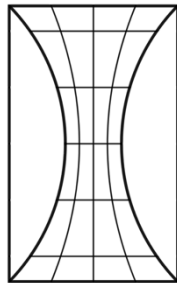


THE WORLD THAT WAS

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 SIXTEEN

4 January 1124

It had been five days since the family returned from the fields and discovered that Mama had died. Matilda hadn't returned to the cottage since. She wanted to give the family time to mourn together and knew that Rachel would stay away if Matilda was there. So she'd returned once more to her isolation at the cave. But this time she had purpose. She was working on a plan.

After weeks in the fields, Matilda had finally come to terms with abandoning her mission. Or at least postponing it. She enjoyed the simple life of helping the family with the harvest and it had revealed an alternate pathway to achieving her mission's objective.

Her encounter with the Bishop had demonstrated the fragility of her initial approach. One wrong move and the entire journey, and all of her sacrifice, would be for nothing.

Instead, Matilda reasoned that she could share her knowledge with the villagers, to get them started on the path to progress. Her Institute supervisors had always preferred a top-down approach that leveraged kings and cardinals to maximise the impact of a Chronomad's lessons. But King Henry had left London and would be abroad for at least a year so time wasn't an issue.

Matilda now saw that teaching lowly villagers would create redundancy for her mission. She would sow the seed of knowledge and hoped Holford would prove to be fertile soil.

It seemed like common sense but there would be obstacles. Rachel had rejected her, Mama was dead and Matilda was once again stuck back at the cave. Trust Mama and Rachel to find another way to torment her.

"Shake it off! Shake it off!" Matilda bellowed as she floated on her back in the stream, watching drops of rain fall through the canopy. She was freezing but still had nasty welts where Rachel had clawed at her face and the cool water eased her aches. Being set upon despite her efforts to help the family had hurt almost as much as the physical injuries.

Matilda swam back to the bank and pulled her clothes straight on before running straight back to the cave. She rekindled her fire and started preparing the rabbit she'd caught that morning. Her stomach grumbled. Meat had become a rare luxury while living with the family. Matilda was roasting the creature over the fire when she heard scrambling from above and saw William making his way into the gully.

"Hellooooo!" he called.

"Just in time," Matilda replied, glad to finally have some company. "It's scrawny but I'm guessing you haven't had meat for days?"

William nodded hungrily and sat on his regular log as Matilda cut her rabbit in half. The rain had eased to a light spit and the combination of a warm fire, hot food and company made it feel almost cosy.

"How's it been back at the cottage?" Matilda asked.

“Depressing,” William answered, staring into the flames. “Ma cries all the time and Rachel is tearing the place apart searching for Mama’s silk handkerchief, insisting that she can’t be buried without it. None of us have left the cottage, other than bringing Mama’s body to Father Daniel. It’s lucky we finished in the fields when we did.”

“And how are you doing?” Matilda asked lightly.

“I’m alright. We knew it was coming, after Pa got better while Mama only got worse. She wasn’t the most pleasant person but, you know, she was family.”

With a sympathetic smile, Matilda handed him the rest of her rabbit.

“Thanks,” William said. “Looks like Rachel really hacked at your face. Sorry about that.”

“It’s not your fault. She’s a real piece of work, that’s for sure. It took everything in me not to fight back, but she had just lost Mama. So she’s been spending more time with the family?”

“Unfortunately,” William responded, the characteristic twinkle in his eye returned. “She’s causing as much chaos as normal but I think Ma appreciates that we’re all together. Rachel hasn’t spent so much time with us since her engagement. Which means Alan has been spending more time with us too, insufferable twit.”

Matilda let the boy vent.

“Ma and Rachel want to give Mama a proper farewell so they’ve delayed the funeral until tomorrow. People are still busy taking care of their own sick loved ones but Father Daniel said that it couldn’t wait any longer...” William tried to put it delicately. “...for practical reasons.”

Matilda tactfully changed the subject. “So the ploughing hasn’t progressed?”

“Oh, that’s why I’m here!” William said, sitting up excitedly. “Matthew was looking for you this morning! He has your plough knocked together and wants you to check it out.”

