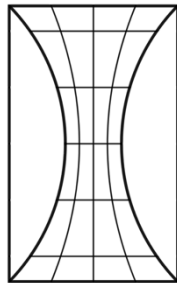


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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Can Matilda avert the solar calamity?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

2 February 1124

William stirred upon the lumpy earthen floor outside the warehouse. He was absolutely exhausted after weeks of slaving away at the mill and his brain urged him to stay asleep. For at least a little longer. But something prickled at his subconscious, dragging his mind from its slumber.

Aren't you supposed to be on watch? it asked. *What's that crackling sound? Is that smoke?*

A smoky smell cut through the inertia of William's sleep. His eyes burst open and he sat bolt upright. He pushed himself up from the ground and wrenched open the warehouse door. The sight within made his blood run cold.

The millhouse wall at the opposite end of the warehouse glowed with orange light. It streamed through cracks in the doors and out onto the empty warehouse floor, casting a long shadow from the lump of Matilda's slumbering form.

"Matilda!" William cried desperately. "Matilda, wake up!"

It was like someone had slowed down time. Matilda must've been in a deep sleep as she also stirred, refusing to wake. She only began to move in the same instant William noticed smoke billowing in from the mill.

"Matilda! Fire! Fire!" William called as he ran towards her.

Matilda jerked awake and snapped into action. Time resumed its normal pace as Matilda pushed herself to her feet and stumbled towards the fire without a second thought. William raced to catch up with her.

"What the hell William?" she shrieked as she ran. "What happened?"

William's silence spoke volumes. He'd failed his guard duty and fallen asleep. Matilda shot him an anguished look and sprinted on towards the fire.

Flames had already started to lick through the doors when Matilda reached them. Not waiting for William, she tore the doors open and was engulfed by a ball of flame that burst into the cooler air of the warehouse.

Matilda remained upright when the flames cleared and William smelt burnt hair. Her dark silhouette stared into the hellish inferno on the other side.

William drew up alongside her and marvelled with morbid fascination at the sheer energy of the blaze. Plaster fell from the walls and heavy beams crackled. William could see through the charred floor and into the burning machinery below.

"What do we do?" he asked, noticing that Matilda's hair was smouldering.

Matilda didn't respond and stared up at the flames in the loft instead.

"Get help," she eventually croaked. Her voice was devoid of emotion but her face was etched with fury and her eyes screamed devastation.

Then she ran in. Matilda was darting across the burning floorboards before William could stop her. Dodging piles of fiery debris, she pushed outside through the mill's main door and quickly returned with a bucket and wet rag. William watched the woman with admiration, dwarfed by the burning building but prepared to fight nonetheless. David versus Goliath.

"Go!" she commanded, seeing William rooted in place. "I'll save what I can but we need help to stand any chance of salvaging this. Go!"

William didn't need to be told again and sprinted back through the warehouse. Flames had started to lick the rafters.

He passed through the warehouse door and was running down the laneway towards Holford when he heard a tremendous crack, followed by something heavy crashing through wooden floorboards and a hideous scream. Worried for his mentor, William whipped back towards the mill but when the smoke cleared Matilda's silhouette dashed out of the building to collect more water.

"Go!" her voice echoed across the yard as she ran back inside.

William sprinted towards the village, racing until his chest and legs burned. And then some. His was furious with himself.

How could he have fallen asleep?

William and Matilda had both slept at the mill since Arnold's thugs' attack, taking turns to watch for any sign of sabotage from the Miller. They'd even informed the Baron of their concerns but received no reply. Just William's luck that the attack had fallen on his watch.

The sun was just beginning to rise and a light drizzle had started when William finally arrived in Holford. He welcomed the cool mist on his singed arms. He circumvented a few of the closer houses and headed straight for the family cottage.

Still at full sprint, William pushed through the front gate and burst into his parents' home.

"Wake up everyone! Wake up!"

Margery groaned and urged him to go away. Pa leaned out of bed, staring up at William with concerned bleary eyes.

"Wassup now?"

