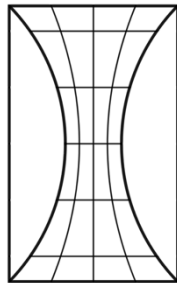


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

7 May 1124

It was dark. And cold. William was terrified.

The flame of William's rush-light guttered as he ran along the dark corridors of the mine, lost and afraid. He longed to wake up but it was no nightmare. His torch struck the wall as he rounded a corner and finally went out, smothering him in complete darkness.

The malicious laughter of William's tormenters echoed off the tunnel walls. William dropped to the floor and sheltered in place, willing the wicked noise to stop. It eventually faded as his pursuers tired of their sport but was replaced with an even more terrifying sound.

Absolute silence.

William crouched in the darkness, unable to see even his hands. He was just a mind in a world of dark. He fought for a way out of his predicament but he couldn't see any solution.

His terror rose with each heartbeat but after an age of ever diminishing hope, the tunnel appeared to lighten. It was faint at first but its intensity grew and William started to see the stone walls around him. He didn't care if it was his tormentors returning, anything was better than the dark prison.

He called out.

A torch rounded a bend in the tunnel and the friendly Miner came into view.

"Roger an' Warren up to no good again?" Edric asked solemnly.

William nodded, squinting up at him.

"Bloody mongrels. I never shoulda taken 'em on. Pity Roger's so good with a pick. Sorry 'bout that."

It wasn't William's first run in with the pair. He didn't know what he'd done to earn their enmity. The out-of-towners had recently arrived in Holford, answering Edric's calls for extra assistance in the mine. They'd taken an instant dislike to William and quickly set about making his life hell. Offering to help find Edric, only to abandon him in the tunnels, was just the latest escalation of their bullying.

"Don't mind 'em boy," Edric told William. "Yar worth twelve of 'em. Everyone's seen how ya been helpin' the village. I'll give 'em a good crack over the head. Bloody dolts."

They reached the surface and William breathed a sigh of relief. He'd never been so happy to see the sky.

"Ah lad, you'd best get changed," Edric said, noticing William's torn and muddy pants. "Take it easy and I'll see ya at the Council meetin' tonight."

William was further humiliated by Edric's dismissal but didn't object. He slunk back towards Holford, trying to avoid the judging eyes of the mine labourers. Most were new arrivals, their faces were unfamiliar. He was

halfway home before he realised that he'd forgotten to ask about Edric's production forecasts, the whole reason he'd risked the dreaded mine in the first place.

William slipped into his family's cottage, hoping to find it empty.

"You're back early," Ma chimed with surprise. She sat by the hearth, preparing another batch of cloth for Matilda's new dyes. William was still unaccustomed to seeing Ma with a spring in her step but news of Rachel's baby had lulled her back to life.

"Are you alright?" Ma asked with motherly concern.

William mumbled a response but Ma saw straight through him with her well-trained maternal eye.

"Will..?" she asked pointedly.

William relented and told her about the whole incident and the labourers' ongoing torments. Ma was furious, her colourful language so unusual that it forced a reluctant laugh from William. Ma washed his pants and dried them by the fire. The pair chatted the afternoon away, trying to solve the world's problems while Ma continued working on her cloth. Just like old times, the mere act of talking reenergised William. Edric's brutes were almost forgotten when he finally departed for the Council meeting.

The Council was Matilda's idea and that evening was only their third meeting. A necessary evil after coordinating Holford's many activities became too much for her and William. They had stubbornly persevered for as long as possible but a growing series of accidents eventually forced to concede the need for more assistance.

"Plus," Matilda had added with a smile, "we can pressure the participants to finally learn their numbers and letters."

The new group that built on the leadership of Pa's jury, though Matilda insisted on keeping the groups separate. It was held in the Brewer's hall, the only room in Holford large enough to fit the participants.

William sat at the long trestle table in the barrel-lined cellar, directly across from Martin Brewer and his son. Martin had made clear his dislike for William, saying that he was too young for a prestigious leadership position. But Matilda wouldn't hear it and pointed out the important role William played in accelerating Holford's progress. William defiantly returned Martin's glare. Yet another bully.