Matilda was shocked. “Already!?”

“Yeah! He was really excited and said he’s barely slept since our visit. Though I couldn’t tell if that was about the plough, the chance to claim your fancy chainmail or the prospect of seeing you again,” William teased.

“I’m not interested!” Matilda replied, more forcefully than she’d intended as a memory of rancid breath flashed in her mind. She saw William flinch and softened her tone. “Lord knows I’m not looking for anything romantic anytime soon. But it’s great news about the plough, I didn’t think he’d be done that quickly.”

Matilda stared up at the sky to gauge how much daylight she had left.

“It’s too late to go now but I’ll come back to Holford tomorrow.”

William squirmed. “Matthew will probably come to the funeral. The whole village will, Holford’s a pretty close-knit community.”

“Don’t worry, Will. I won’t come to the funeral. I’m trying to keep the peace and there’s no chance of that if Rachel sees me. Plus, I don’t think Mama would like the idea of me being there. We didn’t exactly get along.”

Relief flooded across William's face. "We want you back home though, once everything returns to normal. The funeral will be in the morning so they can bury Mama before the smell gets any worse. You could even catch Matthew before it starts and make any final tweaks while we're at the chapel."

"Sounds good," Matilda said.

William finished the last of the rabbit and threw the carcass into the fire.

"Excellent. I'd best be off, Rachel's probably torn the cottage to pieces by now. Sorry I took so long to slip away. It'll be great to have you back home, Holford's mighty dull with you back here."

With that, William raced out of the gully and back towards the village.

Matilda smiled as she stoked the fire. He'd asked her to come back. Home.

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Matilda woke early and snuck in a morning run before walking into Holford. It was a nice day for the funeral. The drizzle had stopped and there was even the occasional patch of a blue sky.

Matilda whistled happily to herself as she walked back to the village, which felt odd given she was travelling towards a funeral. It had become increasingly easier to leave the cave, which felt less like home with each departure.

William waited for her at the ruined mill on the village outskirts, already dressed up for church. He wore his finest tunic, which was only slightly less faded and had fewer patches sewn into it. He'd even combed his unruly nest of hair.

"Looking good William," Matilda called, chortling at his boyish bashfulness at having his appearance complimented.

He ignored her. "You made good time. We can still see Matthew before the funeral starts."

Matilda didn't break stride as William matched her pace and they cut toward the blacksmith's forge.

"The Miller's boy dropped by again last night to see how Margery was doing," William started casually, laughing when Matilda raised her eyebrows at the juicy gossip. "She claims they're just friends but I think all Rachel's marriage talk must've rubbed off."

"It won't be long until there's only you and Elizabeth to keep your parents company," Matilda joked. "Maybe there'll be room for an old spinster like me to move in."

"You're not too old," William said with an awkward cough. "Anyway, Henry said his father has already ground our grain into flour. All of it! Something about commiserations for our loss, though I've never known the Miller to help anyone and Mama wasn't the most popular person in Holford. Regardless, imagine if Matthew's plough works *and* we can have all the flour accounted for. All in one day! That'd take the sting from an otherwise lousy day."

Matilda agreed but his plans seemed ambitious.

Matthew was laying out the final pieces of the plough when the pair arrived at the forge. William ran in to help assemble the heavy machine. Matilda provided directions from her perch on the anvil while the two men strained to lift the heavy components into place. They all stood back to appreciate the contraption when William suddenly discovered a grease stain on his leggings.

“Oh shit! Shit, shit, shit,” he cried rubbing his leg vigorously.

“Careful boy, there’s a lady present,” Matthew teased as William turned red as a beetroot. “Whatcha think? Am I on track to inherit that fine chainmail of yours?”

Matilda stood up from the anvil and walked a slow lap of the plough.

“Not bad gentlemen, not bad at all.” She stopped at the handles and gave it a vigorous shake. It barely moved. “Sturdy craftsmanship. Nice and heavy. You haven’t skimped on the materials.”

“So I’ve done good?”

“You’ve done well, Mister Smith. It looks good but the true test will come in the field. I expect you’ll be joining us for the maiden run?”