"Matilda's mill's on fire! Everyone, please!" William begged. "Arnold set the mill on fire. There's a chance to save it but we need help."

There was a rush of activity as the family assembled outside.

"Rags, buckets, shovel!" William urged. "Anything you can get. Head there now and I'll get more help. Please, as fast as you can. Matilda's all on her own!"

The family hurried off, Pa in the lead with Elizabeth close on his heels. Relieved to have reinforcements on the way, William ran off to find more help.

The Carpenter's house was nearby so William went there next. He decided against barging in but drummed wildly on the door until Walt emerged, wiping his eyes and cursing like a sailor.

"What in blazes do you want?" he asked bluntly.

"The old mill's on fire! Total inferno. We're trying to fight it but we need help."

Walt's expression changed instantly. Fire was a carpenter's mortal enemy.

"Rightio then." He ducked inside and quickly returned with a coat. "You get the Smith, he'll wanna protect our investment. We didn't spend these last weeks helping out for nothin'. I'll gather me boys and meet you there."

William was already leaving before he finished.

The commotion prompted villagers from their homes and William yelled for assistance as he ran past. He had no idea if they would care but he'd take whatever help he could get.

Matthew was already awake and standing outside when William arrived at the forge.

"What's this about a fire?" he asked and was already moving when William answered. "Grab some tools and let's go."

Matthew piled buckets and shovels on William before collecting his own stack of equipment. They raced to the mill together, hindered by their awkward loads.

The fire still raged when they arrived, though the flames appeared slightly smaller. The site was a hive of activity and William was pleased to see that several villagers had joined the fight. The millhouse had been conceded to the inferno but several people beat flames up on the warehouse roof and a chain of others passed buckets of water up from the stream. More still darted in and out, salvaging items from inside or clearing debris.

Matthew and William approached the crowd and distributed their equipment before joining the fight themselves. It was manic and time passed by in a blur. Other than a roiling sea of orange that gradually calmed to black and grey, William's only memories were of Matilda.

The woman fought like a lion, beating at flames with a wet rag and tossing buckets of water with precision. She bellowed orders, with little regard for the weariness of her volunteers. Her face was covered in soot and chunks of her hair had burned away. Her clothes were covered in holes and skin peeled from her hands.

And yet, she was everywhere. Fighting the fire from the front line, improving the bucket bearers' efficiency, guiding the placement of salvaged items. She ran everywhere, slowing only after the flames were completely extinguished. Even then, she prowled around the building to survey the damage while everyone else milled around in the warehouse.

With the fire extinguished, Elizabeth and Margery ran back into Holford to collect food for the weary volunteers. They returned bearing a basket of bread and were soon followed by the Brewers who distributed casks of ale amongst the crowd. Rachel stayed at home.

Matilda finally sat down as the last of the bread was being handed out. She'd lost her eyebrows and walked with a limp. Her toes poked through one of her fine leather boots. Most concerning was the peeling skin of her blistered hands and a nasty burn across her upper left arm.

Despite Matilda's harsh directions, the volunteers were concerned for her wellbeing. She dismissed all offers of assistance and sat shaking uncontrollably with her hands in a bucket of fresh water. She ignored everyone's gaze and smouldered with anger and grief.

"How bad is the damage?" Matthew eventually asked gently, coaxing some life from Matilda.

"The millhouse is gone. The grinding stone fell when the floor collapsed. The remaining roof fell too. There's nothing but the stone shell, though the walls should be salvageable." She droned on. "The majority of the warehouse was saved. Whoever thought to remove the roof tiles and fight the fire from above is a genius."

Matthew passed her a cup of water and she paused to drink, though her shaking hands made it difficult.

"The mechanism is a chunk of charcoal but the grinding stone's still intact, despite the fall. I hope Walt hasn't started the new waterwheel yet..." He shook his head. "...because this might be an opportunity to build something even bigger and better than before. More power. More machines. More options."

William admired her optimism but didn't share it.

"Just get yaself better," Walt told her with unusual tenderness. "We'll make whatever design ya throw at us."

The crowd sat in silence, trying to absorb everything she said.