He breathed a sigh of relief when Pa entered the cellar, deep in conversation with Elizabeth's friend Astrid. She was Holford's elderly midwife and herbalist. The woman who had brought William into the world. Pa caught William's eye and slid onto the bench next to his son, inviting Astrid to sit next to them. It was her first Council meeting and the shy midwife declined, taking a seat at the farthest end of the table instead. William gave her a small wave.

Timothy and Walt arrived next, deep in discussion about the warehouse roof. Timothy sat next to Astrid and gave her hand a friendly squeeze while continuing his conversation. Luke Ploughman, Father Daniel and Joshua Miller gradually filtered in one by one and sat.

The Brewer glared as each person entered, daring them to challenge his authority and ensuring that they took the seats he deemed appropriate. He smothered conversation and everyone milled around uncomfortably. Except for Timothy and Walt, who were either oblivious or just didn't care.

Matilda finally arrived with Edric Miner and Matt Smith in tow. Timothy and Walt stopped their conversation as Matilda stood behind her seat. She looked around the table, dissatisfied.

"No, this won't do at all. Everybody up, we're going to mix this around."

Martin looked incredulous. "Dammit woman! You can't tell me where to sit in my own building!"

"I can actually, if you wish to remain a part of this group. And if you want me to continue helping you and your family. But if you insist on being obstructive, we can move our meetings to my warehouse. It'll mean a longer walk for everyone but might rid us of some dead weight."

The pair stared off in uneasy silence until Alan grabbed his father by the elbow and urged him to stand.

Matilda scattered the attendees around the table, breaking up the cliques that had already started to form.

"I'll say this once more, then let it be done forever," she said. "You're all key members of Holford, the few with the power to advance the interests of the many. I've asked you here to lead, to guide the village to prosperity."

"We're all working towards the same goal. A prosperous village will improve each of your individual lots. But more importantly, it will also improve the lives of your family, friends and neighbours. I won't have petty squabbles in this group. I can't have us fragmenting so leave the petty politics behind. We're all one team in this so if you're unwilling to cooperate, know that we will go on without you."

Martin made a face to his son across the table, though Alan ignored him and remained intently focused on Matilda. Annoyed by the lack of acknowledgement, the Brewer turned to his brother and whispered something behind his hand.

Matilda noticed too.

"Any problems?"

Edric shook his head and William chuckled as Martin cowered at Matilda's gaze, avoiding eye contact.

"Good," she said cheerfully. "Well, first I'd like to welcome Astrid. I've been teaching her more medicine over the past week so she can assist with the injuries that are becoming increasingly frequent amongst your workers. She's also been helping Elizabeth grow some new plants that should be of interest to all of you. Haven't you Astrid?"

The Midwife gave a nervous nod to Matilda, only to quickly look down again at her clenched hands.

"Well it's good to have you here," Matilda said with genuine warmth. "Don't be afraid to chime in, we need more women in this group. Ok, let's make this more productive than the last meeting. We'll start with an update from everyone so let us know what you need from William and I over the coming week. Then we'll discuss our

approach for Baron Walter's upcoming inspection. Our revision of numbers and letters can wait until next week."

They went around the table, each member sharing what they'd been working on. Walt and Timothy were almost finished with the roof of the warehouse which would free Timothy to focus on glass for the windows. Walt had finished the waterwheel components and awaited Luke's plough-team to transport them to the mill.

Father Daniel had progressed work on Matilda's design for an automated writing machine. He'd shown great interest in Matilda's Book and was delighted when she said he could make one of his own. Walt's young assistants had helped carve hundreds of tiny letters into wooden blocks which Father Daniel had painstakingly arranged to tell the Genesis creation story. He promised to have initial prints for the Council's reading lessons by the next meeting, provided others supplied ink and paper.

Martin didn't have anything to contribute but Alan had used an old cauldron to make dyes for the priest's writing projects and Ma's cloth. He'd also been working with recently arrived masons on Matilda's plans to separate Holford's waste and drinking water.

His father scoffed at the idea. "Why anyone would waste time making an artificial river, only to bury it underground?"

When Alan explained how it would improve the quality of their brews the Brewer went quiet once more.

Matilda scrawled notes with charcoal on a precious blank page of her Book. "That paper and ink couldn't come quick enough," she told them with an exaggerated sigh.