“Wouldn’t miss it!” Matthew replied excitedly.

Matilda paused in thought. “The challenge will be getting this heavy thing out there. And convincing the plough-team to even try it.”

“I’ll talk to the ploughmen after the funeral,” William injected enthusiastically. “Perhaps they’ll take pity on a grieving grandson?”

“I’ll talk to them too,” Matthew offered. “They use their cattle to help move some of my larger jobs and still owe me for some repairs. I’m desperate to see if this thing will work.”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Matilda said absentmindedly as she admired the machine. “You’d better get running to the chapel, we wouldn’t want you being late.”

The men set off, excitedly talking about the plough. Matilda smiled as William peppered Matthew with a flurry of questions about the type of metal he’d used and where it was mined. The Boy’s thirst for knowledge really was insatiable.

Feeling odd standing alone in the empty forge, Matilda returned to the family’s cottage and loitered around the front. Holford’s lanes were dead quiet and it was eerie seeing the place so inactive. Realising she’d never been out the back, Matilda meandered around the building, eager to learn more about the minutiae of medieval life. She held her nose as she passed the outhouse, the smell making her want to wretch even through blocked nostrils. Matilda couldn’t teach the family about plumbing quickly enough.

The backyard was empty except for another small vegetable patch and a couple of apple trees. She was impressed by the size of the family’s plot but underwhelmed by its mundanity. The humble backyard hadn’t changed much in a thousand years.

Matilda was just about to return to the front of the property when she noticed a wave of colour in the compost corner beside the house. She walked over and was surprised to see Mama's handkerchief discarded among the compost. Matilda was amused that Rachel had inadvertently thrown out Mama's precious possession but the thought was quickly replaced by confusion as she recognised the composting contents surrounding the fabric.

The leaves of familiar plants were in various states of decay. Much more than should've remained from Elizabeth's preparation of Pa and Mama's medicines. Matilda pocketed the silk and shamelessly scrounged through the compost, unearthing even more of the rotting herbs. Too many. She had personally watched Pa take his doses and quickly deduced that there was only one possible explanation.

Rachel had thrown out Mama's medicine.

Matilda was furious. Beyond furious.

How could the stupid girl let a petty disagreement with Matilda kill the woman she worshiped? Her closest family member struck down by a baseless grudge. Matilda knew that this would only worsen their divide. There was no hope of Rachel accepting any responsibility herself, she would blame Matilda and use it to fuel an escalated enmity.

Matilda fumed. She threw down the composting slop and marched away from both the cottage and Rachel's foolishness. She was halfway down the road when she realised that she still had nowhere to go. She screamed out in frustration before pacing back and forth until her temper cooled and a plan started to form. Matilda decided to channel her anger into a more productive task and set off to find the Miller and start collecting the family's bags of processed flour.

Matilda had no trouble finding the mill, having helped William deliver the final bags of unprocessed grain when they completed the harvest. However, she was concerned that, with the entire village would be at Mama's funeral, there wouldn't be anyone to release the family's flour. Matilda breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the surly Miller standing by the warehouse door, talking to his daughter and counting sacks with his fingers. He grunted when he saw Matilda.

"What're you doing here? Shouldn't you be at the old nag's funeral?"

"She's not from here Papa," his daughter said with a look of disdain. "She's been helping the Archer family with their harvest. Helped William drop off their grain before the old lady died."

The daughter spoke as though Matilda wasn't even there and oozed entitlement from every pore of her over-inflated body.

"That's right," Matilda interjected with forced bubblyness, holding out a hand and hoping to overcome the Millers' animosity. "I'm Matilda, a pleasure to finally meet you Arnold."

The Miller grunted again, took a glance at her peasant clothing and left her hand hanging.

"I'm here to collect the Archer family's flour," Matilda continued. "Your son said you've already processed it."

“Over there by the wall. Just take it and be gone. I’ve got too much to do and can’t have you getting in my way.”

Matilda saw a collection of familiar sacks piled against the wall. Far more than she could hope to carry before the funeral finished. But feeling the handkerchief burning in her pocket, Matilda stiffened her resolve and picked up the first two sacks.