"But how did it happen?" the Brewer asked bluntly.

All eyes turned to William and Matilda. Matilda slouched and avoided William's eye so he started.

"I woke up to the smell of smoke. Next thing I know the whole building was on fire."

There were disconcerted murmurs among the crowd.

"Did you leave a candle lit?" Widow Beatrix asked. "People say you've both been working like dogs, day and night, to get this up and running."

"It was all of the dust," Matilda replied mournfully. "We never stood a chance. The place must've gone up in an instant." She conceded a look at William. "It was that bloody Miller. He threatened us after beating up Will. Said we'd never fix it. Then he burned it down to make sure."

"No!" came the collective cry from the crowd. Some were outraged, others refused to believe Arnold could stoop so low.

"We know he's an evil whoreson but surely not," called another neighbour. "He could've killed you and the boy!"

Matilda grunted, pulling herself upright and shuffling to the salvage pile. She scrounged around before returning to throw an object into the centre of the crowd.

"It's well within his twisted capabilities. There's your proof."

Everyone peered at the unidentified object.

“Oh,” Timothy exclaimed thoughtfully. “Yes, that’s his alright.”

Matilda blinked at Timothy with a vacant expression, taken aback that someone had accepted her theory so easily. “What?”

“That’s one of my oil lamps. That glaze was a custom request, tricky to get the colour right. You’re right, it was for Arnold.”

Matilda blinked twice as she registered Timothy’s affirmation of her theory.

Then, for the second time that morning, she ran.

She didn’t wait for anyone or say where she was going. She just left.

But William knew exactly where she was headed and ran after her, calling back to the others that she was after the Miller. Luckily her limp made it easier to catch up.

“Matilda! Stop!” William called, but the Redhead limped on with determination. “Surely this is a matter for Baron Walter?”

“You don’t understand William. This man is a parasite, a cancer on the village. Now either come and help me or get out of my way and leave me alone.”

William continued his pursuit. Several of the villagers raced to catch up and also sought to dissuade Matilda from a confrontation with the Miller.

“He’s too powerful.”

“What can you possibly achieve?”

“Give it up”

“You’ve still got your health, mostly.”

But there was no convincing Matilda who continued her resolute limp back into Holford. A crowd swelled behind her.

The sun had fully risen by the time Matilda reached Arnold’s house. She slammed against the front door while calling out for the Miller. His daughter eventually opened the door slightly.

“Get. Him. Now,” Matilda hissed.

Joan timidly closed the door and disappeared in search of her father. Matilda paced around the door as she waited, like a big cat waiting to be fed. The crowd continued to swell. Even villagers who hadn’t helped fight the fire started to arrive and asked their neighbours what had happened. Word of the fire was spreading.

The door eventually opened. Matilda stopped her pacing and waited with the crowd. William walked over to stand beside her.

Arnold emerged, his head held high. His family filed out after him, dressed for Mass and standing in silent support. William saw Margery catch Henry’s eye and give a subtle wave. The blonde boy looked terrified.

“What’s the meaning of all this commotion?” Arnold demanded. He saw Matilda standing at the head of the crowd and smirked when he noticed her burnt clothing. “I thought I heard the dog barking. Why have you interrupted our breakfast and brought a mob to harass my family? I thought a strong independent woman like yourself didn’t need reinforcements.”

Matilda scowled at him.

“You know exactly why I’m here, pig. You lit my mill on fire!”

The Miller stood unswayed. “I did nothing of the sort. I’ve been here with my family all morning. The sabbath is a day of rest.”

“Then what’s this?” Matilda asked, throwing the ruined oil lamp at his feet.

“That’s your evidence? You’re deranged, woman. Circumstantial at best.”

It started to drizzle again and yet the crowd didn’t move, not wanting to miss the most monumental exchange in Holford’s living memory. Not a soul spoke up and Matilda raged at their apathy.

“Come on people, wake up! You know he did this!” she cried at their vapid faces. “Why aren’t you angry? This man has a stranglehold over your lives. He takes what he wants and you just let him. His family stands before you in their finery while we eat soggy bread and live in fear. He’s nothing without us. For the love of God, wake up!”