Joshua, Luke and Pa were all progressing well. Joshua had processed Holford's backlog of grain and started work on Arnold's personal hoarded stockpile which would be needed to feed all of the new arrivals. Luke and his team were almost finished ploughing the fallow fields, well ahead of schedule thanks to Matilda's improved plough. Pa was working in the fields to cut hay before sowing the next crop.

Matthew and Ralph had finished adapting the new mill mechanism to drive their automated bellows and had started sharpening the blades for Walt's sawmill. With Matilda's help, Matthew had finally succeeded in casting stronger steels and Ralph was experimenting with magical steels that wouldn't rust. Matthew hoped to use them to make an even better plough, which made Luke whoop out loud.

Edric shared the production estimates William had forgotten to ask for that morning. Matilda's improved pump was keeping the water out of the mine and the Miner's team had already exposed promising new ore-veins. Edric welcomed Astrid's assistance as the hasty excavations made his inexperienced miners prone to clumsiness.

Soft-spoken Astrid finished with an update on her work with Elizabeth.

"Matilda's tomato plants are starting to grow fruit so we're expecting our first harvest soon. Nowhere enough to address the food shortages but a step in the right direction. Matilda promises they will be unlike anything we've eaten before so perhaps we could share that with the Baron?"

Matilda laughed. “That’s a great idea, let’s make him a pizza! It’ll blow his mind.” The blank faces around the table made her laugh even harder. Then she grew serious. “Astrid and Joshua have touched on the food issues but we need to discuss the new arrivals. We’re becoming victims of our own success and it won’t be long until Baron Walter starts getting complaints from the other lords. Even more people have arrived from the region seeking work but we have nowhere to house them. Some Holford families have kindly shared their homes but we can’t rely on their generosity forever.”

William took his cue and spoke up. “We can establish new lodging for the newcomers which will mean even more help for our projects. And if we do it well now, we could design a larger village so it doesn’t get crowded like Stowey. Should we ask the Baron for assistance?”

There was a general murmur of assent from the Council, though Timothy uncharacteristically grumbled that too many outsiders would change Holford’s character.

“Come now Timothy,” Matilda chided. “The only constant is change. Engage with the newcomers from the outset and you can teach them the Holford way of living. Just like you showed me when I first arrived. Plus, aren’t half of your new assistants from other villages?”

Timothy dipped his head in defeat.

“Very well, we can discuss designs and timeframes over the coming days. We’ll need extra land and materials so I’ll raise this with Walter when he visits. Now, all of you go home!”

The Council members filed out of the cellar, their conversations charged with possibility. William and Pa waited for Matilda to gather her belongings and the three of them then made their way home.

“That was an improvement,” Pa noted.

“Much better,” Matilda agreed. “It’ll require firm guidance to keep our more belligerent members focussed but momentum should keep us on course once we’re all moving together.”

“We can try,” William countered, “but I think the Brewer family will always want to branch off on their own. They don’t really care about anyone else.”

Pa met William’s pessimistic realism with a contemplative nod.

They were all exhausted from another long day and it was a relief when they finally entered the cosy cottage. William reflected on the various changes as they settled into their usual places. Pa sat on a new stool from Walt, Ma dished up food in crockery provided by Timothy and Matthew had even crafted forks for everyone. The family’s role in welcoming Matilda to Holford was appreciated. By most.

The biggest change of all was in Ma who was almost back to her same old self since hearing that she would become a grandmother. She was full of energy as she rushed around the cottage in the mornings and evenings, cooking and cleaning to make sure that everyone was ready for their busy days of work.

“We’ve got to have Holford in a good state before my grandchild arrives,” she joked.

Ma was busy herself during the day and William didn't know how she managed everything. He often saw her dashing around the village to visit her friends and coordinating the efforts of the Holford women. She had started building an improved loom with Matilda's guidance and Walt had privately vented his frustrations to William at Ma's incessant insistence that he prioritise her work.

William didn't complain of Ma's work ethic whenever her latest food creation was inflicted upon him. With just regular ingredients, Matilda had taught Ma how to make delicious concoctions but Elizabeth's new produce only further enhanced their meals. That evening was no exception. William's mouth was alive with new sensations. It felt on fire!

"Do you need some water Will?" Ma asked, still enjoying the novelty of being able to offer clean drinking water.

"Not water," Matilda said. "That'll make it worse. Is there any milk?"