Matilda spent the rest of the morning repeating the same journey, carrying two large sacks on her shoulders and dumping them at the family’s door before running back to collect the next round. She was fuelled by her anger with Rachel and her burning arms reminded her of training sessions back at the Institute gym which made her feel alive.

Holford was empty besides the Miller, his petulant daughter and a portly old man who made pottery outside his rundown shack. Matilda’s journeys took her repeatedly past the Potter as she carried the heavy sacks back to the family’s home and he watched her with increasing interest. He gave her an encouraging smile after the third trip and by the time Matilda returned from her sixth trip he was waiting for her with a bucket of water.

“Impressive to see such stamina in a young lady,” he told her as offered Matilda a ladle. “No need for concern, I heard your advice to the villagers and was sure to boil it first.”

Matilda graciously accepted the water and took a seat at the old man’s doorstep.

“Thank you kind sir. It’s hot work, even harder than in the field. As much as we complained, at least the rain cooled us down.”

The man gave a booming laugh. “Sir? I don’t think anyone has ever bestowed that honour upon a lowly potter like myself. Please, call me Timothy.”

“Nice to meet you Timothy, I’m Matilda. That looks like some fine work,” she said, gesturing to the row of pots drying behind him.

“Holford’s specialty and my own unique curse. I learned it from my Pa and he from his before him. I’ll still be making these same damn pots when the Lord returns to collect my withered skeleton on Judgement Day.”

“Well at least you can show Him some quality work. Is it double glazed?” she asked, inspecting a finished sample.

“Ooh hoo hoo. A girl that knows her ceramics? What a find!” He looked at her with appraising eyes. “You and the Archers have done well to get so much flour, given the lateness of the season and Arnold’s tendency to cheat his customers.”

“The family put in a lot of hard work,” Matilda replied modestly.

“I hear it was more than that, young Matilda. That a certain foreign herbalist worked a miracle. What land produces such hardworking women who know about boiling water, improved farming and ceramics?”

He let the question hang.

“The United Kingdom,” Matilda responded. “I went to a prestigious boarding school. A place of learning where students live and are taught many things. Craft, agriculture, arithmetic, medicine.”

Timothy raised his eyebrows enquiringly. “I’ve heard of many places in my time, even been to some distant ones myself. But I’ve never heard of a United Kingdom.”

“It is very similar to here, but also very different. And it’s much further away than I would like. I doubt I’ll ever return.”

“I’m sure that if one as brilliant as yourself sets your mind to it, you’ll get there.”

“We’ll see Mister Potter,” she said, far from convinced. “So why aren’t you at the funeral with the rest of the village?”

“You know why?” he asked in a whisper before yelling his answer. “I never liked the old bat!”

Matilda was shocked at his brutal honesty but couldn’t help smiling as another wave of his deep laughter rolled over her. The shock on her face brought a tear to his eye.

“One of the perks of being old is you stop caring what others think. At my age, I’ve finally realised that life is too short to let others dictate how you feel or what you do.”

“Amen to that. Though still time to make the same old pots?”

“Unfortunately so, a man must eat. But I content myself with a few moments away from the squabbles and petty politics of small village life. It gives me time to dream of what could have been. Making glass with my kiln perhaps.”

“I’ve seen it done before, would you believe? If I ever finish with these damned sacks of flour I’d happily show you.”

“At your magical boarding school, no doubt? Well, I’m interested but forgive an old man if I don’t hold out much hope. Glass has always proven elusive to me. So you intend to stay in Holford then?”

“For now. The Archers have shown me extreme kindness, though I don’t think they realise just how much. I’ll be on my way eventually but for now, I have a debt to repay.”

Matilda bid farewell to Timothy and returned to the mill to collect more flour. He resumed his pot making but called out friendly words of encouragement whenever Matilda passed. The bucket of water sat on his doorstep awaiting her return.

Matilda smiled inwardly each time she passed the Potter. She’d made a friend.

After several more trips Matilda guessed that she had collected about a quarter of the sacks and the pile finally appeared to be dwindling. But when she returned for her next load, Matilda was surprised to see the pile noticeably reduced. The Miller and his bald labourer walked away from the warehouse, sacks of flour in their arms.

