as Holford's. With the newfound purpose from his revived mine, he'd gone from the town drunk to a thriving member of society. He tied his unruly into a tight ponytail and worked with the energy of three men, spending more time underground than above. Besides sleep, attending Council meetings was probably the only time he spent on the surface.

William entered a familiar outcrop of trees where a layer of grey dust covering the undergrowth indicated that he was approaching the mine. He marvelled at the flurry of activity at the site as he approached. Edric had continued to take on whatever additional help he could find, eager to restore the greatness of his family's once prosperous mine. Barring the occasional burst hose, Matilda's pump design had solved the issue of groundwater and the workers delved ever deeper. William heard plans for new tunnels with each visit.

Edric's decrepit hut now served as both sleeping quarters for the Miner and a lockable storage room for his valuable ore. His labourers seemed content to sleep under the summer stars, though some had started to construct basic huts from whatever spare wood they could scavenge. They'd set up a long trestle table and benches where the whole mining crew gathered for their dusty communal meals.

Despite the heat, Edric's smelter blazed every day to free the valuable copper trapped within the ore. William was still amazed each time he witnessed its red-hot contents scraped out. Melting rocks to form nuggets of metal was a special type of sorcery that predated Matilda's arrival.

It was for those nuggets that William had journeyed to the mine. He'd followed Edric's progress for months, monitoring the mine's output with an eagle eye. If his calculations were correct, he would finally have enough to finally start his biggest project.

Matt Smith didn't understand Matilda's desire for delicate threads of copper. *A weak metal*, he'd said, *pretty but useless for anything practical*. He had still built a wire extruder according to Matilda's specifications but used it for steel, refusing to process Edric's early batches of copper without knowing why it was so important. Matilda said he'd just have to wait.

Edric's labourers paid little attention when William arrived and continued going about their tasks. With so many newcomers, William struggled to recognise any of the workers and his stomach dropped when the only familiar face was Warren, one of his frequent tormenters. Certain that Edric was nowhere to be seen, William reluctantly approached Warren and asked where the Miner was.

"Where d'ya think?" he said, surly as ever. "Down the mine. I ain't helping you with nothing so go find him yaself. Careful tho', Roger's down there too..."

William was unsurprised by Warren's taunting tone and left before the animosity escalated.

The mine entrance had been reinforced since William's first visit but his stomach churned as the darkness loomed before him. Taking a breath to steady himself, he withdrew the precious device Matilda had bestowed upon him and ventured underground.

William's biggest project all came back to Matilda's tiny magic light box. The one she'd first shown him at her cave – he was still the only soul who knew her true futuristic origins – and used when they first explored the mine. After months of constant badgering, Matilda had finally judged that William knew enough to understand the device and explained how it worked.

"It's a torch," she'd said simply, as if it were the most unremarkable thing in the world. "Electricity runs through a diode, or a bulb, and generates light."

William didn't understand half of the words but was amazed nonetheless. His family could rarely afford candles so the day ended when the sun set. Matilda's device promised endless light and William's mind exploded with the possibilities of what he could do with limitless daytime. The things he could learn.

Matilda showed him how to dismantle the torch and described each component. The bulb, the crank, the casing. Most important was the battery, which Matilda said could do so much more than make light. William thought she was joking but Matilda explained how she planned to use the mill to make a much more impressive device. Powering lights was just the beginning.

Matilda ended up gifting the torch to William, knowing how much time he spent at the mine and how much he hated being underground. William cherished the gift as he delved deeper in search of Edric.

He interrupted two groups of workers before finally stumbling across the Miner. Edric hummed one of Matilda's tunes as he squatted by a stone wall, the steady ring of his pick adding percussion to the base of his voice. He was far too comfortable in the cramped surroundings.

"Ho, William!" he called, pushing himself upright with a grunt. "Fancy seeing you down 'ere, all by yaself. None o' the boys offered to help?"

"I can manage on my own," William replied defiantly.

“That you can. Here for the nuggets?”

Edric brushed past William and headed back outside without waiting for a response. William scurried after him, terrified of being left behind. Darkness swallowed everything behind him.

“Matthew didn’ happen to give ya any o’ the tools we been waitin’ for?” the Miner asked, his deep baritone echoing off the walls.

“No, he didn’t mention anything.”

“That’s a shame. We’re all back to rotatin’ shifts til we can get more. Been workin’ so hard that we went through the whole month’s supply in only two weeks. Almost too many of us now. But Lord has it been worth it. You shoulda brought that mate of yours to help carry it all back. You’ll be hurtin’ when you sleep tonight.”

Edric’s hearty laughter echoed around the mine. William feared he was right but couldn’t help smiling at the reformed man’s energy.

William breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the surface, though the wall of humidity made him miss the cooler depths. Almost. Edric pulled out a long iron key that matched his hut’s heavy lock – another of Matilda and Matthew’s more recent creations – and unlocked the door before rifling around under his bed and withdrawing four bulging sacks. They looked small but William noticed that even Edric strained as he lifted them onto his bed two at a time.