"How was the meeting?" Ma asked while ladling William some milk. "Better than last week?"

"Much better," Matilda said. "Everyone's making progress, it's so good to see."

"It's honestly amazing to see how much everything has changed. I don't know how I never noticed, but there's something in the air. Everyone has a spring in their step, even more than you'd expect in the leadup to Summer. You've really worked some magic Matilda."

"You're too kind Emma. I've just given gentle nudges here and there. Everyone else is doing the actual work and William is running around to keep them all on task."

William felt himself blush at his mentor's compliment.

"Another of your enchantments," Ma replied. "We love our William to death but Lord knows we never thought he was capable of working so hard."

"Hey!" William protested half-heartedly.

"Not at all," Matilda said with a smile. "I knew he had a good head on his shoulders when I first met him. I think he was just bored."

Matilda got up and rinsed her clay bowl, placing it on the new shelf Walt had built to placate Ma until her new loom arrived.

"That was delicious Emma, it's hard to believe you've just started cooking with chilli. Astrid said the tomatoes are getting close so I'll show you some more recipes soon."

Elizabeth was excited at that announcement.

"Ok dear family, it's getting late. The evenings keep getting lighter as summer draws closer yet somehow it's always dark when I finally return to the mill."

"You take care of yourself, Til," Pa said protectively. "You always say it's fine but keep your wits about you. Martin's made it clear that not everyone is happy with your changes."

"Thanks Pa, I'll be careful."

The young woman strode out into the twilight and the family settled into their regular evening routine. William was amazed how different the building felt with Rachel, Mama and Margery gone. Everyone seemed less on edge and life in the cottage was smooth. Easy.

William remembered the morning's traumatic events and suddenly felt exhausted. He settled onto his small cot and quickly fell asleep to the sound of the happy family pottering around the house. The horrors of the mine were forgotten amongst the warmth, light and sounds of home.

Life was good.

CHAPTER THIRTY

1 June 1124

Rachel was frustrated.

“No Ma,” she urged. “You don’t understand, they’re ruining everything! Martin says they’ve completely changed Holford.”

“Come now dear,” Ma said absentmindedly as she stirred a pot of red sludge above the hearth. From the Foreigner no doubt. Rachel’s stomach betrayed her with a hungry rumble. “You’re being silly, not all change is bad. Just look around, I’ve never seen our neighbours working so hard. And yet also so happy.”

Rachel looked at Ma with disbelief and finally realised that she too was a lost cause. Just like the others, Ma had succumbed to the guile of the red-headed bitch. Rachel gave up. She accepted the aromatic bowl from Ma and nodded along as Ma nattered about her work with the village women. She scoffed her sludge and fled at the first opportunity.

“Don’t forget,” Ma called out after her, “The arguments will subside if you just *talk* to Alan! Take care of that grandchild of mine!”

Frustrated at Ma’s obvious advice, Rachel left the cottage and walked the familiar roads back to her new house. There were signs of change wherever she looked. Neighbours’ hovels had been renovated with tiled roofs or rehung doors. Strange tools were propped beside buildings and gardens brimmed with unusual plants. Every second face she passed was unfamiliar.

The whole village had gone mad. The Foreigner’s arrival had upended Rachel’s entire existence. Matilda was confident, independent and beautiful. She could travel wherever she liked, whenever she liked. Even her clothing hinted at a femininity that Rachel had always been forbidden to embrace, yet the Foreigner showed no fear or shame. Rachel hated her for it.

As if on cue, Matilda marched across the village square shadowed by followers who interrupted each other to ask questions before darting off to another corner of Holford. It was madness. There was a time when Rachel had been followed by a gaggle of admiring followers, younger girls wishing to be her or admiring boys wishing to be with her.

But that was no longer the case. One by one Rachel’s friends had tired of her efforts to expose how things had been better before. They too had abandoned Rachel, pointing to their own second-order benefits from Matilda’s efforts. Now even Ma had joined their side. Rachel felt her lonely world shrink even more.

She missed Margery. Her younger sister would’ve at least heard Rachel’s point of view and always had some pearl of wisdom that could be hatched into a full-blown plan. But Margery was gone. Rachel admittedly could’ve been kinder to her sister when among Holford’s adolescents. But surely Margery understood that Rachel only

sought to improve their family's social standing. Countering the embarrassment that William attracted with his constant antics.