William and Timothy’s comments about the Miller’s shady dealings flashed in Matilda’s mind.

“Hey!” she called out. “Where’s all the flour gone?”

Arnold turned and considered Matilda.

“I’ve taken the processing fee,” he said simply, deeming the matter resolved and turning back to his discussion with the labourer.

“I thought you’d already taken it. What is the fee?”

“Every twelfth sack produced,” he replied warily.

“And how sacks many were produced from the family’s wheat?”

“Eighty-eight,” the Miller replied instantly.

“Well I counted eighty sacks when I arrived, so you’ve already taken your fee. Now there’s little more than forty!”

“You’ve been moving them all day, I don’t know how many you have taken.”

“I made nine trips with two bags each. There should be at least sixty sacks here.”

Arnold did some calculations with his hands. Realising that Matilda knew more arithmetic than the average villager, the Miller changed tack.

“There’s a double fee for priority processing. I had to push their grain ahead of several other families.”

“That’s ridiculous, the family never even asked to be bumped up the queue. Besides, even then you’ve taken much more than double.”

“My son asked on their behalf,” Arnold replied peevishly. “And it’s too late, it’s already done. Shouldn’t you be mourning a family death or something?”

Matilda stood in silent rage, her hands clasped so tightly that it felt like her knuckles would burst.

The Miller sneered. “People usually know better than to question my practices, woman. This is the only mill for miles. It is what it is. Now, have those remaining sacks collected by sundown or there’ll be an additional late fee. I can’t have them crowding up my workspace.”

He walked away with the family’s flour still in his arms. Matilda found herself standing alone, baffled that the Miller could so brazenly steal their hard-earned harvest. He had a monopoly and he knew it. Matilda feared what else he’d taken from the other villagers.

With nothing else to do, Matilda collected another load of flour. She struggled to carry three bags but stubbornly resolved to do so just to spite the slimy Miller.

Matilda’s arms screamed with pain when she reached the family’s front gate. She dropped the sacks in triumph but the cottage reminded her of Rachel’s role in Mama’s death. She slumped to the ground, overcome by the injustice of it all.

“Living wasn’t all that hard,” Matilda’s mother had always told her. “It was the people that made it most difficult.”

So why were there so many shitty people in the world, Matilda wondered. Why were people so selfish?

An image of a portly old man with wispy white hair and kind brown eyes flashed into her mind. The echoing memory of his booming laughter was enough to prompt a smile.

The good people made it all worth it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

5 January 1124

William felt a strange fatigue when the funeral finished. Emotional rather than physical. He would've gladly endured another entire harvest to avoid Ma's sobs and Rachel's excessive wailing. To skip the endless handshakes and insincere condolences. To top it all off, he still had grease on his pants.

Only the promise of testing Matilda's plough and collecting the family's hard-won flour had gotten him through the ordeal. William and Matthew played their part at the funeral, convincing the plough-team to try Matilda's creation when they returned to the fields. The team were sceptical but some significant outstanding debts to Matthew meant they couldn't say no.

Ralph had whooped with excitement when William told him about the development, drawing glares from nearby mourners. Ralph's family were already completely finished in the fields so he didn't even need to sneak away.

It felt like an age since William had seen Ralph and he realised that they hadn't spent time together since the day William first discovered Matilda. His childhood felt a lifetime ago but in reality was only a matter of months earlier. Time was strange like that.

Everyone organised to meet at Matthew's forge immediately after a post-funeral meal, giving the Smith enough time to prepare Matilda's device for transport. William impatiently waited for his parents to finish their solemn discussion with Father Daniel at Holford's small cemetery behind the chapel. They paid the priest and collected their children. It felt odd to return home with one of their number gone for good.

The family were surprised when they arrived and found Matilda sitting in the front yard, once again. She leaned against a large stack of flour sacks, her shoulders slouched. It wasn't the whole harvest but a remarkable effort for a lone woman to achieve in such a short time.

"Is that it? I thought you were supposed to be working while we were gone," William joked but he turned serious when Matilda didn't rise to his dig. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she replied flatly. "It's fine."

