

The Master Miller's Tale

by Ian R. MacLeod

Ian MacLeod contributed a number of memorable stories to our magazine in the 1990s, including "Verglas," "The Noonsday Pool," and "Tirkiluk," but nearly a decade has passed since his last appearance in F&SF. Which is not to suggest he has been idle; as detailed at www.ianrmacleod.com, he has published The Great Wheel, The Summer Isles, The Light Ages, and The House of Storms over the last ten years. (And a new story collection entitled Past Magic has just been published this year.)

This new story, which marks his welcome return to our pages, is set in the same alternate world as that of The Light Ages, but it takes a different approach and you need not be familiar with the novel to enjoy the story.

* * * *

There are only ruins left now on Burlish Hill, a rough circle of stones. The track that once curved up from the village of Stagsby in the valley below is little more than an indentation in the grass, and the sails of the mill that once turned there are forgotten. Time has moved on, and lives have moved with it. Only the wind remains.

Once, the Westovers were millers. They belonged to their mill as much as it belonged to them, and Burlish Hill was so strongly associated with their trade that the words *mill* and *hill* grew blurred in the local dialect until the two became the same. Hill was mill and mill was hill, and one or other of the Westovers, either father or son, was in charge of those turning sails, and that was all the people of Stagsby, and all the workers in the surrounding farms and smallholdings, cared to know. The mill itself, with its four sides of sloped, slatted wood, weather-bleached and limed until they were almost paler than its sails, was of the type known as a post mill. Its upper body, shoulders, middle and skirts, turned about a central pivot from a squat, stone lower floor to meet whichever wind prevailed. There was a tower mill at Alford, and there were overshot water mills at Lough and Screamby, but Burlish Mill on Burlish Hill had long served its purpose. You might get better rates farther afield, but balanced against that had to be the extra journey time, and the tolls on the roads, and the fact that this was Stagsby, and the Westovers had been the millers here for as long as anyone could remember. Generation on generation, the Westovers recemented this relationship by marrying the daughters of the farmers who drove their carts up Burlish Hill, whilst any spare Westovers took to laboring some of the many thousands of acres that the mill surveyed. The Westovers were pale-faced men with sandy hair, plump arms and close-set eyes which, in their near-translucence, seemed to have absorbed something of the sky of their hilltop home. They went bald early—people joked that the winds had blown away their hair—and worked hard, and characteristically saved their breath and said little, and saved their energies for their work.

* * * *

Although it took him most of his life to know it, Nathan Westover was the last of the master millers on Burlish Hill. Growing up, he never imagined that anything could change. The endless grinding, mumbling sound of the mill in motion was always there, deep within his bones.

He was set to watch a pulley that was threatening to slip.

“See how it sits, and that band of metal helps keep it in place...” his mother, who often saw to the lesser workings of the mill, explained. “It’s been doing that for longer than I and your father can remember. Now it’s getting near the end of its life...” The pulley turned, the flour hissed, the windmill rumbled, and this small roller spun on in a slightly stuttering way. “...and we can’t stop the mill from working when we’re this busy just to get it fixed. So we need someone to keep watch—well, more than simply watch—over it. I want you to sing to that roller to help keep this pulley turning and in place. Do you understand?”

Nathan nodded, for the windmill was always chanting its spells from somewhere down in its deep-throated, many-rumbling voice, and now his mother took up a small part of the song in her own soft voice, her lips shaping the phrases of a machine vocabulary, and he joined in, and the roller and the pulley’s entire mechanism revolved more easily.

Soon, Nathan was performing more and more of these duties. He even learned how to sing some of the larger spells that kept the mill turning, and then grew strong enough to lift a full sack of grain. He worked the winches, damped the grist, swept the chutes, oiled the workings. He loved the elegant way in which the mill always rebalanced itself through weights, lengths, numbers, quantities. Fifteen men to dig a pit thus wide down at school in the village meant nothing to him, but he solved problems that had anything to do with grain, flour, or especially the wind, in his dreams.

Sometimes there were visits from the rotund men who represented the county branch of the Millers’ Guild. On these occasions, everything about the mill had to be just so—the books up to date, the upper floors brushed and the lower ones waxed and the sails washed and all the ironwork shiny black as new boots—but Nathan soon learned that these men liked the mill to be chocked, braked and disengaged, brought to a total stop. To them, it was a dead thing within a frozen sky, and he began to feel the same contempt for his so-called guild-masters that any self-respecting miller felt.

On the mill’s third floor, above the account books with their pots of green and red ink, and set back in a barred recess, leaned a three-volume Thesaurus of spells. One quiet day at the end of the spring rush when sails ticked and turned themselves in slow, easy sweeps, his father lifted the heavy boots down, and blew off a coating of the same pale dust which, no matter how often things were swept and aired, soon settled on everything within the mill.

“This, son....” He cleared his throat. “Well, you already know what these are. One day, these books will be yours. In a way, I suppose they already are....”

The yellowed pages rippled and snickered. Just like the mill itself, they didn't seem capable of remaining entirely still, and were inscribed with the same phonetic code that Nathan saw stamped, carved or engraved on its beams, spars and mechanisms. There were diagrams. Hand-written annotations. Darker smudges and creases lay where a particularly useful spell had been thumbed many times. Through the mill's hazy light, Nathan breathed it all in. Here were those first phrases his mother had taught him when he tended that pulley, and the longer and more complex melodies that would keep back those four apocalyptic demons of the milling industry, which were: weevils, woodworm, fire, and rats. As always with things pertaining to the mill, Nathan felt that he was rediscovering something he already knew.

* * * *

There were slack times and there were busy times. Late August, when the farmers were anxious to get their summer wheat ground and bagged, and when the weather was often cloudless and still, was one of the worst. It was on such late, hot, airless days, with the land spread trembling and brown to every cloudless horizon, and the mill whispering and creaking in dry gasps, that the wind-seller sometimes came to Burlish Hill.

Nathan's father would already be standing and waiting, his arms folded and his fists bunched as he watched a solitary figure emerge from the faded shimmer of the valley. The wind-seller was small and dark, and gauntly pale. He wore creaking boots, and was wrapped in a cloak of a shade of gray almost as thunderous as that of the sack he carried over his thin shoulders, within which he bore his collection of winds.

“So this'll be the next one, eh?” He peered forward to study Nathan with eyes that didn't seem to blink, and Nathan found himself frozen and speechless until his father's hand drew him away.

“Just stick to business, wind-seller, shall we?”

It was plain that his father didn't particularly like this man. After all, every miller worth his salt prided himself on making the best of every kind of weather, come storm or calm, glut or shortage. Still, as the wind-seller unshouldered his sack and tipped out a spill of frayed knots, and especially on such a hot and hopeless day as this, it was impossible not to want to lean forward, not to want to breathe and feel and touch.

“Here, try this one....” Spidery fingers rummaged with a hissing, whispering pile to extract the gray strands of what looked, Nathan thought, exactly like the kind of dirty sheep's wool you saw snagged and fluttering on a bare hedge on the darkest of winter days. “...That's a new, fresh wind from the east. Cut through this summer

fug clean as a whistle. Sharp as a lemon, and twice as sweet. Delicate, yes, but good and strong as well. Turn these sails easy as ninepence.”

Already, Nathan could taste the wind, feel it writhing and alive. Slowly, reluctantly, his father took the strand in his own hands, and the wind-seller’s mouth twitched into something that was neither a smile nor a grin. “And this one.... Now *this* will really get things going. Tail end of a storm, tail end of night, tail end of winter. Can really feel a bite of frost in there, can’t you? ‘Course, she’s a bit capricious, but she’s strong as well, and cool and fresh....”

It was nothing but some bits of old willow bark, torn loose in a storm and dampened by trembling puddles, but already the windmill’s sails gave a yearning creak. Nathan’s father might grumble and shake his head, but the haggling that followed all of this conspicuous advertisement was always disappointingly brief. They all knew, had known since before the wind-seller’s shape had first untwisted itself from the haze of the valley, that—strange things though they were, the knotted breath of forgotten days—he would have to buy his share of these winds.

* * * *

Although no one else believed them, master millers swore they could taste the flavor of the particular wind from which any batch of flour had been turned. The weather prevails from the east on Burlish Hill, unrolling with a tang of salt and sea-brightness from the blustery North Sea, but no wind is ever the same, and every moment of every day in which it blows is different, and setting the mill to just the right angle to take it was, to Nathan’s mind, the greatest skill a master miller possessed. Even as you sang to your mill and anchored it down, it responded and took up the ever-changing moods of the wind in her sails. But the feelings and flavors that came from the wind-seller’s winds were different again. On dead, dry afternoons when the sky was hard as beaten pewter, Nathan’s father would finally give up whatever makeweight task he was performing and grumblingly go to unlock the lean-to at the mill’s back where he kept the wind-seller’s winds.

The things looked as ragged now as they had when they fell from the wind-seller’s sack—nothing more than dangling bits of old sea-rope, the tangled vines of some dried-up autumn, the tattered remains of long-forgotten washing—but each was knotted using complex magics, and what else were they to do, on such a day as this? Already writhing and snapping around them—a gray presence, half felt, half seen, and straining to be released—was the longed-for presence of some kind of wind. Up in the creaking stillness of the main millstone floor, and with a shine in his eyes that spoke somehow both of expectation and defeat, his father would break apart the knot with his big miller’s hands, and, in a shouting rush, the wind that it contained would be released. Instantly, like the opening of an invisible door, the atmosphere within the mill was transformed. Beams creaked in the changed air and the sails swayed, inching at first as the main axle bit the breakwheel and the breakwheel bore down against the wallower that transported the wind’s gathering breath down through all the levels of the mill. The farther sky, the whole spreading

world, might remain trapped in the same airless day. But the dry grass on Burlish Hill shifted and silvered, and the mill signaled to every other hilltop that at least here, here on this of all days, there was enough wind to turn its sails.