Arnold’s labourer arrived as Matilda pleaded with the crowd and roughly elbowed his way towards her. William smelled smoke on the bald man’s clothes as he pushed past.

Without warning, the brute lunged at Matilda in an effort to silence her. Even with her limp, Matilda deftly dodged his first two blows but his third caught her off balance and struck her sharply in the jaw. She fell to the ground but the bald man dropped and continued his assault.

It was the Labourer’s brazen attack on a wounded woman that finally jolted the crowd into action. William and two other men hurled themselves at the bald thug and tore him off Matilda while the crowd hurled insults at the brute. The Labourer broke free and lashed out at the villagers which only earned him greater scorn. Three more men dived into the melee before he was subdued.

Pa called for order but the mob was incensed.

With the help of a few nearby villagers, Matilda picked herself up from the ground and calmly brushed herself off before turning back to the Miller.

“You can’t even do your own dirty work,” she scolded before turning to the crowd. “Do you see?”

The crowd’s anger grew and their shouts shifted towards the Miller and his family. Concern finally dawned across Arnold’s face and he urged his wife and children back into their extravagant stone house, calling for silence as they fled.

“Quiet! Quiet.” He paused and waited for the crowd to listen. “So you’ve sided with the flame-haired bitch? Yes, we burned the mill...”

There was an angry ripple through the crowd.

“...But what are you going to do? You need me. And more importantly, so does the Baron. There isn't another miller within a hundred miles of here. This chicken shit doesn't count,” he said, spotting his apprentice in the crowd. “If I go, so does your flour. And the Baron's taxes. But it won't happen. Wealth talks so you can't touch me.”

The crowd grew silent as his message sunk in. And then the scrawny apprentice threw a stone, hitting Arnold square in the chest.

The blow shattered the Miller's arrogant façade and he stared at his apprentice in shock. Then a second stone hit him. And another. The crowd's barrage of abuse resumed, now joined by stones and any other object the mob could find. The villagers took up Matilda's message and demanded that he leave Holford.

“Be gone,” they cried. “Never show your face here again!”

Arnold fled within the house and barred the door, abandoning his labourer to the angry mob. They surged forward and surrounded the house, beating at the door and window shutters. William looked around in awe, he'd never seen his neighbours so incensed.

The crowd turned their anger back to the Labourer but two of Pa's fellow jurors took the bald man away. Pa eventually managed to restore order by promising to talk to Arnold. William watched with pride as his father calmly knocked on the door and led the remaining members of the village court inside to mediate.

The mob's anger simmered but it wasn't long before the door opened, reawakening the crowd and their insults. Pa emerged from the house and called for silence.

“Holford has spoken and the law of the land is clear. Arnold Miller freely admits that he caused the wanton destruction of our lord's property and upon that confession the Holford court finds him guilty. He's to be banished indefinitely and his mill will be passed to the care of his apprentice until a replacement is found.”

There was a cheer from the crowd. The Apprentice looked dumbstruck.

“Now please, allow the Miller family clear passage as they leave. Any additional assault will be handled accordingly.”

A fragile peace settled over the villagers before the Miller and his family gingerly emerged from their house, laden with all the worldly possessions they could carry. Arnold's wife wore five layers of clothes, making her look even more rotund than usual.

The crowd was on its best behaviour and they followed the Miller family to the village limits with only the occasional outburst of abuse. They formed a line as they reached Holford's outer boundary. Arnold turned for one final word.

“You are the dumbest flock of sheep I've ever had the misfortune to meet. You'll regret this day, mark my words.”

He defiantly cast his gaze over the crowd before finally settling on his apprentice.

“Boy, you’ve been the bane of my existence but come now. We’ll start a new mill, away from this rabble.”

The Apprentice looked terrified but puffed his chest and answered with a simple emphatic, “No.”

The crowd cheered and issued one last volley of abuse. They hurled insults and stones as the Miller and his family fled into the forest.

The abuse died down and the Millers had almost completely disappeared through the trees when a final cry erupted from the crowd.