The rest of the family entered the yard and marvelled at Matilda's work but Rachel pushed past and headed inside without a word. Matilda gave her condolences to Ma and William found it refreshing to finally hear genuine sorrow for his family's loss.

William wanted to know what had Matilda so bothered but wasn't able to catch her eye as they all headed inside. Matilda told Ma to sit down and relax, pulling out a bag of freshly collected herbs to brew a tisane. Next, she withdrew a pair of rabbits and started preparing a particularly intricate meal.

"Something special to honour Mama's memory," she said with a weak smile.

Margery and Elizabeth helped Matilda around the hearth, chopping ingredients just so or watching the pot to ensure it didn't boil over. Rachel was in a foul mood and took every opportunity to snipe at Matilda, despite their visitor's obvious effort to commemorate Mama.

"How have you already ruined more of Ma's clothes? It would've been appalling to see you dressed in that filth at the funeral, all covered in flour. If you'd bothered to show up at all."

"Leave her alone Rachel," William defended. "She's spent the whole morning helping our family. Again. She didn't have to do that."

"Like you can talk, all covered in grease." Rachel shifted her gaze back to Matilda. "On second thoughts, I guess being covered in flour is still better than the filth she wore when she first arrived."

Everyone ignored Rachel but that only encouraged her attacks.

"Where are your fancy foreign clothes now? Did something happen at the castle?"

William saw the strain on Matilda's face as she fought to remain calm and refused to bite.

"Come on Rachel," Pa chimed. "Ease up."

Rachel looked directly at Pa before continuing.

"You call this food?" Rachel asked, poking at the foaming broth with her finger. "It smells terrible." She feigned a sudden epiphany. "I hope it's not another of your concoctions. We saw how good that was for poor Mama."

"Shut up!" Matilda cried.

The whole family snapped to look at their guest, shocked at her sudden outburst.

Matilda crumbled. "I can't take it! You wicked little she-devil. You sanctimonious bitch!"

"Woah, Matilda," William urged. "Ease up."

"No, I just can't take it! I've done everything I can to help this family and I taught Elizabeth how to help Pa and Mama recover. And yet Rachel still attacks my efforts? No!"

Matilda rounded on Rachel, her knife still in hand. William's eldest sister cowered slightly.

"That man," Matilda said, pointing the knife at Pa, "is alive because of what I did. Without me, your family would still be working the fields with little hope of saving even half of the crop. On top of that you probably would've buried two family members today."

Matilda paused for breath.

"You killed her Rachel. Mama is dead and it's all your fault."

William was shocked. Margery gasped and Ma's jaw dropped. She looked at Matilda with deathly serious eyes.

"What did you say?"

Ma's tone was as cold as stone. With four simple words she sucked all the wind from Matilda's sails.

“Those are some mighty large accusations, Foreigner,” Ma spat. “You’d best be careful. What did you say?”

Lost for words, Matilda reached into her pocket and withdrew a strip of fabric. Only when Rachel tried to snatch it did William realise that it was Mama’s handkerchief. Matilda swung it out of her reach.

“Emma, I...I found this out the back while you were all at the funeral. It was discarded in the compost heap, along with the remains of week’s worth of ingredients. Rachel never gave Mama the medicine. She threw it all out.”

Ma’s deathly gaze swung to Rachel. Her eldest daughter truly cowered now.

“Is this true?”

Rachel kept silent and her eyes darted around the room as she tried to formulate a response.

“Rachel, you silly girl. Is this true?”

“It was poison!” Rachel protested. “We both saw it! Mama choked the instant it first touched her lips. She wanted no bar of it and I wasn’t about to force it upon her.”

“That’s not poison, you dolt!” Matilda muttered. “Mama was lying down and had a chest infection. Any liquid would’ve made her splutter!”

Rachel looked around the room for allies but seeing only stunned reactions and judgemental faces, she doubled down and went on the attack.

“I won’t hear another of your ridiculous allegations, witch! You’ve been nothing but trouble since the minute you arrived here, with your loose morals and strange potions.”

She launched herself up, fists clenched tightly against her side.