The winds themselves were often awkward and capricious things; unseasonably hot and dry, awkwardly damp and gray. They seemed to come, in that they came from anywhere at all, from points of the compass that lay beyond north and south, east or west. Even as Nathan and his father began gladly heaving the contents of all the waiting sacks into the chutes, the atmosphere within the mill on those days remained strange. Looking out though the turning sails, Nathan half expected to see changed horizons; to find the world retilted in some odd and awkward way. Lying in his bunk in the still nights afterward when the winds had blown themselves out, he pictured the wind-seller wandering the gray countrysides of some land of perpetual autumn, furtively gathering and knotting the lost pickings of a storm with those strange agile fingers, muttering as he did so his spells over rags and twigs.

* * * *

The other children at the school down in the village—the sons and daughters of farmers, carpenters, laborers, shopkeepers, who would soon take up or marry into the same trade—had always been an ordinary lot. Perhaps Fiona Smith should have stood out more, as Nathan often reflected afterward, but she was mostly just one of the girls who happened to sit near the back of class, and seemed, in her languorous demeanor, to be on the verge of some unspecified act of bad behavior that she could never quite summon the energy to perform. Nevertheless, she could hold her own in a fight and throw an accurate enough stone, at least for a girl. If he'd bothered to think about it, Nathan would have also known that Fiona Smith lived at Stagsby Hall, a structure far bigger and more set-apart than any other in the village, which had a lake beside it that flashed with the changing sky when you looked down at it from Burlish Hill, but he envied no one the size of their homes; not when he had all of Lincolnshire spread beneath him, and lived in a creaking, turning, breathing mill.

He was surprised at the fuss his parents made when an invitation came for the Westovers and seemingly every other person in Stagsby to attend a party to celebrate Fiona Smith's fourteenth birthday, and at the fussy clothes they found to wear. As they walked on the appointed afternoon toward the open gates of Stagsby Hall, he resented the chafe of his own new collar, the pinch of the boots, and the waste of a decent southerly wind.

It was somewhat interesting, Nathan might have grudgingly admitted, to see such an impressive residence at close hand instead of looking at it from above. Lawns spread green and huge from its many golden windows toward a dark spread of woods, and that lake, which, even down here, reflected the near-cloudless sky in its blue gaze. There were indecently underdressed statues, and there were pathways that meandered amongst them with a will of their own. Of greater importance,

though, to Nathan and most of the other villagers, was the food. There was so much of it! There were jellies and sausages. Cheeses and trifles. Cakes and roast meats. There were lurid cordials, sweet wines and varieties of ale. Sticky fingered, crusty faced, the younger children took quarreling turns to pin the tail on a blackboard donkey, and those of Nathan's age soon lost their superiority and joined in, whilst the adults clustered in equal excitement around the beer tent. There was also a real donkey, saddled and be-ribboned and ready to be ridden. But the donkey whinnied and galloped as people attempted to catch it, kicking over a food-laden table and sending a mass of trifles, jellies, and cakes sliding to the grass in a glistening heap. The adults laughed and the children whooped as the donkey careered off toward the trees, watched by the stiff-faced men and women in tight black suits, whom, Nathan had divined by now, were the servants of Stagsby Hall.

The afternoon—for the villagers, at least—passed in a timeless, happy whirl. Much beer and wine was drunk, and the children's livid cordials seemed equally intoxicating. Trees were climbed; many by those old enough to know better. Stones, and a few of the silver trays, were skimmed across the lake. Then, yet more food was borne out from the house in the shape of an almost impossibly large and many-tiered cake. The huge creation was set down in the shade of one of the largest of the oaks that circled the lawns. Nodding, nudging, murmuring, the villagers clustered around it. The thing was ornamented with scrolls and flowers, pillared like a cathedral, then spired with fourteen candles, each of which the servants now solemnly lit.

An even deeper sigh than that which had signaled the lighting of the cake passed through the crowd as Fiona Smith emerged into the space that had formed around it. Nathan hadn't consciously noticed her presence before that moment. Now that he had, though, he was immensely struck by it. He and many of his classmates were already taller and stronger than the parents whose guilds they would soon be joining. Some were already pairing off and *walking the lane together*, as the local phrase went, and even Nathan had noticed that some of the girls were no longer merely girls. But none of them had ever looked anything remotely like Fiona Smith did today.

Although the dress she wore was similar in style to those many of the other women were wearing, it was cut from a substance that made it hard to divine its exact color, such was its shimmer and blaze. Her thick red hair, which Nathan previously dimly remembered as tied back in a ponytail, fell loose around her shoulders, and also possessed a fiery glow. It was as if an entirely different Fiona Smith had suddenly emerged before this cake, and the candle flames seemed to flare as though drawn by an invisible wind even before she had puffed out her cheeks. Then she blew, and all but one of them flattened and died, and their embers sent up thirteen trails of smoke. Smiling, she reached forward as if to pinch out the last remaining flame. But as she raised her hand from it, the flame still flickered there, held like a blazing needle between her finger and thumb. Then, with a click of her fingers, it was gone. The entire oak tree gave a shudder in the spell's aftermath and a

few dry leaves and flakes of bark drifted down, some settling on the cake. The villagers were already wandering back across the lawn, muttering and shaking their heads, as the servants began to slice the object up into spongy yellow slices. They were unimpressed by such unwanted displays of guild magic, and by then, no one was feeling particularly hungry.

Without understanding quite how it had happened, Nathan found that he and Fiona Smith were standing alone beside the remains of the cake.

“You’re from up there, aren’t you?” She nodded through the boughs toward the mill. “Bet you’d rather be there now, eh, with the sails turning? Instead of down here watching a good day go to waste.”

Although it was something he wouldn’t have readily admitted, Nathan found himself nodding. “It was clever,” he said, “what you did with that cake.”

She laughed. “All those faces, the way they were staring! I felt I had to do something or I’d explode. Tell you what, why don’t we go and have a look at your mill?”

Nathan shifted his feet. “I’m not sure. My father doesn’t like strangers hanging around working machinery and it’s your birthday party and—”

“I suppose you’re right. Tell you what, there’s some of my stuff I can show you instead.”

Dumbly, Nathan followed Fiona Smith up toward the many-windowed house, and then through a studded door. The air inside was close and warm, and there were more rooms than he could count, or anyone could possibly want to live in, although most of the furniture was covered in sheets. It was as if the whole place had been trapped in some hot and dusty snowfall.

“Here.” Fiona creaked open a set of double doors. The room beyond had a high blue ceiling, decorated with cherubs and many-pointed stars. “This....” She shook out a huge, crackling coffin of packaging that lay scattered amid many other things on the floor. “*This* is from Father. Ridiculous, isn’t it?” A sprawled china corpse stared up at them with dead glass eyes. Nathan had always thought dolls ridiculous, although this one was big and impressive. “At least, I think it’s from him. His handwriting’s terrible and I can’t read the note.”

“Your father’s not here?”

“Not a chance. He’ll be in London at one of his clubs.”

“London?”

“It’s just another place, you know.” Shrugging, Fiona aimed a kick at the doll. “And he’s decided I can’t stay here at school, either, or even in Stagsby. In fact, I’m sure he’d have decided that long ago if he’d remembered. That’s why

everyone's here today—and why I'm wearing this stupid dress. It's to remind you of who I'm supposed to be before I get dragged to some ridiculous academy for so-called young ladies.”

Fiona crossed the room's considerable space toward the largest of all the sheeted objects which, as she tugged at its dusty coverings, revealed itself to be an enormous bed. Enamelled birds fluttered up from its silken turrets as if struggling to join the room's starry sky. Nathan had seen smaller houses.

“This used to be Mother's bedroom. I'd come and just talk to her in here when she was ill from trying to have a son. Of course, it didn't work, so now my father's stuck with a girl for an heir unless he goes and gets married again, which he says will be when Hell freezes.”

“All of this will end up as yours?”

Fiona gazed around, hands on hips. “I know what you're thinking, but my father says we're in debt up to our eyeballs. I'm sure that you Westovers have far more money than we Smiths, with that mill of yours. My grandfather, now, *he* was the clever one. Had a real business mind. He was a proper master smithy. He was high up in the guild, but he still knew how to work a forge. He used to show me things. How to stoke a furnace, the best spells for the strongest iron....”

“And that trick with the flame?”

Fiona looked at Nathan and smiled. Her eyes were a cool blue-green. He'd never felt such a giddy sense of sharing, not even when he was working hard at the mill. “I'll show you his old room,” she murmured.

Up wide, white marble stairways, past more sheeted furniture and shuttered windows, the spaces narrowed. Nathan caught glimpses through windows of the lake, the lawns, Burlish Hill, and then the lake again as they climbed a corkscrew of stairs. Cramped and stuffed with books, papers, cabinets, the attic they finally reached was quite unlike the great rooms below. Fiona struggled with a shutter, flinging sunlight in a narrow blaze. Nathan squinted, blinked, and gave a volcanic sneeze.

She laughed. “You're even dustier than this room!”

Standing in this pillar of light, Nathan saw that he was, indeed, surrounded by a nebulous, floating haze. “It's not dust,” he muttered. It was a sore point; the children at school often joked about his powdery aura. “It's flour.”

“I know.” Something fluttered inside his chest as she reached forward to ruffle his hair, and more of the haze blurred around him. “But you're a master miller—or you will be. It's part of what you are. Now look.”

