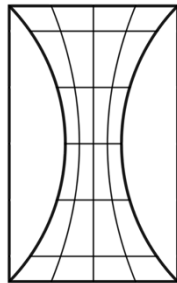


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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CHAPTER TWENTY

25 January 1124

Winter had well and truly set in. It rained constantly. Margery's family were confined to the cottage, though Rachel's departure lightened the mood and made it slightly less crowded. Margery quite enjoyed the confinement but poor William bounced off the walls like a caged animal.

With little to do outside, Margery and her remaining siblings pestered the Foreigner to teach them how to read and write. Margery was the most diligent student and raced ahead of the others, though William stubbornly struggled to keep up and excelled at Matilda's lessons, particularly numbers. Elizabeth didn't mind either way and was just happy to spend quality time with the family.

They practiced writing by drawing with their fingers in the cottage's dirt floor. In less than a week they'd memorised the letters of the alphabet and could spell out each family member's name when quizzed. They loved the lessons and while Margery focussed on learning ever more complicated words, William had already started multiplication.

The Foreigner's Book was in high demand and the family were placed on a strict rotation policy. Margery used her time to stare at new words and sound each one out loud, driving everyone insane with her endless mumbling. William spent his time looking at the Book's pictures which only fuelled his annoyingly endless stream of questions. Elizabeth spent her time focussed on the Book itself, flipping through the pages and wondering what the tree that produced it might've looked like.

"We can try making paper when the rain clears up," Matilda promised her. "Then you can bind it into a book of your own. That'll make our writing lessons easier, particularly if Ma and I can make some inks."

To further break up the winter monotony, Matilda also taught a series of new crafts and activities to help around the house. Each morning started with Matilda's bizarre routine of strange full-body stretches followed by mock fights. She showed Pa designs for sturdier tools using metal from Matthew and taught Margery how simple wooden buttons could fasten clothing.

One rare sunny afternoon, Matilda took William to her secretive cave in the forest and returned with a bag of exotic plant seeds which she used to teach Elizabeth how to cultivate seedlings in the warmth of the cottage. Greenery soon sprouted from every available space.

Margery especially appreciated that the Foreigner devoted particular attention to Ma, who struggled most with winter malaise and adjusting to life without Mama and her eldest daughter. Matilda first tried teaching Ma new recipes. The family benefitted from mouth-watering delicacies but Ma remained a wreck. Margery hinted that textiles were Ma's great passion and it was only when Matilda discussed making an improved loom and long-lasting dyes that Ma finally forgot that she hadn't heard from Rachel since the wedding.

Although they'd lost Rachel, Matilda had quickly become a part of their clan. She joked with them over family meals, helped out with chores and showed appropriate levels of scandal when listening to the scarce

village gossip. She was thoroughly more enjoyable to be around than Rachel had ever been. Margery thought it was the best winter ever.

Although normally full of energy and willingness to help, Margery noticed that the Foreigner's mind was often elsewhere. She regularly needed questions to be repeated or stared off into nothingness. The cause of her silent musings was revealed as the family sat down for their meal on yet another dreary morning.

"I've been thinking about the Miller," Matilda raised in an overly casual tone as she ladled a bowl of porridge. "I think I've got a plan."

Margery stiffened in her chair. The Foreigner knew of Margery's friendship with Henry yet persisted with her crusade against the Millers. Margery wished Matilda would just let it go.

Pa lay down his spoon and interrupted her with a sigh, "Not this again?"

"I know," Matilda continued. "You can't risk Arnold blocking your access to flour. But isn't it ridiculous that a single man can hold the entire village hostage when there's another mill lying in ruins? That he can live a life of luxury, barely lifting a finger, while everyone else lives on meagre rations? Holford deserves better."

Margery had heard it all before. She scoffed the last of her watery porridge before fleeing the cottage without a word.

The Miller's house was nestled by the stream that ran through the village. It was nicest building in Holford, meticulously crafted by Stowey stonemasons generations earlier and its roof tiled by Timothy Potter. Only the brewery was bigger.

Margery raced there to find Henry and knocked on the door, feeling self-conscious standing before such a grand building. As always.

She prayed that Henry would open the door rather than any of his miserable family. Margery and Henry often bemoaned their two wicked sisters but at least the rest of Margery's family were pleasant. Henry wasn't so lucky.