“You’ve turned my family against me! I know when I’m not welcome and won’t spend another second under this roof with filth like you. Not when there’s another family ready to accept me with open arms. A better family. I hope I never see any of you again!”

Rachel vaulted over her bed and ran from the room, slamming the door behind her.

The family was left in stunned silence, both at Rachel’s sudden departure and the magnitude of Matilda’s revelations. It was all too much for Ma who completely broke down with heavy, uncontrollable sobs. Pa and Elizabeth rushed over to hug her, one on each side.

William was surprised to see Matilda casually resume cooking. She chopped the remaining ingredients and passed the knife to Margery before wrangling the door open and walking outside.

William raced out after her.

Matilda paced back and forward in the front yard, both arms folded over her head and tears streaming down her face. Seeing William, she wiped her eyes and forced a smile.

“I’m fine,” she said before William had a chance to speak. “It’s been a big day for me too.”

William nodded but just stood in awkward silence.

“It was the Miller too, you know,” Matilda croaked eventually.

“What?”

“The reason I was so out of sorts when you all returned from the funeral,” Matilda clarified. “When I discovered Rachel’s...stupidity, I started collecting the flour to channel my anger into something productive. I was making progress when I caught him stealing extra sacks. He’s cheating the family.”

William knew Arnold was a questionable character but was shocked that the Miller would so blatantly steal from his family.

“What scumbag robs a grieving family? Surely that isn’t normal of this time?”

“It’s not,” William reassured her.

“It gets worse,” Matilda continued. “He wasn’t happy when I exposed his scheme and said he’d take even more as a fine if we haven’t collected it all by sundown. I honestly don’t know how we can avoid it.”

“Shit.” William felt kicked in the stomach. So many days of back-breaking work, only to have it stolen away from them.

The pair milled around uncomfortably out the front of the house. Matilda looked distraught but William’s mind raced.

“Ok, I’ve got it,” he said.

Matilda looked up at him quizzically.

“Matthew and Ralph are waiting for us to test your plough. If we help the plough-team get started, the four of us can run to collect the remaining sacks. How many did you say there were?”

“Forty-one, so ten trips.”

“Less if we can find more volunteers! We can manage both that and the ploughing before sundown. Let’s go!”

William shot Matilda his most encouraging smile and ran off towards Matthew’s forge, beckoning her to follow. A small crowd was already gathered when they arrived.

“About time! Where’ve you lot been?” Matthew called as they approached. “Everyone’s convinced it won’t work. That I’ve wasted good iron.”

William apologised. “Sorry Matthew, it’s been a bit of ordeal. Ma’s a wreck, Rachel stormed out during lunch and Matilda’s had a run in with Arnold. We might need some more of your help.”

“What’s the sod done now? And who’s this?” asked Luke, the leader of the plough-team. He looked at Matilda with uncertainty.

“Oh, yeah,” William said. “Ploughmen, this is Matilda. She’s been helping my family in the fields. This new plough was all her idea.”

Matilda waved awkwardly.

“What’s a woman know ‘bout ploughin’?” another ploughman grumbled.

“You know Arnold,” William continued, ignoring the rudeness. “He’s up to his old tricks. He claimed a quarter of our wheat as payment for grinding it before the funeral and now says he’ll take more if we don’t collect it all by tonight.”

“That’s absurd!” Matthew protested.

“Like hell he will!” the Plough-Master chimed in. “I’ve had enough of that bastard thinking he can lounge around his fancy mill doing less work than us but take a bigger cut of the profit. Girl, help us get this thing working and my lads’ll help you when we finish up.”

Matilda smiled and they all leapt into action with newfound energy. They soon had the plough in the fields, assembled and hitched to Luke’s cattle. Flanked by the plough-team, Matilda rode the plough into the field and showed them how to use it. The cattle strained to get the heavier load moving but the sharp metal blade cut deeper into the ground than any plough William had ever seen while a curved attachment turned the rich, dark soil.

Ralph and Matthew joined William to watch from the field boundary.

“So who’s the Redhead?” Ralph asked, struggling to take his eyes off the woman working in the field. “Is she one of Rachel’s friends?”