After swiping a space clear on a sunlit table, Fiona creaked open the spines of books that were far bigger and stranger in their language than the mill's Thesaurus of

spells. The same warm fingers that he could still feel tingling across his scalp now traveled amid the symbols and diagrams. Guilds kept their secrets, and he knew she shouldn't be showing him these things, but nevertheless he was drawn.

“This is how you temper iron.... This is an annealing spell, of which there are many....” A whisper of pages. “And here, these are the names for fire and flames. Some of them, anyway. For there's always something different every time you charge a furnace, put a spark to a fire, light a candle, even.”

Nathan nodded. All of this was strange to him, but he understood enough to realize that flames were like the wind to Fiona Smith, and never stayed the same.

“Not that my father's interested. He likes to joke about how he got through his grandmaster exams just because of the family name. And I'm a woman, so there's no way I can become a smithy....” She grew quiet for a moment, the sunlight steaming in copper glints across her hair as she gazed down at the vortex of flame that filled the page.

“What'll you do instead?”

“I don't know.” She looked up at him, fists balled on the table, her face ablaze. “That's the frustrating thing, Nathan. *These* of all times. All the old spells, you know, the stupid traditions, the mumbling and the superstitions and the charms and the antique ways of working, all of that's on the way out. Modern spells aren't about traditional craftsmen—not when you can mine the magic right out of the ground. That's what they're doing now, in places up north like Redhouse and Bracebridge, they're drawing it out of the solid earth almost like they extract coal or salt or tar or saltpeter.”

Nathan nodded. He knew such things as mere facts, but he'd never heard anyone speak about them—or, indeed many other things—with such passion.

“I'm lucky. That's what my grandfather used to say. I'm lucky, to be living in this time.” She shook her head and chuckled. “The future's all around us, just like the world you must be able to see from up on your hill. And this, now *this*....” She pushed aside the book, and took down a large and complex-looking mechanism from a shelf. “He made this himself as his apprentice piece.”

It took up most of the table, and consisted of a variety of ceramic marbles set upon a complex-looking arrangement of arms and gears, all widely spaced around a larger and even brighter central orb that might have been made of silver, gold, or some yet more dazzling metal.

“It's an orerry—a model of the universe itself. These are the planets, this is the sun. These tiny beads are the major stars. See...” As she leaned forward, their blaze was reddened and brightened by the fall of her hair. “This is where we are, Nathan. You and I and everyone else, even the Hottentot heathens. This is our planet and it's called Earth....”

Nathan watched as her hands, her hair, fluttered from light to dark amid all this frail and beautiful machinery, and his thoughts, and his lungs and his heart and his stomach, fluttered with them. Although he had no great care for matters of philosophy, he couldn't help feeling that he was witnessing something exotic and forbidden in this strangely Godlike view of the universe that Fiona Smith was describing. But it was thrilling as well.

“Now watch.”

Leaning down close to the table, afloat in sunlight, she puffed her cheeks and blew just as she had blown at her birthday cake. But now, smoothly, silently, the planets began to turn.

“You try.”

She made a space and Nathan shuffled close. Then, as conscious of the warmth of Fiona's presence beside him as he was of the blaze of the sun, he bent down and he blew.

“Is that how it really works?”

She laughed. “You of all people, Nathan, up on that hill, should understand.”

Silently, seemingly with a will of its own, in gleam and flash of planets and their wide-flung shadows, the orerry continued to spin. Nathan watched, willing the moment to continue, willing it never to stop. But, slowly, finally, it did. It felt as if some part of his head was still spinning as, dazed, he helped Fiona close the shutter and followed her back down the stairways and along the corridors of her huge house. Everything, the sheeted furniture, the hot air, seemed changed. Outside, even the sun was lower, and redder, and it threw strange, long shadows as it blazed across the lawn. The world, Nathan thought for one giddy moment, really has turned.

* * * *

A space of desk near the back of the class at the village school lay empty when Nathan and his classmates returned to school, although there was nothing particularly remarkable in that. Soon, they all were leaving, drawn into the lives, trades, and responsibilities for which they had always been destined, and Fiona Smith's birthday party, if it was remembered at all, was remembered mostly for the drink and the food.

The windmill up on Burlish Hill turned, and the seasons turned with it. More and more, Nathan was in charge, and he sang to the mill the complex spells that his father's voice could no longer carry. The only recreation he consciously took was in the choir at church. Opening his lungs to release the sweet, husky tenor that had developed with the stubble on his cheeks, looking up at the peeling saints and stars, it seemed to him that singing to God the Elder and singing to the mill were much the same thing. Instead of calling in at the pub afterward, or lingering on the green to

play football, he hurried straight back up Burlish Hill, scanning the horizon as he did so.

He could always tell exactly how well the mill was grinding, and the type of grain that was being worked, merely from the turn of its sails, but there was a day as he climbed up the hill when something seemed inexplicably wrong. Certainly nothing as serious as a major gear slipping, but the sweep of the sails didn't quite match the sweet feel of the air. He broke into a run, calling to his mother as he climbed up through the stairs and ladders inside the mill. The main sacking floor was engulfed in a gray storm, with flour everywhere, and more and more of it sifting down the chutes. Hunched within these clouds, gasping in wracking breaths, Nathan's father was a weary ghost.

Feeble though he was, the miller resisted Nathan's and his mother's attempts to bear him out into the clear air. He kept muttering that *a miller never leaves his mill*, and struggled to see to the rest of the sacks before the wind gave, even though the batch was already ruined. Finally, though, they persuaded him to take to his bed, which lay on a higher floor of the mill, and he lay there for several days, half-conscious and half-delirious, calling out spells to his machine, which still creaked and turned between periodic, agonizing bouts of coughing.

As poor luck would have it, the winds then fell away. It grew hot as well. The skies seemed to slam themselves shut. Much more now for the sake of his father than for the mill itself, Nathan longed for a breeze. He searched for the hidden key to the lean-to, and he found it easily in a tin of nails; just the sort of place he'd never before have thought to look. The few knots left inside the small, close space hung like dried-up bats on their iron hooks, and part of Nathan felt that he had never seen anything so weathered and useless, and part of him already felt the strange, joyous surge of the winds that each clever knot contained. There were no spells in the miller's Thesaurus to tell him how to unbind a trapped wind, nor the sounds that he should make as he did it, but doing so came to him easily as laughing and crying as he stood on the millstone floor. The air changed in a clamor of groans. The mill's sails creaked and bit and turned. At last, there was work to be done, and Nathan got on with doing it with a happier heart. He knew without climbing the ladders that his father's breathing would be easier, now that the mill was working properly all around him once again.

Although he was too exhausted to make use of it, Nathan released another wind at twilight purely for the glory of feeling the pull and draft of it through all the mill's leaky slats and floors. More than usually, this one lived up to the wind-seller's tales of bright spring mornings and the shift of grass over cloud-chased hills. When Nathan finally climbed the ladders to see his father, his mother—who had sat all day beside him—was smiling through her tears. He took the old man's hand and felt its hot lightness, and the calluses that years of handling sacks and winches had formed, and the smooth soft gritting of flour that coated every miller's flesh, and he smiled and he cried as well. They sat through the old man's last night together, breathing the

moods of the mill, watching the turn of the stars through the hissing swoop of its sails.

* * * *

Nathan's mother went to live in an old warehouse beside the dunes at Donna Nook, which had once stored southern hops before the channels had silted up. He visited her there on saints' days, taking the early milk wagon and walking the last miles across the salt flats. Although she was wheezy herself now, and easily grew tired, she seemed happy enough there spending her days talking of brighter, breezier hours, and better harvests, to the widows of other millers. In those days, the Guild of Millers still took care of its own, but of course there were no master millers there. Nathan knew, had long known, that a miller never left his mill.

But he was a master miller now—even if the ceremony of his induction that he'd envisaged taking place beneath the golden roof of some great guild chapel had dwindled to a form signed in triplicate—and he gloried in that fact. Heading back from Donna Nook toward Burlish Hill in darkness, he would find his mill waiting for him, ticking, creaking, sighing in its impatience to take hold of the breeze. Often, he sang to it out loud even when no spells were needed. It was only when he was with other people, he sometimes reflected, that he ever felt alone.

The mill was Nathan's now, and that made up for most things, even though there was less and less time for the choir. The spells in those whispering books, and every creak and mood and scent and flavor, every seed of corn and every grain of flour it produced, shaped his life. When he rested at all, it was merely to taste the breeze as he stood on top of Burlish Hill. From there, on the clearest of days, you really could see all of Lincolnshire, and gaze down at the huddled roofs of Stagsby, and the rippling windflash of the lake that lay beside the closed and shuttered windows of Stagsby Hall.

Everyone remarked on Nathan Westover's energy in the seasons that followed. Millers were never known to take an easy bargain, but few drove them as hard as he did. Farmers and grain dealers might have gone elsewhere, but here was a miller who worked to whatever deadline you set him, and never let any of the sacks spoil. On nights of full moon, you could look up and see the sails still turning. It seemed as if he never slept, and then he was to be seen early next morning at the grain markets at Alford and Louth, making deals to buy and sell flour on his own account, driving more and more those notoriously hard bargains, clapping backs and shaking hands in ways that earned money, but also respect.

These were good times across the rich farmlands of Lincolnshire. The big cities of the Midlands were spreading, sucking in labor under their blanket of smoke, and that labor—along with the growing middle classes who drew their profit from it, and the higher guildsmen who speculated in shares, bonds and leases—needed to be fed. Borne in on endless carts, and then increasingly drawn along rails by machines powered by that same heat and steam that drove those burgeoning industries, came supplies of every kind, not least of which was flour for cakes, biscuits, and bread.