“Wait!” Margery shouted. “Wait for me! I’m coming too.”

Before anyone could react, William’s older sister ran off into the forest after the Miller family and her best friend.

Just like that, another sister was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

2 February 1124

Matilda was stunned to see Margery run off into the forest, ignoring Pa's calls and chasing after the Miller family. The frenzied crowd redirected their abuse at the fleeing girl, hollering insults and good riddance. The sudden loss of another daughter was too much for poor Ma who collapsed into Pa's arms. William and Elizabeth ran to her side.

The Miller family disappeared from sight and the crowd's yelling subsided. Pa lifted his distraught wife to her feet and they joined the remaining crowd heading back to Holford. The charged atmosphere was extinguished as drizzle turned to rain and the crowd dissipated. Ma's wracking sobs drove the villagers even further away.

Everyone was silent as they walked down the muddy road back to Holford, processing the morning's tumultuous events. Deciding that the family would be absorbed by their own loss, Matilda darted into the forest to get some space of her own. She caught William's eye and shot a look urging him not to follow.

She cut towards the smoking remnants of her mill and it was only when Ma's weeping was replaced by forest sounds that Matilda realised just how weary she was. Her jaw ached from the Labourer's brutal attack and her burns throbbed. Already feeling woozy, she threw up after looking closely at her blistered fingers. They'd already started to smell.

Matilda was terrified of infection and headed straight to the mill-pond, grabbing a bucket and a coarse rock to clean herself as best she could. She stripped off her clothes but took particular care with her tunic which had crusted onto her shoulder from puss.

She cleaned herself meticulously, using twigs as makeshift tweezers to remove every strand of fabric or ash from within her burns. Each new discovery made her retch.

Convinced that she'd cleaned most of the filth, Matilda went for an awkward swim to wash out her wounds. The cool water soothed her burns but she began to shiver uncontrollably and suddenly became lightheaded.

Clutching onto consciousness, she dragged herself to the safety of the shore. She caught her breath and collected her burnt clothes before staggering naked back to the mill, head foggy and legs like jelly.

Several times she found herself dropped on one knee. She arrived to the safety of the warehouse and was drying herself with her blanket when she was hit by a particularly strong wave of nausea. The dirt floor rushed up to meet her and everything went black.

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It was dusk when Matilda woke. She hated her body's weakness and for letting the Miller's sabotage rob her of a day's work. She ignored her rumbling stomach and went straight to wash herself again before donning fresh clothes and fashioning bandages for her burnt hands.

Matilda stubbornly resumed her work and toiled well after the sun had set. The fire was extinguished but her anger remained ablaze, at everyone and everything. She tore charred bits of timber apart to salvage all that she could. Some of them were still warm.

The clouds cleared and moonlight streamed through the completely collapsed roof, allowing Matilda to continue her work late into the night. It was only after a third fall, when Matilda landed heavily and burst a giant blister, that she finally conceded the futility of her efforts and begrudgingly sought some rest. She was asleep almost as soon as her head hit the dry dirt floor.

+++

Matilda spent the next morning poring over the wreckage of the mill and cataloguing the full extent of the damage. She determined that the fire had been deliberately concentrated around the mill mechanism which meant there was little left but the stone shell of the millhouse. Luckily the majority of the warehouse was unscathed.

By midday, Matilda had created a decent stack of salvaged timber in the warehouse. She was wrestling with a particularly large beam when William arrived carrying Elizabeth's food basket. Matilda was ravenous but refused to pause her work and continued to wrangle with the timber.

William placed his basket on the warehouse floor and vaulted down into the mill's basement to assist. The pair had almost succeeded when the task required Matilda to break her stubborn silence.

"No, push to your left!"

With one final shove, they hauled the beam into the warehouse and sat down, exhausted.

"You look terrible," William told Matilda bluntly. "Have you stopped at all?"

"I cleaned myself up when I got here," she replied simply. "There's work to do."

"Not yet, you need a break. I'd bet you haven't eaten since the fire."

Matilda's stomach growled viciously. "Fine."