Margery's prayers were answered.

"Oh, hi," Henry said simply. "Wasn't expecting you today. It's raining."

"I know," Margery said impatiently, pulling him outside and towards Arnold's warehouse. "Quick, I've got to tell you something."

Henry followed and sat upon the sacks of grain as Margery closed the door behind them.

"Matilda's up in arms about your Da again," she blurted.

Henry looked up at her dumbly. "Oh, I thought you might want to try kissing again."

"Not now Henry. Trouble's afoot."

Henry looked disappointed. "Well, what's she up to?"

Margery paused, feeling sheepish. "I didn't stay long enough to listen. But she's been worked up for days. Your Da's antics during Mama's funeral really bothered her. She's going to do something."

“She can’t do anything,” Henry replied with certainty. “No-one’s brave enough to mess with Da.”

“I don’t know Hen. This woman doesn’t play by the normal rules.”

“But what can we do? Da’s already in a foul mood today. He won’t listen if we say something’s just going to happen.”

Henry was right. Margery paused again.

“Ok, let’s go hear what she’s thinking. Surely your Da will appreciate some warning.”

Henry looked hesitantly at the rain but followed Margery outside. The pair were halfway home when Margery caught a glimpse of red hair also darting through the rain, followed closely by her little brother.

“Quick, over here!” Margery whispered, dragging Henry behind a hedge as William knocked on their neighbour’s door. “Sneak up and see what they’re up to.”

Henry looked unconvinced but Margery pushed on anyway. She shuffled from cover to cover, hiding behind hedges, barrels and fences. Henry made too much noise but they eventually got close enough to listen.

“...but surely you want things to change? You just said how much he’s taken from you. Shouldn’t we try stopping him?”

“It’s a noble undertaking but he’s a cruel man, plain and simple. I wish you luck but I want no part in it.”

Margery heard a door slam shut.

“That’s two now,” William told Matilda. “They’ll all agree with you but no-one’s brave enough to challenge him.”

“Come on Will,” Matilda pleaded. “We’ve got to try.”

The pair ran back into the rain and onto the next house. Margery followed behind, taking care to remain unseen.

William knocked at the next door. “Hello Beatrix, sorry to bother you. This is Matilda, she’s helped out with the harvest and wanted to ask you some questions.”

Beatrix eyed the Foreigner warily. “Yes?”

“I’m concerned about Arnold Miller and want to bring an end to his unsavoury practices.”

Widow Beatrix happily told Matilda about her experiences with the Miller, down to the exact amounts of flour he’d taken over the previous three harvests. But she clammed up the instant Matilda asked for help.

“Nope, won’t do that. A corrupt miller is still better than grinding wheat by hand.”

Matilda thanked the Widow and resolutely continued to the next houses. She got a long list of evidence but only Matthew Smith and Pa agreed to join her and William to confront Arnold.

Margery listened as the group discussed their plan of attack and Pa urged once more that Matilda let the matter lie. She considered him briefly before shaking her head and marching off towards the mill. The men cursed and ran after her.

Margery and Henry followed, running into the yard as Arnold exited the mill. William acknowledged their arrival with a surprised look.

“Morning Arnold,” Matilda started glibly.

“What do you want?”

Margery felt Henry cringe beside her at seeing his Da already riling up. He was well acquainted with the man’s temper.

“Just a friendly chat,” Matilda replied sunnily. “I’ve compiled a detailed account of the villagers’ takings from the fields. And the fees you charged each of them.” She held up her Book with a flourish. “As expected, things didn’t quite add up when I ran the numbers. You’re taking much more than you should.”

“I take what I’m entitled to,” Arnold replied petulantly.

“I don’t believe that. Numbers don’t lie.”

“Well, what are you going do?” the Miller challenged. “You’re not even from here, why do you care?”

“I loathe bullies,” Matilda replied with a shrug. “Tell me, does the Baron know? I’m sure he still makes a tidy profit but is he aware of the scale of your greed? Does he know how much more he could be getting from the villagers?”

“I pay more than I ought to.”

“Hmm, we’ll see. Baron Walter owes me a favour and I’ll be sure to raise this issue with him. Unless I can have your word that things will change around here, of course.”

Matilda let the words hang and Arnold paused in thought. With a silent look, Margery asked Henry if Matilda had done enough. He shook his head just as the Miller’s expression hardened.