Sometimes, although it seemed less often than in the times of Nathan's childhood, the wind-seller still came to Burlish Hill. In rare hot, windless times, the shimmer of something—at first it could have been nothing more than a mirage swirl of dust—would emerge from the valley, and Nathan wondered as he watched where else this man traveled, and what he did on other, less closed-in days. He always bought a few examples of the wind-seller's produce, although in truth he barely needed them, for he made sure that he made efficient use of all the winds that the sky carried to him, and had little need for such old-fashioned methods of enchantment. The world was changing, just as Fiona Smith had once said it would. Magic was being pumped out from the ground beneath northern cities. You could buy oils and new bearings that were infused with it, which was commonly called aether, and which spilled dark hues in daylight, and shone spectrally in the dark. Nathan was happy enough to use the stuff—at least, if it was for the good of his trade. He knew, or surmised, that the hill itself had once been the source of the power that drove the mill's spells, but perhaps that had been wearing thin, and what else could you do but breathe and work through the seasons that time brought to you, and sing, and wait, and smile, and hope for the best?

Few people ever command anything in this world in the way that Nathan Westover then commanded his mill. He even enjoyed the tasks that most millers hated, and loved filling in the reds and greens of profit and loss on the coldest of nights when the sails hung heavy with ice. Numbers had their own climates, their own magics. Even as the inks froze and his fingers burned with the cold, they whispered to him of how far he had come. He was building up savings in a bank account in Louth—which he was then reusing, reinvesting, but still always accumulating, and it sometimes seemed as he stood outside in the bitter air and the night sparkled with motes of frost that the dark shape of the big house twinkled once more with lights.

I'm sure you Westovers have far more money than we Smiths, with that mill of yours.... Even if it hadn't been true then, it was almost certainly true now, and the rumor was that Grandmistress Fiona Smith would soon be back at her home in Stagsby Hall. Nathan waited. After all, London and all those other faraway cities were merely places, just like Stagsby, and he was too accustomed to the capriciousness of the Lincolnshire weather to be anything other than patient. He even bought himself a suit, which he never wore after the tailor's fitting, although he often took it out to admire its cut and shake off its gray coating of dust.

There was an even harder edge to the bargains Nathan drove for the following spring's rye and wheat, an even brisker turn to his mill's sails. Then came another summer, and the larks twirled and sang over the ripening corn, and the skies cleared to a blue so deep and changeless that it scarcely seemed blue at all. Then the weather flattened, and there was no rain, and the heat shrank the lake beside Stagsby Hall, and the corn dried and the dogs panted and even the turning of the mill on Burlish Hill finally slowed until there came an afternoon when everything in the world seemed to have stopped—including Burlish Mill.

Nathan was looking out from the mill's top level when he saw a dark shape emerging from the heat-trembling stillness of the valley below. Certainly not a farmer, for the corn was dying and none of them had anything to bring. Skidding down ropes and ladders, he stood squinting and rubbing the sweat from his eyes as he willed the shape to resolve into a dusty silhouette.

The heat was playing tricks. The body wouldn't stay still, and the movement was too swift. Through the thick, flat air, Nathan caught the brisk rattle of hooves. He waited. A rider on a gleaming, sweating, chestnut horse came up, dismounted, and walked quickly over to him. Female, tall and well-dressed, she took off her riding hat and shook out her red hair.

Smiling at his surprise, Grandmistress Fiona Smith took a step closer, and Nathan saw that, whatever else was different about her, the fiery blue-green gleam in her eyes was unchanged. Then her gaze moved up to the sails above him and her smile widened into a wonder that Nathan had only ever seen on the faces of fellow millers. Still smiling, still looking up, she began to walk around the brown summit of Burlish Hill.

Nathan followed. Fiona Smith was wearing dark riding clothes—boots, a jacket, a long skirt—but they were new and sharply cut and trimmed with shining edges of silk. This was nothing like the same girl who'd once stood before the candles of that many-tiered cake. Not that he hadn't dreamed, not that he hadn't dared to wonder—but looking at this woman, watching the way she moved, he marveled at how she'd changed and grown to become something quite unlike the person he'd imagined, yet was still recognizably Fiona Smith.... All those ridiculous thoughts, all those years, and yet here, real beyond any sense of reality, she was.

"This is where you keep the winds?" Despite the heat of the day, the air around the stone lean-to had a different edge.

"You know about the wind-seller?"

"I've made a small study of your trade." Fiona shivered. Her eyes flashed. "Why don't you use one now?" Her gaze changed shade as she looked at him. "But that's the old way, isn't it?—and no self-respecting miller likes to admit that they can't manage on nature's winds alone. And such winds cost money. That's what I admire about you, Nathan Westover. You're passionate, but you're practical as well. You should hear people talk. Everyone...." She turned beneath the still sails, spreading her arms, encompassing every horizon. "From here to here. They all know exactly who you are."

"But probably not by name."

"The miller of Burlish Hill!" She laughed. "But that's what you are, isn't it? Strange, for a man of such substance to have his life founded on a mere breath of air."

Nathan laughed as well, and felt something loosening like a freed cog inside him. He'd never thought of it like that before, but she was right. "I'd always hoped," he said, "that you'd come here."

"And here I am." She gave what he took to be a curtsey. "And I have a proposal to put to you, Nathan. So why don't you show me inside your mill?"

Nathan would have been speechless, but the mill was the one topic about which he was always capable of talking, and pride soon took over from his shock at Fiona's presence. He could even push aside the thought of how he must appear, with his arms bare and his dungarees still gritty from the dust of a long morning's cleaning, and probably reeking of sweat and linseed oil as well. At least all his hard work meant that his mill was in near-perfect condition. Even if Fiona Smith had been one of the guild inspectors who'd used to come in his father's time, he doubted if she'd have been able to find a single fault. Pristine, perched, as ever, on the edge of turning movement, the mill welcomed them through streams of sunlight into its hot, fragrant floors.

"You and I," she murmured as she climbed the last ladder and took his arm to help herself over the lip, "I always used to look up at this mill and wonder if I couldn't become a part of what it does." She was so close to him now that he could feel the quickness of her breath, see how the changed brownness of her skin consisted of the merging of constellations of freckles.

Then they both hunched deliciously close together beside the topmost window, looking down and out at all the world as it was revealed from the combined height of Burlish Hill and Mill. Nathan could feel the warm tickle of Fiona's hair. The world was hazed today, but everything was clear in his head as on the sharpest day as he pointed out the directions of the winds. All Lincolnshire lay before them, and he could feel the soft pressures of her body as she leaned closer. Despite these distractions, he found that talking to her was easy as chanting the simplest spell. When most people looked out from Burlish Hill, they strained for the name of this or that town, a glimpse of the sea, or the tower of Lincoln Cathedral. They saw buildings, places, lives, distances to be traveled, but what Nathan saw and felt was the pull of the sky, the ever-changing moods of the air. And Fiona Smith understood. And she even understood—in fact, already knew—about the demands that different types of grain placed upon a mill. How the millstone had to be geared and leveled differently according to the grist and the weather, and all the complex processes of sifting and sieving, and then of proving and damping, about which even the farmers who produced the stuff, and the bakers who baked it, barely cared. She could have been born to be the wife of a master miller.

Then, as they leaned close, she talked to him of her years away from Stagsby. The school she'd been sent to by her father had been just as dreary as she'd feared, but she'd traveled afterward, fleeing England and heading south and south, toward warm and dusty lands. Looking out, Nathan could smell the air, feel the spice heat of the lives of those darker-skinned people who, as she put it, slept when they felt like

sleeping, and danced when they wanted to dance. He'd never cared much for the idea of travel, for the winds of the world always came to him, but now he understood. The mill was turned fully south, facing across the brown weave of England toward other, more distant, shores. Then, although he hadn't spoken a single word of a spell, the whole great machine shook, and its gears moved, and the sails swooped in a single, vast turn. It was a sign.

Helping Fiona back down the levels, lifting her fully in his arms, he felt her amazing warmth and lightness. She laughed and her breathing quickened and she pressed herself closer still. Leaning the whole soft pressure of her body against him as they swayed together on the main millstone floor, she planted a long, hot kiss on his lips.

The mill was entirely at rest again when they stumbled outside, but Nathan's head was spinning.

"It's almost a shame to be back here in England." Fiona sighed, fanning her neck as she pushed back her hair. "I hate London, with its traffic and fog and smell. But here, here—being *here*. You know, I'd almost forgotten. But I feel so at home here in Lincolnshire. And you and I, Nathan, we really could be partners, equals. Let me show you...."

Reaching into the pocket of her skirt, she took out something small and round. A coin, a bead, or perhaps merely a pebble. But it had a black aether-glow. Crouching down, she tossed it like a dice onto the brittle brown grass, and the blackness spread. Nathan was reminded of the tumble of the wind-seller's sack of storms, but this was different again, and far more powerful. Grids of fire leapt across the blackness. Dimming even the blaze of the sun, they threw sparks in Fiona's hair. When she looked up at him, that same fire was in her eyes.

"This," she said, "is a map, a plan. It goes far farther than you can see from even this hill. Here are the great cities, the ports and towns and industries, of all of England. See, Nathan, see how they blaze! Even you, up here, must use fire. But think what fire really means. Fire means power. The same power you feel when your body grows hot as you move those arms to work all those clever winches, but magnified, multiplied, almost beyond measure. Then imagine all that power, that heat, controlled." The brightness amid the dark mirror that lay spread before them increased. It spilled and moved and pulsed along quivering veins. Nathan felt like God himself looking down on this different world, for he saw every movement and detail as close and intricate as the fine auburn down on Fiona's bared neck as she leaned beside him. There were shimmers of steam, furnace mouths, endless sliding arms of metal. He tasted coal and smoke.