William started preparing her a meal of bread and cheese. He'd even smuggled the family's precious supply of honey.

"I didn't know whether you'd prefer to eat it or use it on the burns," he told Matilda as he passed over her meal.

Matilda mellowed with each hearty bite. It was heavenly.

"Thanks Will," she said, feeling more herself. "You were gone awhile, what've you been up to?"

"Taking care of Ma," William replied. "Trying to at least. She's a wreck. That's two daughters gone now. Plus Mama. Poor Elizabeth hasn't been allowed out of her sight which is sucking the life from both of them. I've never seen Pa so angry. He put Arnold's brute in the stocks overnight to wait for Sir Phillip. Arnold would be either brave or stupid to set foot back in Holford."

"What about the villagers? Did they continue their rowdiness?"

“Not without you to fuel their frenzy. They all went their separate ways as soon as we returned. The reality only settled in today, now that the excitement’s worn off. Everyone’s on edge, asking how we’ll grind flour or how the Baron might seek vengeance. Some even talked about finding Arnold and getting him to come back.”

Matilda felt her hackles rise. “Over my dead body!”

“It won’t happen,” William reassured. “Pa won’t let it. Nor I. Or Joshua, the Apprentice. But he’ll need your help. Poor guy’s in way over his head. He was so proud to finally stand up to his boss and even moved into Arnold’s house. But people are already banging on his door demanding their flour. Some are even asking for their grain back. But he just sits there, trying to understand Arnold’s leger. I don’t think he can even read. Perhaps he could be one of the first students here at your school.”

William shot her a cautious smile.

“I’m sorry for falling asleep. I really tried to stay awake, I swear.”

Matilda knew she’d asked too much of the Boy. “It’s not your fault. I pushed you too hard. Myself too. Arnold was bound to get his way eventually.”

“True,” William said thoughtfully. “I guess it’s only upwards from here then. We certainly can’t sink much lower. What will you do with the place now?”

Matilda had given it a lot of thought and told William that as terrible as the fire was, it presented an opportunity. The pair walked around the site as Matilda shared her plans to build a completely new mill, one with a much bigger waterwheel and a more efficient mechanism that could drive all sorts of machinery. A mechanical bellows for the Smith *and* a water-powered saw for the Carpenter. Perhaps even an electrical generator. It would be revolutionary. Provided they could fund it of course.

Matilda was just explaining how falling water would drive her improved design when she heard thundering hooves racing towards the mill. Baron Walter rode into the yard at full gallop, flanked by Sir Phillip and another knight. He sat atop the tallest horse Matilda had ever seen. It was solid muscle and lathered in sweat from a hard ride. The Baron reined in his steed, smoothly dismounted and marched towards them.

“What in damnation is this?” he yelled, waving at the charred shell. “I gave you a building that lay untouched for decades and within weeks it’s burned to the ground?”

“It hasn’t...” Matilda was cut off as Walter continued his rant.

“And my miller? MY miller! I hear he’s been kicked off MY lands, by MY own peasants no less! How can my quietest hamlet turn so suddenly to chaos? I ordered you to keep the peace!”

“We tried. My lord,” Matilda added stiffly. “William and I kept to ourselves, just clearing the mill. It took weeks but we were almost done. The village craftsmen were already making replacement parts.”

“But did you tell the Miller what you were doing? Did you tell him why you were clearing it?”

“He witnessed your decision!” Matilda replied angrily. “Of course he knew what we were doing...”

“So you flaunted that you were usurping his position in the village?” the Baron asked matter-of-factly. “No wonder he attacked you, I would’ve too!”

Matilda resented the Baron’s insinuation that they’d deserved the attack but, channelling all the lessons from the Institute diplomacy curriculum, she strained every fibre of her body to hold her tongue. She stared at Walter in tense silence, waiting for his temper to burn out.

“I will say my lord,” Sir Phillip interjected, “It may be missing a roof but the building *is* much clearer than last time I rode through.”

“Right you are Phillip,” Walter said pensively. “Well, it’s done I guess. Now what are you going to do about it?”