“The fees are what they are. They’re not up for negotiation. Not that it’ll matter to your lot,” he said, gesturing to Pa and William. “I won’t be dealing with you again and if others don’t like it then they can try going elsewhere too.”

“Oi!” Matthew shouted, “That’s not fair!”

“Be reasonable Arnold,” Pa implored coolly.

The Miller sneered as he turned back to the mill.

“Holford is united,” Matilda bluffed. “Lose one and you’ll lose them all.”

“Ha! I’ll take my chances,” the Miller called over his shoulder as he returned to work.

“That’s unfortunate,” Matilda responded calmly. “I’d hoped he’d want to avoid this but I guess there’s no option. Come William, time to see the Baron.”

The pair strode off in the direction of Stowey.

“Are we really going to see the Baron?” William asked excitedly.

“Yep.”

“And he really owes you a favour?”

“Yep.”

The rest of the group were rooted in shock and Matilda had disappeared around a nearby building before any of them moved.

“Shit, I don’t think she’s joking,” Matthew said, tugging at Pa’s arm. “We should stop them before this gets out of hand.”

The men ran off.

“Should we follow?” Margery asked Henry.

“I dunno. Da looked pretty mad.”

A sense of adventure seized Margery. “But Hen, do you think she’s really going to see the Baron? In his castle?”

Henry hesitated. “You go. I’ll make sure Da’s alright.”

Margery didn’t argue and ran off in pursuit, leaving her friend standing alone. She caught up with the group as they entered the forest. Margery heard William’s endless questions from a mile away.

“Margery?” Pa noted with interest. “What are you doing here? Where’s Henry?”

“Back with Arnold. I couldn’t miss this!”

Margery joined the group, listening in awe as Matilda batted away every concern or objection. They were halfway to Stowey when they heard running.

“Come to talk some more?” Matilda asked with genuine interest as Arnold and Henry came into view.

“I don’t know what you’re hoping to achieve here, woman,” Arnold huffed as he caught his breath. “Cease this foolishness and be on your way. The damned family can keep using my mill.”

Matilda thought for a second.

“No. Not good enough.”

She turned and resumed walking.

To everyone’s surprise, Arnold vaulted forward and grabbed Matilda from behind, childishly trying to restrain her.

Matilda’s response was equally unexpected. The moment the man touched her, she dropped to one knee and used the momentum of his large frame to pull him effortlessly over her shoulder and fling him to the ground. She pinned him down with her forearm tightly across his throat.

The group’s shouts of concern quickly transformed to amazement.

“Touch me again and you’ll wish you were dead,” Matilda hissed.

The Miller stopped struggling.

“Good. Now, you’ve proven to be the slimy weasel I’d expected. It’s time someone put you back in your place. Scurry home, little ferret.”

With a shove, Matilda pushed herself to her feet and casually resumed walking. William trotted after her while the others stared in shocked silence. Matilda wasn’t ten yards away when Arnold called out.

“No!” he cried, pushing himself from the ground. He followed after them again, not even bothering to brush himself off. “I won’t let some *woman* drag my name through the mud.”

“You’ve done that yourself,” Matilda said. “But suit yourself. It’ll be fun to hear what Walter has to say to you.”

The mood was tense as the group continued towards Stowey. Margery fell in line with Henry and greeted him with a bewildered smile. Arnold walked alone at the rear of the group, muttering to himself.

They arrived at the town and headed straight for the castle. Their tense party drew strange looks as they traipsed up the castle hill but no one interrupted them.

Margery had never been inside the castle and was filled with anxious excitement. She couldn’t believe that Matilda had the nerve to just stroll up to the guard and was let through without breaking stride.

Margery soaked in the sights as they raced through the castle. Five of the most magnificent horses she’d ever seen stood unused in the stable and the stone buildings were finer than any in Holford. Even the Miller’s house looked shabby in comparison.

The Foreigner strode confidently up the keep staircase without a care in the world.

“Hello again Grumpy,” she said with surprising familiarity to the surly guard. “I’m here to see the Baron. Is Sir Phillip in?”

Margery was amazed by her casual tone and even more so when the Castellan actually appeared. Sir Phillip was legendary around the region for his valour while serving the King and for being the Baron’s righthand man. Margery had only ever seen him from a distance.