"The world is changing, Nathan, and you and I—*we*—must change with it. Forget about the old ways, the old songs, the old spells. Already, see here, the arm of the railway is reaching as far as Spalding. Soon it will be here, and here, and here, as well." Fire dripped from her fingers, spilling and spreading between the embers of

the towns. “The engines, the rails, will draw everything closer together. People—their trades, their lives.”

Nathan blinked. He saw the tiny machines made larger, and enormously powerful, through clever intricacies of iron. But why was she telling him this? He strained to understand.

“I’ve already had the land down there around Stagsby Hall surveyed. The road itself can easily be widened, and the lake will provide all the water we could ever need—at least, it will when there’s a decent drop of rain. And did you know Nottinghamshire’s made of nothing but coal? Transportation shouldn’t be an obstacle even before we can get a railhead at Stagsby. Right now, the engineers are drawing up the plans for the enginehouse. But they’re just *experts*, Nathan, people who work at desks with pens. I need someone who really understands the local markets, and probably knows more than anyone else in this whole county about the grinding of grain. I need someone who has the whole business in his blood.”

“You’re saying—”

“I’m saying we could work together, down there. We’re living at the start of a new age. Forget about the guilds and all the old restrictions, we can make ourselves its kings and queens. As soon as the money is released, straight after the marriage—before, if I get my way—I’ll give the order to start digging the steam mill’s foundations.”

For all that Nathan Westover was a man of business, the conversation was taking a surprising turn. “But what about here, what about this mill?”

“I know, I know, it’s a wonderful creation. Of course, it will be months before we can get the steam mill fully commissioned. Even after that, I’m not suggesting that we shut this windmill down immediately. Far from it—I’m sure we’ll need it for years to take up the slack and deal with the seasonal rush. But this isn’t some dream, Nathan. This isn’t about sentiment or imagination. My fiancé’s a senior master of the Savants’ Guild. He has shares in almost all the major rail companies, and they’re developing the latest most powerful magics of steam and iron. Of course, he’s old, but he still—”

“What do you mean? You’re saying you’re *engaged*?”

“Where else do you think I’m getting the money to finance this project?”

Nathan stood up. For all the sun’s blaze, the darkness of the map seemed to have spread. Then he started to laugh, taking in great, wracking gulps of air. “And you thought—you thought that I would give this up? My whole life? Come to work down there....” He raised a trembling hand.

“But what *did* you think, Nathan?” She was standing beside him again now, and far too close. He had to turn away.

“All these years. All these *bloody* years. I’ve hoped....”

“Hoped what, Nathan?” There was a pause. The light gathered. He sensed a change in her breath. “I wish, I *do* wish, that life could be different. But that isn’t how it works, Nathan, and even if it did.... Even if it did, can you imagine how much money the sort of project I’m talking about needs? It’s more than you could ever dream of, wealthy though I’m sure you think you are. My husband will get my name and what little of my companionship he still needs when I’m in the city, and I’ll get his money and the freedom to live here. It’s a fair enough exchange. But as for the rest. As for the rest. It doesn’t mean.... I *like* you, Nathan, I truly do, and I felt what we both felt inside the mill. And if we *were* together, if we were business partners, and you were the manager of my mill, who knows....” Her hand was upon his shoulder, kneading the flesh, moving toward his neck, “Who knows—?”

He spun around in a blurring rage. “And you imagined that you could have me as your *employee*—working on some infernal machine! You might as well expect me to go to Hell.”

“Hell, is it?” Stumbling back, she stooped to snatch up the stone. Its spell swirled around her in a dark vortex of flame in the moment before the map faded. “You think *that* would be Hell?” She grabbed her mare’s reins, mounted, and drew the creature about in a wild and angry lunge. It reared, baring its teeth around the bridle. “There’s only one infernal machine, Nathan Westover,” she shouted, “and we’re both on it, and so’s everyone else in this world!”

With a dig of her heels, Grandmistress Fiona Smith galloped off down Burlish Hill.

* * * *

The heat finally relented in peals of thunder. Huge skies hurried over Lincolnshire, and what grain there was that year, poor stuff, flattened and wettened, was finally borne up Burlish Hill’s puddled track for grinding. If the miller up there seemed even brisker and grumpier in his dealings than he had before, it got little mention, for all the talk was of what was happening down at the big hall. When storms finally blew themselves out, there came a last day of surprising warmth; the last echo of summer cast across the stark horizons of autumn. Sheer luck, although the villagers agreed that the wedding breakfast to which they’d all been invited could scarcely have been bettered. From the few glimpses they’d had of the bride with her flaming hair and pearl-beaded dress, everyone agreed that she made the finest imaginable sight as well. Pity the same couldn’t be said of the groom, who looked dried up and old enough to make you shudder at the very thought of him and her.... Not that much of that was likely, it was agreed, as the wine and the beer flowed, still less a child. Lights were lit as dusk unfurled. A great machine with a greedy furnace and tooting pipes was set chuffing in the middle of the lawns. It gave out steam and smoke and music, and soon everyone began to dance. Amid all these distractions, few would have bothered to look toward Burlish Hill. Still fewer would have noticed that the sails of the mill still turned.

That winter was a hard one. The land whitened and froze, then rang with the iron wheels of the many carts that headed through the gates of Stagsby Hall to scrawl their marks across the ruined lawns. With the thaw came much work as villagers bent their backs to the digging of what seemed like an endlessly complex trench. Sconces and braziers burned as the work continued long into the nights, and the grandmistress herself was often present, offering the sort of smiles and encouragements for which the men were greedy, although few yet comprehended exactly what the work was for. Still, they agreed as they sat afterward in the snug and drank their way through the extra money, it might help put Stagsby on the map. It would never have occurred to them that Stagsby had proclaimed itself across all Lincolnshire for centuries by windmill-topped Burlish Hill.

The huge new contrivance itself, part machine and part factory, looked wholly alien as it squatted amid the spring mud at the brown edges of the filthy lake. The opening of it was cause for yet another party at the hall. People were getting blasé about these occasions by now. They commented on the varieties of cake and beer with the air of connoisseurs, and were cheerfully unsurprised when the first turning of the great camwheel failed to occur. Nevertheless, the grandmistress gave a speech up on a podium, and both she and it were more than pretty enough.

Looking down from Burlish Hill through that long winter and into the spring that followed, Nathan absorbed tales and rumors along with the scent of coalsmoke that now drifted on the air. Lights shone now often from the windows of Stagsby Hall, but they were nothing compared to the fume and blaze that glowed beside it. On still days, he heard shouts in odd accents, the toots of whistles, the grumpy huff and turn of a huge and awkward machine, the call of strange spells. The first summer of this new competition, though, went well. Nathan aimed to be as reliable and competitive as ever—in fact, more so. He cut into his savings, reduced his rates, and the crop that year was as good as the previous one had been bad. There was more than enough grist to keep him working night and day, and the winds mostly came when he needed them. Meanwhile, all the machine down in the valley seemed capable of delivering was broken deadlines. If the local farmers took a little of their trade to the new grandmistress, it was more out of curiosity to see the great steambeast at work, and because of her looks, rather than because of the quality of the service she offered. Knowing something of farmers and their nature, Nathan didn't doubt that the novelty would fade. And he was a miller, and there had always been a mill up on Burlish Hill. He was prepared to trust the winds, and the seasons, and be patient.

Nathan was also sanguine about the other changes he noticed in the world. He'd understood long before Grandmistress Smith had laid it out before him on that clever map that one of the main reasons for his success as a miller was the improvement in haulage and communication that the spread of the new steam railways had brought. When a line finally reached as far as the Lincolnshire coast, he was happy to use it to visit his mother at Donna Nook; it saved several hours, and meant he no longer sacrificed an entire day's work. On summer's mornings, the cramped, chattering carriages drawn by those odd new machines were filled with

families from the big cities heading for a day out at new resorts. He sometimes even stopped off himself for a stroll along the promenade, although to him the Lincolnshire coast remained essentially a wintry place. This, he thought on a freezing, blustery day when the gaudy new buildings were shuttered and sand gritted the streets, is real weather, brisk and cold and sharp.

The tracks now also ran to the town markets, where the steam and the screech of whistles added to the traditional stink and chaos of the cattle pens, the clamoring baskets of geese and chickens, the shouting and the pipesmoke. There were new animals now, as well. Horses that were too broad and strong and stupid to be called horses, and frighteningly fancy ducks and hens. In this new age of new magic, there were also strange new trades. Still, the tall rooms in which the auctions of grain took place remained places of golden, if bustling, calm. The mass of grain itself was stored in barns or warehouses. All that was here were wicker baskets containing samples, which you could thumbnail the husks off to taste the soft white meat inside. Nathan relished the whole day, and the entire process. He would, he sometimes reflected, have come to these auctions even if he didn't trade himself. He even enjoyed the conversations, which were invariably about the air, the earth, and the crops.

Market day that September in Louth was busy as ever, and the roar of voices and the jostle of shoulders was entirely familiar. Standing toward the back, Nathan was tall enough to see over the caps and heads of the factors and farmers, and still had a voice that the older millers who clustered at the front had lost. Then, as the bidding commenced, he noticed a shift in the usual ebb and flow. There was a surprising swirl of attention near to the auctioneer's desk, and it was centered around a solitary head of flaming red hair.

It was the same at the next auction, and the one after that. Against all tradition, Grandmistress Fiona Smith—a woman, and no member of any of the recognized agricultural guilds—was bidding on her own behalf. Not only that, but she was far better at getting the auctioneer's attention than anyone else in the room. Worst still, the masculine reserve of these country guildsmen meant that they withdrew from bidding against her at prices that were far too low. Essentially, she was getting her grain on the cheap because of how she looked.