William forgot that Ralph hadn’t actually met Matilda, just another example of how little time the friends had spent together recently.

“No, definitely not. A stranger, would you believe? Not even from the region.”

Ralph was amazed. “Of course you managed to find the one interesting person passing near Holford. How’d you manage that!?”

“It was the day we tested the sling. She came past Holford some months back and needed to go to Stowey Castle so Pa offered to take her. She returned here afterwards and has been helping us with the harvest since. She’s a wonder.”

“Too right,” Matthew chimed in dreamily. “It’s rare to find a woman who knows her metal. She’d be one to walk the mountains with.”

“I don’t know how you do it William,” Ralph said shaking his head. “But look at them go! A design so simple but I’ve never seen a plough glide through the fields so quick. The dirt is like butter! At this rate they’ll be done here by tomorrow morning.”

“That’s the plan.” William replied cheerfully. “And if they can do the Cooper’s fields tomorrow then my family might get done by the end of the week.”

The team ploughed on into the afternoon, stopping only to sing their praises of Matilda’s invention. It washed over Matilda like a wave across a rock and William knew that she was already thinking about their next task. She managed to undo most of the plough-team’s goodwill when she made them destroy the old plough.

They all protested and Matthew even suggested hiding it at his forge but Matilda insisted that it wasn't worth risking the Baron's wrath. Not when they already had a superior design.

The plough-team finished their work well ahead of schedule and true to their word, joined William and Matilda to collect the remainder of the family's flour. The Miller was far from happy to see Matilda's reinforcements and even less so when one of the ploughmen stayed behind to keep watch while the rest of Luke's crew transported the sacks to William's home.

The sun had just set when the team collected the final three sacks of flour and said a jolly farewell to the surly Miller. William and Matilda thanked the plough-team and said goodbye to Ralph and Matthew at the forge before returning home. The pair walked in silence and William stared up at the stars as they walked, exhausted but amazed at how much had happened in the space of a single day.

Seeing him staring, Matilda broke the silence. "They're giant balls of fire, you know? Just like our Sun but burning thousands and thousands of miles away."

William looked up in amazement.

"They're the whole reason I'm here," she continued, looking upwards too. Darkness filled her eyes. "The Sun spat out its fire and licked the world. It was chaos."

"Truly?" William asked with disbelief. It sounded inconceivable but it was coming from Matilda. "But they just stay up there. Why don't they just burn out or fall from the sky?"

"Always asking the right questions," Matilda laughed. "You're a marvel. An absolute marvel."

Another silence fell as William looked up at the burning balls of flame through new eyes.

"Matilda? Will you leave us again, if you get sad or things get too hard? Rachel shouldn't be around any more to cause trouble. Thank God."

She thought for some time before responding.

"I won't. Not until we've finished the ploughing and Holford has kicked the last of this miserable illness. I promise." She paused again. "William. I'm sorry for taking so long to come to your aid. You were right to ask for assistance, I was just too far gone to see it."

"It's alright. You came in the end. And it's really Rachel's fault that Mama's gone isn't it?"

"Don't be too hard on Rachel," Matilda said gently. "Fear can be a powerful motivator. For both her and Mama. I just wish she'd had more faith that someone could know better than her."

William was shocked to hear Matilda defend his vile sister. Someone who had been so wicked, who'd assaulted Matilda and caused the death of a family member.

"I feel sorry for Rachel," Matilda said. "It will be very lonely for her tonight."

William hadn't thought of that.

They arrived at the cottage and dropped the final bags of flour.

"What a long day," William said. "I'm exhausted!"

“Me too. But tomorrow’s a new day. One filled with faster ploughs, pre-stacked flour and, hopefully, a later start. I’m sorry that Mama didn’t make it.”

Matilda gave him a quick hug and the pair headed inside. The family had packed up for the night and both Margery and Elizabeth were already asleep. Without a word, William and Matilda crawled into their beds.

William felt a weight of loss as he fell asleep listening to the heart wrenching sounds of Ma’s weeping, as though he’d lost both his grandmother and a sister in a single day.

But Matilda lay on the other side of the room. She was like a new sister. One that understood him even better than the old one.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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