He greeted the Foreigner with a big smile and a friendly embrace.

“So good to see you again! We thought you’d left for good. The bag of clothes you left made for an odd parting gift.”

“I ran into some unexpected troubles,” Matilda replied cagily.

“I pray it was nothing too great.”

“I’ve mostly recovered,” Matilda reassured. “I’ve been helping with the harvest in nearby Holford and seek an audience with Walter on a related matter. Is he in?”

“Locked away in his study but I’m sure he’ll excuse an interruption for his prodigal physician.”

The Castellan welcomed the group, ushering them inside and out of the cold. They gathered around the hearth of the biggest fireplace Margery had ever seen. It warmed her in an instant and she gawked around at the cavernous interior of the keep as they waited.

“Lady Matilda,” Sir Phillip eventually called. “He’s ready to see you now.”

He guided the group into a grand hall where the Baron waited expectantly on a simple wooden throne. It would’ve held at least four of the family’s cottage.

“Matilda!” the Baron called joyfully. “A pleasure to see you again.”

The Foreigner marched forward and gave a graceful curtsy worthy of a seasoned noblewoman. It looked odd in her well-worn farm clothes.

“Good to see you too my lord. How is your finger?”

“As good as new,” he said, rubbing a finger on his left hand. “Though I’ve taken to wearing the ring on a chain.”

“Very prudent,” Matilda approved.

“And who do we have here?” the Baron asked.

Matilda motioned the group forward.

“Villagers from Holford, my lord. I’ve been assisting with their harvest since helping you.” Matilda’s voice cooled. “And this is Arnold, Holford’s miller.”

The Baron’s expression hardened as he realised Matilda hadn’t come for a straightforward social visit.

“I don’t have many mills on my lands,” he interrupted. “I don’t recall ever having missed payment from this mill.”

“No my lord,” Arnold replied, “you have not.”

Matilda glared at him. “I’m sure he’s paid precisely what you have asked. But I’ve found that he is heavily cheating the villagers and have little doubt that he’s also cheating you.”

The Baron looked displeased and stared warily at the Miller. “This is a concerning allegation. One that will require further investigation. Do you have evidence?”

“Yes, testimony from countless villagers. I would welcome an investigation, but I’ve also come with a potential solution.”

The Baron was intrigued but wary. “Go on?”

“Competition ensures that villagers can get the most flour from their grain. And more flour for them means more taxes. I beg your permission to renovate the ruined old mill at the outskirts of Holford.”

“You can’t do that!” Arnold cried.

“I can’t?” the Baron asked, irked by the Miller’s boldness.

“There...isn’t enough work for two mills,” Arnold pointed out. “And the taxes! To the King. Surely you will need to pay double the taxes if you allow this woman to operate another mill.”

“He has a point,” Baron Walter told Matilda.

“He does, my lord. But I’m confident your investigation will show that he’s stealing from the village which should easily cover any increase in taxes. And as for demand, Holford’s crop will improve next year. Matthew Smith here has already improved the farming equipment and I’ll teach the villagers how to better manage their fields to improve yield. I’d happily teach your other villages too.”

Margery marvelled as silence fell over the room while the Baron considered what the family’s guest had said.

“One other thing,” Matilda added cheekily. “You did promise me a favour for saving your finger.”

Baron Walter looked displeased at being reminded of a debt. Even Margery knew that Matilda was pushing her luck but the Foreigner doubled down.

“I ask for ownership of the ruined mill as my reward. I can have it operating within the year and your income from Holford will more than double by the next harvest. I promise.”

The Baron paused again. Sir Phillip whispered something to him.

“Fine,” the Baron said. “You may repair and operate the mill, but it remains my property.”

“My lord, you can’t,” Arnold pleaded, earning him a glare from the Baron.

“I can do what I bloody well like. Sir Phillip will visit Holford to investigate the truth behind Matilda’s claims. Be warned Miller, I don’t take kindly to being cheated. Now all of you, be gone!”

“Thank you, my lord,” Matilda said with another grand curtsy. “I’ll have it working in no time.”

Margery watched in awe as the Foreigner left, as though what had happened were the most normal thing in the world.