Rachel's feet carried her along while her mind was elsewhere and she eventually found herself standing before Mama's headstone at the chapel cemetery. Rachel visited the grave most days. Mama's passing was another loss brought upon by Matilda's arrival. Another voice that Rachel could no longer rely upon for counsel.

Mama had understood the importance of social standing. Had experienced the harsh sting of its loss. Mama was buried beside her wealthy husband beneath a grand headstone carved by Stowey's masons. But her final years as a widow had been a drought compared to her lavish life as a miller's wife. For years, Rachel had witnessed the pain of that fall.

Rachel startled as she felt her baby moved around inside her. The intrusive reminder of new life was a complete contradiction to graveyard around her. She lovingly clutched her visibly extended stomach. The baby was her one glimmer of hope. Her chance to finally have the happy family she'd always dreamed of.

She hoped it was a son. Life was easier for a man.

Ma and Pa had always wanted a son. Even as a child Rachel had been all too aware of that. It was the reason they'd tried to have so many children. The four that made it past infancy and the many that didn't. Rachel had watched them try all of the Midwife's schemes for conceiving a boy. The potions and prayers. The position of stars and chants. It had bordered on heresy.

But they'd received Rachel and her sisters instead. Their eldest daughter was constant source of trouble, as Pa had reminded Rachel all too often. Her efforts to secure Alan's attention had required the Midwife's other fertility services on several occasions. Pa accused Rachel of bringing shame upon the family but he too failed to see that she actually sought the exact opposite.

It was inevitable that Rachel would end up with Alan. The Miller's son might've provided even greater wealth but he was socially awkward, an outcast. Plus, he was closer to Margery in age so why not double the family's chances of a good marriage? Pa had suggested several respectable boys from nearby villages but Rachel knew it had to be Alan. As Martin Brewer's eldest son, he was guaranteed to inherit a lucrative trade and, more importantly, he was well respected amongst his peers. He was undeniably a bully but Rachel didn't care whether it was respect or fear that underpinned his social clout.

Despite years of insisting that Alan and Rachel weren't mature enough to marry, Pa was finally prompted by Rachel's third visit to the Midwife to make a proposal to Martin. Pa promised a generous dowry to the Brewer – much more than he could afford – on the condition that they be married after Alan's eighteenth birthday. The sole positive of Matilda's arrival was that the date had been moved forward.

Rachel had been so happy in the lead up to the wedding. Her soon-to-be father-in-law spared no expense in organising the event and she was the talk of the entire region. All of the details she and Mama had discussed for years finally came into place, though it was a knife to the stomach that Mama wasn't there to see it herself.

In contrast, life after the wedding was far from what Rachel had dreamed. She had tried to be the perfect wife. She prepared meals just as Ma had shown her, tweaking the recipes to accommodate Alan's specific tastes and using the expensive ingredients available to the wealthy. Sugar, caraway, pepper. She worked harder than ever before in the first weeks of marriage to make a beautiful home, only for Alan to return from the brewery, inhale his meal and provide little more than grunts as conversation. He would retire to bed and have his way with her before rolling over without a word. Every day was the same.

Rachel always knew that Alan was a brute – selfish and aggressive – but foolishly hoped that the love of a new marriage would cool his temper and warm his heart. She learned that he was a sad man, cursed by his alcoholic father and the weight of responsibility. Even amongst his cruelty and neglect, Rachel discovered that she felt sorry for her husband.

Martin Brewer had managed to establish a successful trade despite being a younger son without claim to a large inheritance. Martin had built his brewery through tenacity and hard work, overcoming doubters and debtors alike. But the endeavour took a toll and he'd heavily sampled his own brews to cope. Much like his brother Edric, Martin was a mess behind closed doors. Responsibility for keeping the brewery running had fallen to Alan years prior.

It was a heavy burden for a young man and Alan also used his product to blunt his worries. He spent most evenings away from his marital home, drinking with friends while Rachel obediently awaited his return. Alone.

Rachel bore the loneliness for as long as possible but each day became harder. Her pleas for companionship fell on deaf ears, enraging Alan who saw them as yet another responsibility he was forced to bear. Each confrontation drove Rachel's husband further into his drink. The new couple's limited interactions were often spent fighting and there were many nights that Rachel fell asleep in their lavish house with tears streaming down her cheeks, praying that her husband would wrap her in a warm embrace.