Nathan was shocked to discover that seemingly sensible men could act like such fools. If a batch of corn or oats was selling at a price he knew to be ridiculous, he made sure he made a better bid. Sometimes, he pushed things too high, and the red head that absorbed so much of the hall's attention would give a negative shake. Still, grain was grain, and he had the stuff stored at his own expense until he found the time and the energy to have it delivered and ground. He'd always thought of himself as hardworking, but in that season and the ones that followed, he surprised even himself. The mill turned as it had never turned, and there was always something more that needed to be done, and even a decent wind wasn't always enough for him. On days when there was a moderate easterly, or a keen breeze from the north,

Nathan still found himself looking up in frustration at the slow turn of his mill's sails. Finding a wind hanging hooked in his lean-to that made a close enough match to the one that was already blowing was an entirely new skill, although it was one he did his best to learn. Sometimes, on the right days, the whole mill spun and thrummed with a speed and a vigor that he'd never witnessed. It was thrilling, and the needs of the many mechanisms dragged the songs from his throat until he was exhausted and hoarse. On other days, though, the winds fought angrily, and the mill's beams creaked and its bearings strained and its sails gave aching moans. Such strains inevitably increased the wear on the mill's components, and the costs and demands of its maintenance soared.

On cold winter nights, when there was now still grain in need of grinding, or flour that somehow had to be dried off before it could be sold, he dragged himself to the desk with its books of spells and accounts at which his father and many other generations of Westovers had sat. But the nib trembled, his lungs hurt, and the red and green figures could no longer be persuaded to add up. He'd once never have thought of leaving any job half-completed, but now he staggered off to snatch the few hours' sleep with the colored inks still warring. Then he dreamed of storms of figures, or that the mill was storm itself, and that the air would never stir again across all of Lincolnshire if he didn't work its sails.

* * * *

Nathan had got little enough in reply on the rare occasions when he'd mentioned the wind-seller to his fellow millers. Did the man come to them on those same still, hot days on which he always seemed to visit Nathan? That hardly seemed possible. Was there just one wind-seller, or were there several of their species or guild? And where exactly did he come from—and what essential substance was it, after all, from which his winds were made?

A flat, hot day. The mill groaning and creaking, and Nathan's bones filled with an ache for the time—it seemed only moments ago—when there was always too much grain, and never enough hours in the day to grind it. This summer, though, he'd had to rein in his bidding in order to keep up his repayments to the bank, whilst the carts had borne their grain less regularly, and in smaller amounts, up Burlish Hill. The farmers never looked Nathan directly in the eye or told him what they were doing, but the evidence was down there in the valley, in a pounding haze of noise and heat. Could people really work in such conditions, when the day itself was already like a furnace? Nathan wiped his face. He hawked and coughed and spat, and worked the bloody phlegm into the dry ground of Burlish Hill with the heel of his boot. Just last week in Gainsborough, he'd been having a bite of lunch at one of the inns beside the market before taking the train that now reached Burwell, only five miles out of Stagsby itself. His bread roll had tasted gritty and sulfurous. He'd spat it out.

A distant engine chuffed across the landscape, trailing its scarf of steam. Somewhere, a whistle blew. Nathan coughed. No grist in need of grinding, but he

still had half a mind to unlock the lean-to and take out whatever winds he had left in there, just for the ease they brought to his breathing, and the cool feel of them twisting in his arms....

A gray shimmer was emerging from the valley, and it was too stooped and solitary a figure for his heart to begin to race. Nathan remembered his fear and excitement back in the times when his father had been master of this mill, and every spell had been new, every wind fresh and young. Still, it was good to think that some things didn't change, and he almost smiled at the wind-seller; almost wished him a cheery good day.

The man flapped his old cloak. He seemed to give a shiver as he studied the hot, dry horizons. "The hardest of all seasons, eh?"

Nathan shrugged. Almost every farmer said something similar to him when they came up here. It was usually a prelude to their explaining how they couldn't afford his normal rate, and it was scarcely in his interest to agree with them. But Nathan found himself nodding. This really *was* the hardest of all seasons.

"I've a hundred remedies...." The wind-seller unshouldered his sack, and there they all were beneath: a knotted multitude of rags, but such beautiful things, especially on a day such as this. Storms and airs and breezes hazed about them in a thousand hurrying tints of blue and black and gray. Nathan knew how to drive a bargain, and the Elder knew he wasn't in position for extravagances, but he couldn't help feeling stirred, drawn, excited. And was it his own wheezing breath or the mill itself that gave off that needy groan?

Nathan barely heard the wind-seller's patter about his products. He of all people didn't need to be told about the poetry of the skies. He lifted a tarred and bunched handful of northerly rope that wasn't from the north at all, and felt the bitter bliss of it swirling around him, then the soft twine of a southwesterly blown in from far beyond every southwesterly horizon. Its breath in his face was the laughing warmth of a kiss. He bore them all, great stirring armfuls of them, into his stone lean-to, and hooked them up on their iron hangers, where they stirred and lifted with a need to be let loose. It was sweet work, delicious work, to hold and be taken hold of by this knotted blizzard of winds, and Nathan found that he no longer cared how many he really needed, nor what he could afford. By the time he'd finished, there was nothing left beyond the sack itself, and, had the wind-seller offered it to him, he'd have taken that as well.

Nathan was sweating, gasping. He was possessed by hot spasms, shivers of cold. How much had he actually paid for this glut? He couldn't recall. Neither did he particularly care. But as the wind-seller whistled through thin lips and laid the empty thing of rag across his back, Nathan felt that today he was owed something more.

"Tell me, wind-seller," he asked, although he knew that such questions should never be asked outside those who belonged to a certain trade or guild, "exactly how

is it that your winds are made?"

"It was your father I used to deal with, wasn't it?" The man's cold gaze barely shifted, but it took in all of Nathan, his mill, and his hill. "Although you and he might as well be the same. Same mill, same man, same sacrifices, eh? But it's always slightly behind you, isn't it?—I mean the best of all days, the keenest of winds, the sweetest of grain. It's never quite where you're standing now. And the longer you work, the more you give up, the more time hurries by, the more it seems that the strongest breeze, the whitest clouds, always came yesterday, or the day before."

"You're saying your winds are taken from the past?"

Twisting his neck, the wind-seller gave a shake of his head. "Time was, there were no sails up here, no millstone—and no miller, either. But the winds still came, and the sun rose and fell. Back then, people saw things clearer. You, miller, you've merely given up sweat, and years, and the good state of your lungs to keep this mill turning, but for those people it was the seasons and then the sun itself that had to be turned." The wind-seller laughed. It was a harsh sound. "Imagine—the blood that was let, the sacrifices they made, to ensure that spring arrived, that the next dawn came! But the past is gone, miller—used up. It's as dry and dead as this ground, which has been seeped of all its magic. What we're left with are the husks of our memories. Just like this sky, and this land..."

Nathan watched the wind-seller's shape sink down into the valley's haze. Might as well, he reflected, have tried talking to the winds themselves.

* * * *

Conversation after the markets in Lincolnshire bars always came free and loud. Nathan had never been one to seek out companionship, but now he found that there was some consolation to be had in sharing a glass or two, and then a few complaints, after another pointless morning at the auctions. Grandmistress Smith was less of a novelty these days, and she won her bids less easily, for there were other steam mills at Woodhall and Cranwell, and an even newer, bigger one in construction at South Ormsby. The world was changing within the giddy scope of one generation, and it wasn't just the wind and water millers who were losing out. Elbowed in with them amid the hot jostle of sticky tables in those bars were hand weavers, carters—even smithies: for all that the Smithies Guild was hand-in-glove with the financiers who constructed these new machines, it was the high-ups, the pen pushers, the ones who wore out their fat buttocks by sitting at desks, who made a nice living, and devil take the old ways and local village businesses founded on decent, traditional skills. It was an odd coalition, both alarming and reassuring, and the talk turned yet more furious as the evenings darkened and business suffered and the drink flowed.

Plans were hatched, then laughingly dismissed as more beer was bought. But the same complaints returned, and with them came the same sense of angry helplessness. Nathan was never a ringleader, but he and everyone else around those

tables soon agreed that there were better ways to spend your time and energy than sitting uselessly in a bar. They were *guildsmen*, weren't they? They had their pride. Better to go down fighting. Better still to resist wholeheartedly, and not go down at all.

They met one night at Benniworth. In the morning, the precious furnace that had just been delivered was found transformed into a dented mass of metal as if by a hailstorm of hammerblows. They met again at Little Cawthorpe. A culvert beneath the embankment of the new railway that would bear coal from Nottingham far quicker than the old canals was blown apart, although the damage was far less than might have been expected, considering the amount of explosive that was used. Lincolnshire earth, as any farmer would have attested, was notoriously slow and sticky stuff to move. Something stronger and better was needed, and Nathan brought it with him the next time they met outside Torrington in an owl-hooting wood.

“What you got there, miller?”

Lamplit faces gathered around him, edging and prodding to get a glimpse of the oddly lumpen knot he held in his hand.

“Something alive, is it?”

“Something that'll make them think twice about stealing the living off decent guildsfolk?”

Nathan couldn't bring himself to explain. He merely nodded, and felt the glorious lightness of a wind that had come from a point in the east to be found in no compass. These men didn't really expect to understand. Theirs was a loose alliance, and they remained almost as wary of each others' skills and secrets as of those they were campaigning against.