How could she ever be like that?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

30 January 1124

Sweat beaded on Matilda's forehead as she worked on the ruined mill. She wiped it off with the back of her filthy hands. The clouds had mercifully cleared to grant a rare three days of respite from the endless winter rain. The ground surrounding the mill was churned from William and Matilda's early renovation efforts but it became less boggy with each sunny day.

She tore one last vine from the exterior wall before stepping back to appreciate all they had accomplished in the week following the Baron's decision. After a wet march to collect tools from her cave, they had barely stopped working and even camped in the ruin to maximise their use of the pleasant weather. It was starting to look like a tidy crumbling ruin, rather than just filthy and overgrown. *Her crumbling ruin.*

Matilda was ecstatic that her gamble had actually worked. There had always been some human elements outside of her control but the case against Arnold seemed tight. She had rolled the dice and come out with a spectacular win. Plus her bag of clothes from Sir Phillip. Pa was furious at Matilda after Arnold had cut off the family's flour, if only for an hour, but Matilda still felt an inner glow at challenging the Miller's unjust stranglehold over the village.

It was only when Matilda first stood before the ruined mill and inspected it with an owner's eye that she realised the true scale of her task. She was glad that King Henry was still in Normandy and her mission on hold. It would take months to repair the building, let alone getting the mill back to working condition. And that was provided she somehow convinced Holford's tradesfolk to help her without upfront payment. She would need all the charm she could muster.

Matilda had been pleased to discover a surprisingly solid structure after clearing the dense undergrowth surrounding the mill, though the exterior plaster had started to crumble after years of neglect and sections of the tiled roof had caved in. The building consisted of a long single-storey stone warehouse that ran parallel to Holford's small stream. The millhouse stood on the southern end, a semi-submerged three-storey building that housed the grinding mechanism and a small loft.

The mill's waterwheel was a mess of rotten timber but Matilda was relieved to find that the grindstone and internal mechanisms were mostly intact, despite the majority of the millhouse roof having collapsed. A little less charity she would need to ask of the townsfolk.

William emerged from the warehouse with a large bale of brambles over his shoulder, Matilda's hatchet tucked into his belt. He tossed them onto the ever-growing pile of refuse before the building. They planned to have a bonfire. While it wouldn't rival the one at Rachel's wedding, Matilda hoped it might entice a few prospective tradesmen to inspect the project.

"These blackberries are never ending," William complained. "And so spikey. Ma's going to kill me if she finds another hole, she's still mending my other tunic."

"It'd be nicer if there were berries," Matilda sympathised. "But it looks like Elizabeth's got lunch!"

William's youngest sister skipped towards the mill, humming to herself with a basket draped over her arm. She'd been the most supportive family member, making food deliveries rain, hail or shine.

"Wow," Elizabeth marvelled as she lay down her basket. "You two have actually managed to make this place look presentable."

"Thanks Beth," William said, already pilfering from the basket. "Its been a big week. It'd be easier with some extra help..."

"No way," Elizabeth replied, swatting William away. "I'm not risking Pa's wrath. He's already tetchy that I'm delivering your food. Says we have to get everything prepared for next season, that we don't have a second to waste. It feels like winter's barely started."

"That's my fault," Matilda said. "He's worried about the Miller, that you won't have anywhere to take grain next season and will have another hungry winter. It'll take time for me to earn back his trust."

"Nah," William countered. "Just get this mill fixed and the whole village will love you."

"I still can't believe the Baron gave it to you in the first place," Elizabeth marvelled as she unpacked the food. "Everyone knows it's haunted."

"Haunted?" Matilda asked with a raised eyebrow.

"People say its cursed," William explained. "The old miller was murdered here, years back. Pushed his apprentice too hard, they say."

"Mama's husband was trained by that apprentice," Elizabeth added. "Even Mama was scared of him."

"Never mind all that, little sister," William beckoned excitedly. "Come see what we've done."

William's excitement was hard to ignore so they led Elizabeth inside to show off their progress. She was impressed before they'd even entered.

"You can actually open the door!"

"We. Sure. Can," William replied, using his shoulder to fight the rusty hinges. "Not that we could do much when we finally got it open. It took a day of chopping down bushes and clearing debris before we could even get inside."

After days of work, the dim warehouse was now a dry cavernous space. Cobwebs still hung from the exposed rafters and beams of sunlight shone through gaps between the roof tiles. Half of the room was still filled with brambles but William had worked through them with remarkable efficiency.