For so long, marriage had been a beacon of hope. A chance for her to escape the oppressive life with her parents and William's constant irritating presence. And yet it had soured so quickly. *But it was alright*, Rachel told herself, *she had her baby*.

Realising that she'd been away from the house for too long, Rachel raced from the graveyard and back home. She rushed to have food ready for Alan's return that evening but knew deep down that he would be late. Again.

Rachel sat in silence by the warm hearth while she waited for her husband's return, cradling her stomach and dreaming of the life her baby would have. She no longer felt alone, as she had in the early weeks after the wedding. She had hope.

It was well after dark when Alan finally stumbled into the house. Rachel had fallen asleep against the wall and he was so drunk that he didn't even see her at first. Rachel stood up, her eyes still bleary.

"Welcome home dear. It's late," she observed wearily.

"Don't you start," Alan slurred. "I've already had an earful from my father."

“That’s no good. Why don’t you take a seat and tell me about it? I made beef stew. Just how you like it.”

Alan grumbled but dropped into his seat. Rachel ladled stew into his bowl and lay it in front of him.

“What happened with your Pa?” she asked cautiously.

Alan ignored her, his unfocused eyes fixed upon his bowl as he ate.

“Was it another busy day?”

She waited. Again there was only silence.

“I visited Ma today. I told her how the Foreigner is ruining the village. That too much is changing. She didn’t believe me and said Holford is actually improving.”

Alan scoffed.

A response! At least it was something.

Alan finished his food and lay down his spoon before clumsily pushing himself up and shuffling towards their bed.

Rachel plucked up her courage and spoke plainly to her husband.

“Please talk to me.”

Alan staggered around and stared at her.

“Please?” she begged, hating the desperation in her voice. “I don’t want much, just to hear about my husband’s day.”

Tears welled in the corners of her eyes.

Alan swayed and gaped at her. His addled mind processed her words. And then his face scrunched up with rage.

“You don’t...want much?” he hiccupped. “You got me, didn’t you? What more could you want?”

Rachel saw what was coming and tried to back down.

“No Al, that’s not what I’m saying. Never mind, we can talk another night.”

“No!” he yelled. “You got what you wanted. You got me! You made your stinking Pa talk to mine and they hatched their grand scheme to lock me away. For life!”

Alan stepped toward her, menace in his eyes.

Rachel cowed before him. She’d never seen him so worked up.

“And now they gang up on me in front of the Redhead? This is all your fault.”

He struck her across the face.

Rachel cried out in shock and fell to the floor. She tried to pick herself up but Alan shoved her back down.

“It’s all your fault!” he cried.

Rachel looked up and caught a glimpse of his eyes. An unfocussed cocktail of devastation and fury.

Then he attacked.

Rachel's drunk husband rained blows down upon her. He struck with an open fist but each blow rang her head like a bell.

"No!" she begged. "Please? Stop! The baby!"

Her last words cut through her husband's rage and he stopped, shoving her to the ground one last time.

"Get out," he hissed. "Now. Go to your parents. Go to mine. I don't care. Just get out and leave me alone."

Rachel's ears rung and she barely heard him.

"Now!" Alan yelled.

Rachel didn't need to be told again. She lunged for the door and tore it open before running aimlessly into the night. One hand wiped tears from her eyes, the other cradled her baby.

She had no idea where she was going, she just ran. Away from Alan. Away from her parents. Away from all the people who'd let her down.

Rachel ran past the village boundary, until she couldn't run any more. She was suddenly woozy and the pain in her head made her drop to the ground. She threw up and crawled to a hedge at the side of the road, hoping to use it to stand back up. She propped herself up but anything else was too difficult. Tears streamed down her face.

Her swollen eyes were starting to close over when a light appeared on the road, coming towards her from the village. Fearing it was Alan, Rachel scrambled again to stand up but her body refused to obey. She was forced to lie in a heap by the hedge, filled with dread.

Rachel realised it was a woman as the figure drew closer. Some lucid part of her brain wondered what woman would risk walking the outer roads so late. Then she glimpsed the red hair.

The Foreigner was the last person Rachel wanted to see and she was mortified that Matilda would see her in such a state.