“That should do for now,” the Miner said. “I’m not sure you’d be able to carry much more to be honest.” He eyed William’s arms. “The Redhead has ya running around too much. You’re too scrawny. Ya should come down and swing a pick with us for awhile. It’ll do ya some good.”

“Uh, thanks for the offer,” William stalled. He couldn’t think of anything worse. “Maybe if I find some spare time. But I’d better get going, Matthew’s waiting.”

“Me too,” Edric said, eager to return underground. “Always more to do but never enough time. See ya tonight,” he called over his shoulder as he marched back into the earth.

William shook his head in disbelief at the Miner’s enthusiasm. So different to the slob he’d met in a pigsty.

Edric wasn’t exaggerating about William struggling to carry the bags back to Holford. His arms ached before the mine was out of view but he soldiered onwards, refusing to let the labourers see a soft villager fail at such a simple task.

His frequent stops reminded him of another interrupted journey between the mine and the village, though this one had less vomit. His arms were ablaze by the time he arrived at Matthew’s forge.

“I just don’t understand,” the Smith said as William dumped the sacks by the forge. “Why copper? She can’t make anything with it! Perhaps cheap jewellery but our time would be better spent improving the steel or recreating her chainmail.”

“Not the chainmail again?” Ralph asked impatiently as he joined them, handing William a pitcher of water and the magnetic lodestones Matilda had requested. “Haven’t you preached that there’s more to this noble craft than warfare?”

William downed the entire pitcher and massaged his sore arms while the blacksmiths continued to spar about the noble art of metalwork.

“How long until the wire’s ready?” William interrupted.

“A few weeks perhaps, depends what Matilda wants to prioritise,” Matthew said. “I’ve made my arguments but it seems that even my apprentice is against me. Insubordination I tell you!”

“You can ask at the Council meeting tonight, but I’m sure she’ll say it’s the priority. She really wants to get started on this next mill project. Trust me, it’ll be worth it.”

“Look at you,” Ralph mocked. “All high and mighty knowing what the secret project is.” He looked to Matthew with a smirk. “I’m sure one of those iron rods could get him talking. You heat it in the coals and I’ll pin him down?”

Matthew picked up a rod with a flourish and William was feigning terror when there was a sudden commotion from the village square.

“Heeeellppp!!!” a desperate voice cried. “Someone!? Anyone!?”

The three men ran out of the forge to see what was going on. Several other villagers emerged from nearby houses.

One of Edric’s labourers stood alone in the village square. He was covered from head to toe in dust and looked around frantically.

“What’s going on?” Matthew asked the man, cool-headed as always.

“Cave in! Down the mine. Most got out but there’s people trapped down there!”

Matthew and William reacted instantly, running towards the mine. William stopped only a few strides in.

“Matthew,” he called. “Tools! Edric said they’re low on tools. Have you got more?”

Matthew stopped too and took Ralph back to the forge to grab them. William ran on, urging the labourer back towards the mine. The crowd continued to swell and he spotted Elizabeth and Astrid.

“Tell Matilda to come to the mine. Astrid, with us! Now!”

Elizabeth sprinted towards Matilda’s mill and William urged everyone else to the mine.

“What happened?” William asked the labourer as they ran. “I was just there.”

“One of the old shafts collapsed. Only just reopened. Ed’s been pushing us hard to beat his quotas so we didn’t have time to redo all the supports.”

William cursed Edric’s stubborn determination to redeem himself and thundered towards the mine.

When they finally arrived, the mine was a different type of chaos to what William had witnessed that morning. Cries of pain tore through the trees and people ran everywhere. Two men groaned on the long benches, covered in even more dust than usual. One was bleeding profusely from his head. Astrid rushed over to help.

William did what he could to coordinate the rescue efforts and, lacking any other leadership, the frenzied labourers quickly updated him on the situation. One of the older tunnels had collapsed. Edric had ordered it reopened a week ago. Reinforcing timbers had been used for huts. Two men had already been dug out, one was dead. Four more were missing, including Edric.

William was consulting with Astrid when Matthew and Ralph arrived with additional tools. William tasked them with coordinating things on the surface before rallying some familiar labourers and running down into the mine. Despite the clear risk of another cave in, William's mind noted with amusement that he felt no fear as he delved underground once more.

The air was dusty and the floor littered with debris. William pushed his way to the front of the rescue effort and used Matilda's torch to illuminate the space for the workers. He barked orders, organising a human chain to remove debris and telling others to find additional wood to reinforce the walls.

Progress felt excruciatingly slow and William lost track of how long they'd been digging. Larger rocks had to be levered out and the diggers tired quickly. William made them swap and started digging as well.

William finished a third rotation before returning to the surface. It was much calmer and he found Matilda walking around and tending to the wounded. He ran over to give her an update.

"Well done," Matilda said. "It sounds like you've got things under control. I think we..."

There was a sudden commotion from the mine entrance.

"We've found one!"

Midsentence, William ran back into tunnel.