"You could fit all of Holford in here!" Elizabeth marvelled, her voice echoing off the distant walls.

"And then some," William said proudly. "It's much bigger than Arnold's warehouse and even he can only fill half at any time. We'll need to patch up the walls. Inside and out."

William gestured to a particularly bad stretch of wall, where fallen plaster lay in large chunks on the dirt floor.

“We need to do something about these windows,” Matilda added, motioning to the four large shutters on either side of the long warehouse walls. Fighting another rusty hinge, she forced one open to let sunlight and fresh air stream in. “I’ll see if Timothy wants to start making glass. After some roof tiles that is.”

A rat scurried along the wall as the trio continued the tour.

Elizabeth squealed.

“Any chance you could lend us one of your cats?” Matilda asked Elizabeth, only half joking.

They reached the far end of the hall and William wrenched open the double doors to the millhouse. A small step took them up to a floor made of heavy wooden planks. The gaps between them were still caked with flour that had long since spoiled.

The room was particularly bright compared to the dim warehouse as light poured in through the partially collapsed roof. Shattered roof tiles lay scattered across the floor. Sifting through them to recycle any that remained intact was another task on Matilda’s comprehensive to do list.

The giant millstone sat in the centre of the room and a shaft pierced the floor, leading to the primitive gear system that drove it. It was the pinnacle of medieval engineering. William had already quizzed Matilda for hours to understand how it worked and how she planned to improve its efficiency.

Elizabeth was much more intrigued with what was above.

“A loft! How fun!”

Like a little child, she raced up the ladder and onto the small platform. Matilda chuckled at herself for missing the novelty of a second storey for someone who lived in a hovel.

“It’s so dusty,” Elizabeth called from above. “And high. And spacious!”

“Missing half the roof will do that,” William called up. “It was miserable there when we first arrived and rain was pelting down.”

“That’s where my bed will go,” Matilda told them casually.

“What?!” the siblings cried in unison. Elizabeth’s head comically popped over the edge of the loft.

“You can’t expect me to stay in the cottage forever?” Matilda asked.

They continued their blank stare.

“On a cot in that cramped little corner of the house? With your whole family?”

William’s mouth hung slightly open.

“When there is all of this space just waiting here?”

The siblings remained silent. Matilda decided to wait them out.

“Well that changes everything,” Elizabeth said matter-of-factly as she jumped down the final rungs of the ladder. “This will need to be much homelier if you ever intend to live in it. I’ll help you plan.”

The trio exited the main millhouse door and sat down for lunch.

“What will you do with all the spare space?” Elizabeth asked as she unfurled a rug.

“I was thinking of starting a school,” Matilda replied.

William and Elizabeth stared at her blankly once more.

“A shared space where people could come to learn how to write,” Matilda explained. “Or make paper. Or study animals. Anything really.”

The siblings loved the idea, provided they could be among the first pupils. They discussed other ideas for the empty space. A hospital. A laboratory. An inn. A workshop. In the end they decided the mill was probably big enough for a little bit of everything. The siblings didn’t mind, so long as they were involved every step of the way.

“A hospital will need a proper herb garden, for the medicine,” Elizabeth realised excitedly. Apple still in hand, she ran to the mill and began to pace out the space needed to grow sufficient produce for whatever Matilda’s building eventually became.

“Naturally,” Matilda agreed, jumping up to join the excited girl in her pacing.

They planned the layout for a generous garden, complete with herbs, berries and an orchard. William shouted half-hearted encouragement from the picnic blanket before tiring and lying back to watch the clouds.

“And you’ll need pretty flowers too, not just practical ones,” Elizabeth insisted. “It’s got to look nice after all.”

William groaned loudly but Matilda agreed enthusiastically.

As her finishing touch, Elizabeth marched to the ‘orchard’ and dropped to her knees. She scooped away several handfuls of mud and placed the core of her half-eaten apple inside the hole.

“There,” she said proudly, wiping her muddy hand on her dress. “If the sun and rain continue like we’ve had this past week, it’ll be a nice shady tree for your pupils to study under in no time.”

With their planning done, Matilda helped Elizabeth pack up the remnants of their lunch and thanked her for trekking to the mill yet again. As always, Elizabeth was just happy to assist.