They called themselves The Men of the Future by now, because that was the opposite of what their wives and neighbors shouted after them, and their target was another mound of earth, although this was far bigger than the railway embankment. Steam mills and their associated machinery were even greedier for water than the watermills they replaced, and a reservoir to supply one such new machine had recently been constructed here in Torrington, taking up good grazing land and creating more aggrieved men. As, shushing each other and stumbling, they came upon it through the moonless dark, the clay bank looked huge. They laid the several caskets at its base. Then they turned toward Nathan.

“Whatever that thing is, might as well use it now, miller.”

Nathan nodded, although his movements were slow. The wind that twisted in his hand gave off a sharp scent of spring grass. Leaving it in this marshy spot was like destroying a treasured memory. But what else could he do?

They scrambled back through darkness from the hiss and the flare of the fuse. A long wait. The thing seemed to go out. A dull crump, a heavy pause, then came flame and earth in a sour gale, and a white spume of water lit up the dark.

The men cheered, but the rumbling continued, shaking the ground beneath their feet. Some were knocked over, and all were splattered by a rain of hot earth and stone. There was more fire, and then a boiling, roaring wave. They ran, scattered by the power of all the enraged elements that they had unleashed. It was lucky, it was agreed when heads were finally counted as they stood on a nearby rise, that no one had been buried, burned, drowned, or blown away. It looked as if the dam was entirely wrecked. Several fields had certainly been turned into mire. People would have to listen to Men of the Future now.

It was a long walk home. Drenched, muddied, Nathan kept to the edges of the roads although he scarcely expected to encounter any traffic on a night this black, but then he heard a rumble behind him. He turned and saw what seemed to be a basket of fire approaching. Then he saw that it was some kind of wagon, and that it was powered by steam. For all his increasing familiarity with such engines, he'd never heard of one that ran along an ordinary road, and curiosity made him reluctant to hide entirely from sight.

It rumbled past. Big wheels. A big engine. It really did shake the earth. Then it stopped just a few yards past him, spitting and huffing, and a door at its back flung open.

"I'm guessing you're heading the same way that I am, Nathan Westover," a voice called. "Why don't you give your feet a rest?"

Dazed, Nathan stepped out from the edge of the ditch. He climbed in.

"You look as if you've..." Grandmistress Smith's eyes traveled over him.

"It's been a hard season."

"That it has. I'm just back from London, from burying my husband. We'd grown fond of each other, contrary to how people talk, and he was a decent enough man. Neither do I make a habit of picking up men from the roadside on my travels, although I hear that's how the tale is told."

Nathan had heard no such tales, and his chest was proving difficult in the sudden change of air within this hot compartment which was padded with buttoned velvet, and lit from some strange source. The woman who sat opposite was dressed entirely in a shade of black far deeper than that he remembered she had once worn on her sole visit to his mill. No silks or trimmings. Her hair had dimmed as well; trails of gray smoked through it. Only the flame in her eyes was unchanged.

"I suppose," she murmured, "you think we're deadly foes?"

"Isn't that what we are?"

She waved a hand. “Merely competitors, like your fellow millers. And it was never as if—”

“Fellow millers!” Nathan wheezed. He cleared his throat. “There are few enough of us.”

“But when you say *us*, Nathan, why must you exclude me? We make the same product. I bid for the same grain in the same halls. And you and I... There’s a new science. It’s called phrenology, and it allows you to determine a man’s—I mean a person’s—nature merely from studying the bumps on their head. I’ve had it done myself, and mine reveal me to be stubborn and obstinate, often far beyond my own good interests.” She attempted a smile. “And you...” She reached across the carriage. Her fingers brushed his bald scalp. “You’re an easy subject now, Nathan. One hardly needs to be an expert to understand that you’re much the same. And I suppose you remember that offer I made...” The steam carriage, which was a clumsy, noisy thing, jolted and jostled. “Of sharing our skills. It could still be done. Of course, I have to employ men from the new guilds to see to the many magics and technicalities of running a steam mill. In all their talk of pressures, recondensing, and strange spells—I can barely understand what they mean even when they’re not talking the language of their guilds. Once, I could snap my fingers...” She did so now. There was no flame. “And that mill of yours. The dusty air—anyone can see what it’s doing to you. We could still...”

She trailed off. The machine rumbled on through the night, splashing through puddles, trailing spark and flame.

“There’s no point, you know,” she said eventually as they neared Stagsby. “You can’t resist things that have already happened. Those men, the ones who give themselves that stupid name and are causing such damage. They imagine they’re playing some game, but it isn’t a game. The Enforcers will—”

“That’s not what counts—someone has to put up a fight against steam!”

The lines deepened around her eyes. “You’re not fighting steam, Nathan. What you’re fighting is time itself.”

* * * *

More than the grain and the flour, more even than the mill, the winds were Nathan’s now. Work or no work, whatever the state of the air and the clouds, they encompassed him and the mill. He talked to them in their lean-to, unhooked them, stroked their bruised and swirling atmospheres, drew them out. As the rest of the world beyond his hilltop went on with whatever business it was now engaged in, Nathan’s mill turned, and he turned with it. He laughed and he danced. Strident winds from a dark north bit his flesh and froze his heart. Lacy mares’ tails of spring kicked and frisked. His winds swirled around him in booming hisses as he sang out the spell that made them unbind, and they took hold of his and the mill’s arms. In that moment of joyous release, it seemed to him that he was part of the air as well,

and that the horizons had changed. There were glimpses of different Lincolnshires through their prism swirl. He saw the counterglow of brighter sunsets, the sheen of different moons. It reminded him of some time—impossible, he knew, too ridiculous to recall—when, godlike, he'd looked down on the brightly flowing tapestry of the entire universe, which spun like some great machine. He saw the ebb and flow of cities. He saw the coming of flame, and of ice, and the rise of vast mountains pushing aside the oceans. He saw glass towers and the shining movements of swift machines along shimmering highways of light. He believed he glimpsed heaven itself in the sunflash of silver wings amid the clouds. The visions faded as the mill took up the strain of the wind, but they never left him entirely. They and the winds returned to him as he lay on his bunk and snatched at flying fragments of impossible sleep. They came to him more quietly then, not with a scream and a screech and a growl, but in a murmur of forests, a sigh of deserts, a sparkle of waves, a soft frou of skirts. They breathed over him, and he breathed with them, and he let them lift him in their fragrant arms. In and out of his dreams, Nathan laughed and danced.

For all the many winds that he'd bought from wind-seller on his last visit, Nathan knew he'd been less than frugal in their use. Sometimes, on the days of hard sky and mirage earth, he'd look out for that characteristic silhouette climbing up the little-used path from the valley, but the man never came, and part of Nathan already knew that he never would—not because of the indiscreet questions he'd asked, nor for the money he now couldn't afford to give him, but because the man's trade was like that of the millers themselves, and was thus in decline. Why, Nathan had even heard it said that sailors, who were surely the other main market for the produce of the wind-seller's guild, were now installing clever and brassy devices on the decks of their ships that could summon a wind to fill the sails when there was no wind at all. Partly, that sounded like the blurry talk of smoky barrooms, but that, as far as Nathan could see, was how so much of the world had become. He still looked out for the wind-seller on those sour days of bad air that seemed to come all too frequently now, but he knew in his heart that a figure would never shape itself out of the smoke and haze of the valley below. Those last purchases, this marvelous glut, had been like the rush of flour in the chutes when the hoppers were nearly empty. Soon, all that would be left was dust.

Nathan hoarded his last winds as a starving man hordes his withering supplies. He toyed with them in his mind, carried them about with him, inspected them, sniffed them, sang to them, got the tang of their currents in his mouth. Still, the moment of their release had to come, and it was all over too quickly. And just how were they made—where were they from? The question might now seem immaterial, but it wouldn't let Nathan go. He studied the knots ever more carefully, not only for their feel and bluster, but also the exact nature of their bond. Of course, he'd always known how to undo them—that came to him as easily as winching a sack of grain—but their tying was something else. His fingers traced the long, wavering pattern, which he realized was always the same, no matter from what substance the knot was formed. He followed the kinks that were left in the exhausted scraps once the wind had gone. With so few left, and the wind-seller so absent, it even seemed

worth trying to see if he couldn't capture a few small winds himself.

Small they were. He was sure that something vital was lacking even if, as the wind-seller himself had once seemed to say to him, that *something* had already been bled from the very ground. Still, and guilty though he felt, Nathan would sometimes desert his mill for a few hours to gather grasses, or wander the hedgerows of the landscapes below in search of strands of sheep's wool, deer pelt, castings of snake's skin: anything, in fact, that could reasonably be knotted, and through which the winds might once have blown. The knots strained his fingers. They hurt at his heart. They blurred before his eyes. Yet, whatever it was that might once have been trapped within them wasn't entirely lost, for when he undid them, they would let out a sigh, the breath of lost season's air. Never sufficient to drive anything as big as his mill, but enough to bring an ease to his breathing on the most difficult nights when his lungs seemed to close up inside him, and to add some flare and spectacle to the conflagrations wrought by the Men of the Future.

Although the wind-seller never came, Burlish Mill had other visitors now. Men with canes and women with extravagant hats, borne almost all the way to Stagsby from the midland cities, first class, would climb Burlish Hill on summer afternoons and smilingly ask what exactly the cost was for a guided tour. He was slightly less brusque with the painter who lumbered all the way up the slope with his boxes, canvases and easel, but all his talk of *setting down for posterity* was off-putting, and Nathan sent him back down as well. Dismissed, too, was the man who lumbered up with a wooden box set with a staring glass eye, within which, bizarrely, he claimed he could trap and frame light itself.