Rachel saw Matilda notice the shape by the side of the road and watched the shock register on the Foreigner's face as she realised it was a person. Matilda rushed towards Rachel, her otherworldly light searing Rachel's swollen eyes.

The Foreigner propped Rachel up, her voice urgent but speaking in calming tones. Rachel was numb and too sore to push away the assistance but noted with morbid amusement the shock on Matilda's face as she recognised William's sister. Yet still the Foreigner helped.

"Oh Rachel," Matilda soothed, "what has he done to you? I knew it was bad, but this?"

Rachel was surprised by the genuine concern in Matilda's voice. Despite her hatred of the Redhead, Rachel relished being cared for.

"We're not far from my mill," Matilda told her. "We'll fix you up there."

Matilda carefully coaxed Rachel up from the ground and led her back to the mill. It was slow going and Rachel stumbled several times but Matilda held her with a firm yet gentle grip.

Rachel hadn't been to the mill since the fire and was amazed by the small village that had grown around it. Even by the moonlight, she saw the tiled roof and freshly plastered walls. It was the grandest building in Holford.

Matilda brought Rachel to her bed in the completed corner of the warehouse and lay her down gently.

"Wait here," she said kindly.

Matilda disappeared and returned with a bucket and cloth. She delicately wiped Rachel's face, reminding Rachel of her own efforts to care for Mama. Tears flowed once more.

"Shh," Matilda hushed. "Stay still. Be calm. You're safe here."

Her soothing worked and Rachel felt herself starting to relax.

"It's alright Rachel. It's going to be alright. I'm here to help."

Rachel closed her swollen eyes and savoured Matilda's deliberate strokes.

"Tell me what happened Rachel. It'll help." Matilda paused with the cloth. "I'm not here to judge. I honestly don't understand the animosity between us but I wish it were gone."

Rachel stayed silent. Matilda resumed wiping and eventually got up for fresh water. She returned with a salve and when she'd finished applying it, Rachel spoke.

"It was Alan," she confirmed.

A dam broke and Rachel poured her heart out, telling Matilda everything. She didn't care anymore. She told Matilda about Alan. About her marriage. About the baby. She told Matilda about her loneliness and the changes in Holford. She told of her hatred.

Matilda just listened, stroking Rachel's hand the whole time. Rachel felt Matilda tense as she described Alan's attack.

"You poor thing," Matilda said. Her voice was full of compassion but her eyes were aflame. "No one should have to go through that. You deserve so much better." Matilda took a deep breath and centred herself. "You stay here tonight ok? Get some sleep. We'll work out a longer-term solution in the morning. You're safe here, I'll keep watch."

The Foreigner stepped out of the warehouse and stood by the door.

Rachel felt empty but she couldn't explain why. It was a good empty, as if a weight had lifted from her shoulders.

Finally feeling safe, Rachel permitted her eyes to shut.

Sleep came instantly.

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All was silent when Rachel woke the next morning. Only one of her eyes would open and her head pounded but she forced herself up and silently left the warehouse. Matilda lay asleep by the door, still wearing her clothes from the previous night. Rachel felt embarrassed at letting her former rival see her so weak. She fled.

Rachel limped back into Holford, hoping to avoid anyone familiar but the roads were mercifully clear. She considered going to Ma and Pa's cottage but dreaded the awkward conversation. Ma had said only the previous day that it was her duty to obey her husband.

Instead, Rachel turned towards her marital home beside the brewery. She stood at the door for what felt like an age before finally lifting the latch and entering.

Alan was nowhere to be seen. The house was a mess, their belongings strewn across the ground. Several items lay in pieces. Alan's dirty bowl still lay on the table.

Rachel didn't know what had happened but she spent the rest of the day putting the house back in order and tidying up the mess. Matilda tried to enter the house at one point but Rachel yelled at her hysterically until the Redhead retreated. Rachel calmed down and spent the rest of the day baking bread and refreshing the stew for her husband's eventual return.

She'd spent all day trying to figure out the right words to say but Rachel's apprehension evaporated when Alan opened the door and she saw his face. It too was covered in bruises. His eye was black and he carried his left arm by the wrist.

Alan stopped in his tracks and looked around the recently tidied house. At the stew by the hearth. He glared at Rachel and disappeared into the bedroom.

Without a word.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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