Matilda decided to join Elizabeth back to Holford, leaving William to continue his clearing work. The two women happily chatted the whole way back. Elizabeth told of her favourite walks through the forest and Matilda recalled the amazing nature she’d seen on her travels.

Matilda bid farewell to Elizabeth when they reached the cottage and went to tell the Blacksmith her ideas for the mill. Matthew was beating away at pieces for a second plough when Matilda arrived.

“Our first order,” he proudly informed. “Lots of people asked about it at the wedding. The plough-team couldn’t help bragging.”

Matthew had already agreed to help with the mill but regretted his premature offer when Matilda outlined her plans.

“We’d have to sell many more ploughs to make all of that happen,” he told her. “Though you could always part with your chainmail.”

“Not a hope in hell,” Matilda countered. “I’ll talk to Timothy about the roof. William suggested Holford’s carpenter might also help? What do you think?”

“I’ll ask. Walt’s a damned fine builder but a touch fickle. One day he’s helping a neighbour for free, the next he refuses paid work from his own mother. He might take issue with working for a woman but I’ll see if he might help for me. Surely he can’t turn down a project this grand.”

Matilda thanked Matthew and continued on to Timothy’s house. The elderly potter was away so Matilda simply left a broken roof tile by his kiln, trusting he would know who it was from. Deciding to delay another awkward apology to Pa for another few days, Matilda turned back towards her mill.

An endless stream of calculations ran through Matilda’s head as she meandered back. She had grand plans for the mill. Mechanical bellows. An automated sawmill. Electricity. Technologies all at least a century away from discovery but she had a chance to introduce them prematurely. The tangible project was much more stimulating than theory at the Institute.

But the small waterwheel could only power one. *Which to choose.*

She sauntered through the bare trees but her mind snapped to attention when the mill came into view and she saw four strangers gathered around the building. She was too far away to see exactly what was happening but her gut told her it wasn’t good. She picked up her pace to a jog.

As she drew closer, she saw William boldly standing between the men and the mill. She was still too far to hear what he was saying but could hear the defiance in his voice. The men antagonised him, mocking his courageous stand. In an escalation their sport, Arnold’s bald assistant stepped in and punched William in the face before expertly bouncing back to dodge William’s sluggish counter swing. Matilda broke into a sprint.

“Hey!” Matilda called as she drew closer to the confrontation. “What the hell’s going on?”

The men turned to face her.

“Look here boys,” the Miller sneered. “The bitch is back.”

Matilda slowed and was relieved that the men’s attention had shifted away from William. She felt the familiar rush of adrenaline that preceded a fight. Having not been ambushed or clubbed over the head, she could handle them. Any lingering fear was overcome by rage.

“What’re you doing at our mill?” she asked through gritted teeth.

“The bitch has teeth,” Arnold jeered. “Listen to her growl!”

“You’re more confident with friends around,” Matilda noted. “Surely you don’t want a repeat of the journey to Stowey?”

The Miller’s men threw him questioning glances.

“What are you going to do? Take us all?” Arnold challenged with bravado.

“I’m not going to take any of you, as much as I’d like to. The Smith and Carpenter are on their way to measure up our new waterwheel,” Matilda lied. “I don’t think they’ll take kindly to your bullying. Or we could just start now, it’s probably fairer to you.”

The mood remained tense. Matilda continued to stare down the Miller, her eyes blazing with fury and defiance.

Arnold buckled first.

“Watch yourself girl. Sir Phillip just visited my mill and took a huge fine because of your meddling. You’ve got powerful friends and achieved more than I’d ever thought possible. But you can’t keep going. You won’t. Know your place.”

Arnold shoved past Matilda and signalled for his gang to follow. They each glared at Matilda with varying levels of menace before following their leader like a pack of browbeaten dogs.

Matilda ignored them and rushed over to William. He had a bloody nose and would get a nasty black eye but he was fine. Matilda grabbed a bucket of water and handed William a rag to clean his bloody face.

“Who were they?” Matilda asked as she handed a rag to William.

“You know the chubby blonde one, Margery’s friend Henry. The scrawny twitchy one is his apprentice Joshua and you’ve already met his labourer at the warehouse. The bald one. He does all of Arnold’s dirty work, both at the mill and around the town.”

Matilda’s blood boiled as she watched the men disappear into the woods, pumping themselves up at having threatened a woman and beaten up a boy.

Her gut told her it was far from over.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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