Matilda seized the opportunity and gestured with an injured hand. “It’s been a painful ordeal, but there are positives that can come of it.”

The Baron stared at her with disbelief.

“The blaze cleared out the remaining areas much faster than William or I ever could. The destruction of the mill’s mechanism is certainly a loss but we can install a more powerful design when we rebuild a new mechanism.”

“Why would we need to build a new mechanism,” Walter asked impatiently. “There’s already another mill, without a miller!”

Matilda took a deep breath, letting the frustration of the man’s obstruction flow over her.

“I hope to work with Holford’s smith to create a mill-powered forge capable of producing stronger metal and with the carpenter to create a mill-powered saw. Among other things. I guarantee that no other region in the entire Kingdom has access to that technology.”

Matilda led the Baron and his men around the site, showing them the extent of the damage but taking care to paint it in a positive light. She explained how her plans for a more efficient mechanism would work and how it could allow the mill to do more than just grind flour.

“This is all fine and well,” Walter chimed, “but with neither mill operating the villagers can’t process their own flour. You promised me double output but expect me to go without any income? It’s unacceptable!”

“I could train the Miller’s apprentice...” Matilda started but Sir Phillip interrupted.

“I must say, this contraption is well beyond me but she does seem singularly knowledgeable. Your mind is a valuable commodity Miss Matilda. Walter, if she succeeds with this, maybe she could revive other projects. The old copper mine perhaps?”

“Oh no, one project at a time,” Matilda insisted but Walter’s eyes had already lit up.

“Now that’s an idea,” the Baron mused. “It could certainly compensate for the reduced milling revenue.”

“And longer term...” Sir Phillip hinted.

“Yes!” Walter cried without a second thought.

Matilda protested. "There's no way I can complete both projects at once. Any time spent on the mine would be less time to restart the mills. I can teach the Miller's Apprentice but not both."

"I won't hear it," Walter said. "You will inspect the mine and make it profitable again. The damned Miner is still wallowing around somewhere nearby isn't he?"

"He is, my lord," Sir Phillip said, giving Matilda an unusually sympathetic smile.

"Then Matilda will find him and have him show her around the mine. And you'll also help the Apprentice. Yes. Cease your work on this ruined endeavour this instant and don't return until the Apprentice has dealt with the flour."

The Baron's last statement was issued as a command, his tone concrete and eyes set.

Matilda paused. There was no way around it.

"Okay, my lord. I'll inspect this mine and see what can be done. But I make no promises of success. And I'll help the Apprentice get his affairs in order while also continuing planning with the village craftsmen." Matilda's tone was concrete and her eyes set. "At least permit *them* to progress so we can begin repairs when the apprentice boy is trained."

Walter nodded and turned toward his horse.

The exchange left an unpleasant taste in Matilda's mouth so she decided to push her luck.

"My lord, the mill has rightfully remained your property. As will the mine. But may I request compensation for my output?"

Sir Phillip shot Matilda a cautioning look but she continued.

"I've proven myself to be both capable and honourable. I request full authority to make alterations at both sites as I see fit, with the specific goal of maximising your long-term output."

"That seems fair," Baron Walter said warily.

"And I would request half of the profits," Matilda continued with a completely straight face. "To finance the work."

The Baron balked. "Half!? You're daft woman!"

"Only of the profits," Matilda reassured. "Surely my efforts are worth something to you. You're asking me to turn dead and unprofitable sites into golden geese. If I leave..." She looked at him pointedly "...or something happened to me, the sites would remain untouched. Wasted. Useless."

"She *has* proven to be an asset Walter," Sir Phillip confirmed. "Perhaps half of a half might be fair?"

"Careful Phillip," the Baron warned, only half-jokingly. "It appears you and the Redhead are in league with one another." He sighed. "You're a wilful woman Matilda but fine, half again. An eighth of the profits to distribute as you see fit. I'll hear no more on the matter."

"Yes my lord," Matilda said with a grateful curtsy. The mere promise of income would encourage cooperation with the villagers.