It was one of the labourers. They'd exposed most of the man when William arrived but the man's crushed chest made it clear that he was dead. William stepped aside as the body was delicately extracted from the rubble and carried back up to the surface.

Digging resumed with renewed vigour and it wasn't long before they found a shoe and its accompanying foot. They initially thought it was another casualty but the toes wiggled as they brushed dirt away. The group accelerated their efforts and hastily extracted the man.

It was Roger, William's other tormenter. He was in a bad way, his breathing ragged and his torso purple. He was barely conscious but his eyes pleaded for help. William ordered that Roger be carried straight to Matilda and resumed digging.

The debris became finer and William's team eventually carved a hole through to the other side of the tunnel.

"Hey!" came a weak cry from the other side.

“Gregory!” a female labourer called out with relief. William had never met either of them.

“My legs are busted,” Gregory announced. “Hurry! I’ve managed to dig Edric out but he’s not good. Stay with me Ed...”

Wary of the insecure ceiling, William ordered that the roof be braced before they resumed digging. They dug as fast as possible, carving out a hole big enough for the female volunteer to slide through. She reported that neither man was in a state to clamber up the debris so work resumed to carve a hole large enough for a stretcher.

They cut through in no time, the woman digging from one side and the rest of the team from the other. William pushed through and scrambled down to Edric. The torch beam passed over the Miner’s face, coated in dust and fluttering eyelids barely open.

“You’ll be alright,” William urged.

Edric couldn’t speak but gave a weak smile upon hearing the familiar voice.

Warren helped William fumble in the dark to assemble the makeshift stretcher. Edric grunted in pain as they loaded him onto it and was fully unconscious when they passed him through the hole.

William ignored the gaping abyss behind him and focussed on Gregory who was bathed in sweat and moaned as he clutched his shattered legs. They bundled him onto another stretcher which Warren and the woman guided through the hole while William pushed. When he was through, everyone scrambled out and William followed, relieved to be back on the safe side of the collapsed roof.

“Out!” he cried. “Everybody out! Now!”

The few remaining volunteers ran out of the mine. William was the last to leave the godforsaken tunnel. Darkness lapped at his ankles.

The atmosphere was subdued when he reached the surface. Two bodies lay on Edric’s long trestle table, coarse cloaks draped over their faces. Astrid wept uncontrollably.

“William!” Matilda cried from the door of Edric’s hut. “Get over here!”

William rushed inside and was shocked to see the floor covered in blood and Roger lying on Edric’s bed. The intrusion in Edric’s abode felt wrong

“I’ve done everything I can but he’s still looking pretty bad,” Matilda said. “Keep an eye on him while I check Edric and the man with the broken legs. Just remember what we discussed in the winter, pressure and pulse.”

Matilda ran out of the hut, leaving William alone with his tormenter. William wasn’t entirely sure what to do but he diligently watched over the man, willing him to stay alive. William’s hands shook uncontrollably but he refused to take his eyes off the injured miner.

Matilda eventually returned and relieved William of his terrifying watch.

“That’ll do Will, I’ll take it from here.”

William gladly stepped aside and let Matilda perform a quick check of her patient before she knelt down and started to clean Roger's grimy face.

"How were Gregory's legs?" William asked.

"Shattered," Matilda said with concern. "There's a chance they'll heal but they'll never be straight again. I'm afraid he'll be crippled for the rest of his life. We may even need to amputate but he'll live. I'm not so sure about this one."

She gestured to Roger.

"He's tough," William conceded. "A real arse but I'm sure he'll make it. And Edric..?"

Matilda stopped mopping Roger's brow.

"I'm so sorry Will. Edric didn't make it..."

William's blood froze.

"He was gone before he reached the surface. The other labourer died too. I asked poor Astrid to take over when Roger reached the surface but she was well out of her depth. I fear I've caused her great trauma today."

Matilda paused and looked up at William, her eyes full of compassion and concern.

"He died doing what he loved," she said. "A man in his mine, not a drunk in the mud. You've done so well William. Helping him get back on his feet. Keeping him motivated. Organising this rescue all by yourself and leading from the front." She paused. "I really don't know what to say. I'm so proud."

William gave her a weak smile. Despite everything, the sincerity of Matilda's praise meant a lot.

"Go home and get some rest," she continued. "God knows you deserve it. I'll stay here with Roger. He looks stable but I doubt he'd survive the journey to Holford. There's no way in hell I'm letting another soul slip away. Not today."

William didn't need to be told again and fled the cabin. A crowd had assembled outside. They'd wrapped the bodies and loaded them onto stretchers. William huffed impatiently for them to move but it was only after a nod from Matthew that he realised they were waiting for his directions.

"Ah, alright then. Back to Holford."

William led the mournful procession back to the village, all the way to the parish church. He was glad someone had run ahead and warned Father Daniel, meaning he only needed to give a cursory explanation before the crowd dissipated and William could finally return home.

Ma, Pa and Elizabeth's faces were etched with concern but they didn't press him to talk. Still fully clothed and covered in dust, William dropped to his bed without a word. His arms ached but consciousness left him almost immediately.

He slept like a rock.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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