Satisfied that his interests were no longer threatened, Walter mounted his horse and started back to Holford at a more leisurely pace. Matilda gave a knowing nod of gratitude to Sir Phillip as he too mounted up and departed to detain Arnold's labourer.

"By all that is holy, how did you manage that?" William exclaimed as the knights disappeared from sight.

"I don't know," Matilda said with a big grin. "It rarely hurts to ask? Come on then, we'd better earn our keep and see what this apprentice has gotten himself into."

William helped Matilda hobble back to Holford and they quickly made the rounds. Timothy was glad to see Matilda in one piece and excited to make more tiles for a new roof, a welcome change from the endless pots that were his namesake. His one condition was that Matilda finally show him how to make glass. Knowing of its future utility for her projects, she agreed instantly.

Matthew was harder to convince. He'd been happy providing minor support but his frown deepened as Matilda explained what they would need for the new waterwheel and mechanism. His interest grew when Matilda promised to teach him how to forge larger components and he became genuinely excited when she explained how the larger waterwheel would drive large saw blades for Walt and automated bellows for Matthew's mechanical forge.

"You can do that!?" he cried.

"Sure can. We could even try making steel," Matilda baited.

"Why do I sense there's more..?" Matthew asked warily.

Matilda sighed. "Well, the Baron gave me another task. He was quite insistent that I find the Miner and revive his old copper mine. Do you know where to find him?"

The joy in Matthew's face disappeared. "That old mole. He owed me a lot of money. Good luck getting a coherent sentence out of him, he's the Brewer's older brother and rarely without a drink. I'll try to find him for you. He's either sulking in some cesspit near the Brewer's or at his hovel near the mine."

Matilda thanked Matthew and left to find Walt. She needed a much bigger favour from him and wracked her brains for the best approach.

"Na, can't help ya," he said. "Ya'd need my entire stock of dry timber."

Matilda ended up having to literally beg for Walt's assistance. He was intrigued by the idea of a saw mill but it was the Baron's promise of future funds that eventually convinced him to provide enough wood for at least the roof. Even then he demanded a hefty cut of profits.

Matilda was satisfied with her progress but her head throbbed and her burns ached as they made their final stop to help the Apprentice. She shivered as they passed the Miller's empty house, her mind replaying the previous day's confrontation.

The mill was a complete shambles when they arrived. Bags of grain were strewn across the floor and fallen stacks of flour had torn open. The Apprentice was covered in the white powder, making his hair look prematurely grey. Combined with his gaunt eyes and scrawny physique, he looked like an elderly man.

William and Matilda spent the rest of the day helping Joshua get the place in order. William restacked the grain and swept up the flour while Matilda worked with the Apprentice to decipher Arnold's needlessly complex accounting system. Having spent the winter teaching the family, she was shocked at Joshua's lack of rudimentary numeracy and helped develop a schedule to put his customers' minds at ease. Matilda suggested significantly reducing the Miller's overinflated fees to further alleviate any concerns.

Next they worked with the mill itself, helping Matilda intuit how the machine was supposed to work. They managed to grind their first bag of flour after hours of experimentation and had the site working – though still far from smoothly – by sunset.

“Well it's official,” Matilda announced. “I think we can call you Joshua Miller now.”

Joshua gushed with gratitude and his eyes had regained some life by the time William and Matilda set off for the cottage. They were both weary but felt they'd accomplished a lot.

They were almost home when an arm grabbed Matilda and dragged her behind a hedge. William cried out with a mixture of shock and warning. Matilda acted out of instinct and, despite her burns, swept her assailant's feet before landing a flurry of punches.

“Ow! Stop it!” Matthew cried, trying to push Matilda away.

“Oh, sorry,” Matilda replied sheepishly. “I don't like surprises.”

“Noted,” Matthew wheezed as he clutched his stomach. “I found the Miner for you. Want to see who you'll have the pleasure of working with?”

The pair followed the Smith to a pigsty behind a nearby building. Matthew gestured to a lumpy pile of rags.

“There's your miner,” he said, barely hiding his amusement at Matilda's disgust. “Looks like you've got serious work to do.”

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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