His trips to Donna Nook had grown less regular, and the last occasion he chose to see his mother was the sort of bitter, windy winter's day when he'd have spilled the hoppers with the sacks of grist he knew his mill longed for, had he any left. After the confinement of the train, he'd hoped that the air along the coast would make his breathing easier, but he felt as if he was fighting some new, alien substance as he hunched toward the old hop warehouse, which now had sand sliding in through its lower windows. His mother wasn't up in her little room, and the fire was out. Stumbling, wandering, he finally found her hunched and gazing seaward from the crest of a dune. Her body was dusted, as if by a coating of the finest and lightest of flours, with a layer of frost.

Now, the nights when he did the work of the Men of the Future were his only escape from the needs of the mill. More and more, he came to think of the world beyond Burlish Hill as a dark and moonless place, erupting with hot iron and black mountains of clinker and coal. The Men of the Future had grown better organized, and the targets of their visitations were kept secret from all but a select inner group to which Nathan had no desire to belong. He was happy, although he knew that happy wasn't really the word, simply to meet in some scrap of wood or of heath, and to take the long, silent march toward another citadel of smoke and fire. There were so many of them now, and with so many purposes. Not just weaving and

milling, but threshing, road-making and metal-beating: so many new technologies and spells. Sawmills were powered by steam—printing presses, even—and with each threatened trade came a swelling of their ranks. Pale, slim-faced men from far towns, workers with skills that Nathan couldn't even guess at, were taking charge, and they knew far better than their country colleagues how best to destroy a steam-driven machine. It wasn't about sledgehammers or pickaxes, or even explosives. Such brutal treatments were time-consuming, inefficient, and loud. Far better, they murmured in their slurring accents, to use the powers and magics of the devices themselves. Nathan could appreciate the cunning of setting a millstone turning so its two faces tore and clashed themselves apart. Could see, as well, how clever it was to put lime in a cold furnace, or molasses in a water vat, although some of the more arcane skills that these men then started to use, the muttering of short phrases, the leaving of scrolls of symbols that caused machines and furnaces to break apart when they were restarted, seemed too close to mimicking the work of the new steam guilds themselves. But something had to be done, and they were doing it, and these new Men of the Future continued to encourage the use of the small winds Nathan brought himself. Not that they were essential, he understood, to the work in hand, but their ghostly torrents, which lit up these damnable mills and factories with strange, fresh atmospheres, had become something of a signature of their work across Lincolnshire.

The nights when they met were never ordinary. There was always a similar mix of fear and hopeful excitement. They were, Nathan sometimes reflected, like midnight versions of the summer trips that families from the cities took on the railways to the lakes, the hills, the coast. Some Men of the Future even caught the day's last train to get to their next meeting place, then the morning's milk run to head back home again, and here they all were tonight, gathered once again in some typically remote spot, although the distance of travel had been much shorter than usual for Nathan. He even knew the farmer on whose land they were now standing; he'd once been a good source of trade.

Faces down, backs hunched, the Men of the Future shuffled toward their target in wary silence. As ever, the night was moonlessly dark, but to Nathan these were familiar roads. He didn't count himself a fool, and had long anticipated the night when they would head toward Stagsby. A year or two before, he'd have probably left them to get on with their work and returned to his mill, or perhaps even tried to persuade them to wreck a different machine. Not now. When he was heading home through a gray dawn after one conflagration, a passing grain merchant had halted the hairless beasts drawing his wagon to ask the way to Stagsby's Mill. Nathan knew from the scent of the sacks alone that here were several days' work of good barley, and offered the man an uncharacteristically cheery good morning. The merchant stopped him short when he began his directions. He was looking, of course, for the steam mill down in the valley; not that other thing—just a relic, wasn't it?—up on the hill.

Burlish Hill was nothing more than a presence in the darkness as the Men of

the Future passed through the village, where no murmurs were made, no lights were shown. Then came a faint gleam of iron as they met the closed gates of Stagsby Mill. But, just as Nathan had witnessed before, one of the thin-faced men at the head of their procession murmured cooingly to the bolt, and the metal wilted and the gates swung open.

There was no lawn, no trees, only bricks and mud, now at Stagsby Hall. But Nathan, as he turned and blundered into the men around him, couldn't help remembering, couldn't help trying to look. This was the most dangerous time of their work. One night, there would surely be mantraps, men with guns, regiments of Enforcers, or those poisonously fanged beasts like giant dogs, which were called balehounds. Indeed, many of the Men of the Future, especially those of the old kind, would have relished a fight, and there was a brief flurry when the eyes of some living beast were sighted in the pall of dark. Then came suppressed laughter, the glint of smiles. Nothing more than a donkey, old and mangy, tethered to an iron hoop. Once again, their secrecy seemed to have held.

The Men of the Future reached the doors of the machine itself, which gave as easily as had every other barrier. Inside, there was a warmth and a gleam to the dark. The furnace was still murmuring, kept banked up with enough coal to see it through to next morning without the need to relight. There was living heat, too, in the pipes that Nathan's hands touched. He'd been in enough of such buildings by now for some aspects to seem less strange, but this one, especially when the doors of the furnace were thrown open and light gusted out, stirred deeper thoughts. After all, grain was ground here. Although this place was alien to him, aspects of it—the strew of sacks, the smell of half-fermented husks, the barrels of water with their long-handled scoops for damping down—were entirely familiar. But there was something else as well. Nathan sniffed and touched. He was so absorbed in whatever he was thinking that he crashed his head on a beam and let out a surprised shout. Faces glared. Voices shushed him. Rubbing his bare forehead, he realized what it was. This place was cramped, awkward, and messy compared to some of the machines they'd recently targeted. After all, Stagsby Mill had been working down in this valley for almost twenty years, and was getting old.

He watched as the thin men set to their work, quietly shoveling coal into the furnace, stoking up its heat, whilst others of their ilk smirkingly tended to the taps and levers that controlled pressure and heat, murmuring their own secret spells. The heat grew more solid. New energies began to infuse the bricks and irons of the engine house. The main rocker let out a protracted groan. A hiss, a gesture of quick hands, and Nathan was summoned toward the glare of the furnace. The wind that he held in his hands was one of his own best gatherings—just a few looped wisps of seed-headed grass, but it felt soft and sharp as summer sunlight—and he felt sad to release it, much though he knew that it had to be done. Teeth of flame gnashed as he tossed it into the glowing mouth. The furnace gave a deep roar. Coughing and gasping, he was shoved back.

The Men of the Future were in a rush now, but eager and excited as they bustled out. Back in the safety of the cool darkness, they turned and looked, shading their eyes from the open enginehouse door's gathering blaze. There were jeers and moans of disappointment when a shadow blocked the space ahead; some idiot was standing too close and spoiling the show.

"Martin, Arthur, Josh!"

A woman's voice, of all things, although none of them recognized the names she called. When she called them again, and added a few others, along with some hells and goddammits for good measure, it became apparent that she hadn't expected to find herself alone. There was derisory laughter. So much for the hired thugs and the balehounds, although, as Grandmistress Fiona Smith stepped across the puddled mud toward the gaggle of men who hung back in the deeper darkness, it became apparent that she was holding a gun.

"You're trespassing! I warn you—I'll *use* this thing..." The gun was hefted, although it was plainly an old device. "This isn't just filled with swan shot."

The laughter grew louder. This was all simply adding to the show. The grandmistress glanced back when sudden light speared from every aperture of the building behind her.

"What exactly have you done to my—"

Then the entire engine house exploded.

Nathan ran, fighting his way through the searing air, the falling bricks and earth. The blaze was incredible—it was like battling against the sun. A figure lay ahead of him, although it shifted and shimmered in a wild dance of flame and smoke. He grabbed it, drew it up, hauling it and himself across the burning earth that seemed to be turning endlessly against him until, finally, he sensed some diminution of the incredible heat. Coughing, gasping, he laid Fiona Smith down on the rubble and mud beside what had once been the lake of Stagsby Hall. The water was scummed now, licked into rainbow colors by the leaping flames at his back, but he fumblingly attempted to scoop some of it over her blackened and embered flesh before he saw that it was already too late. Little flamelets and puffs of smoke played over Fiona Smith's charred body, but the fire was leaving her eyes. He leaned close, hands moving amid the glowing remains of her hair, and in that last flicker of her gaze, there came what might have been a twinge of recognition, then a final gasping shudder of what felt like release, relief. Nathan's hands still twined. Looking down, he saw that his hands had unconsciously drawn a knot in the last unsinged twine of Fiona Smith's glorious red hair.

* * * *

The climb uphill had never been harder. His own flesh was burned. His lungs were clogged and charred with flame and soot. As he finally reached, half-crawled, across the summit, he realized that this was the first time he'd ever ascended Burlish

Hill without sensing the moods of its air. Now that he did, hauling himself up and looking around at a world which, but for the fire that still blazed in the valley, lay dark at every point of the compass, he realized that there wasn't a single breath of wind—not, at least, apart from whatever was contained within that last knot of hair he'd cut loose with a glowing claw of metal, and that his fingers now held crabbed in his pocket, and was far too precious to be released.

Nathan coughed. With what little breath he had, he tried to call out to his mill. The sound was nothing: the mere whisper of dead leaves from some long-lost autumn. Impossible that this vast machine should respond to anything so puny, but, somehow, groaningly, massively, yet joyful as ever, it did. The sails began to turn. In a way, Nathan had always believed that the winds came as much from the mill itself as they did from the sky-arched landscape, but he'd never witnessed it happen so clearly as it did on that night. Invisibly, far beyond the moon and the stars, clouds uncoiled, horizons opened, and—easy as breathing, easy as dancing, sleeping, and far easier than falling in love—the keen easterly wind that most often prevailed across Burlish Hill, but that was never the same moment by moment, began to blow.

There wasn't a trace of grain in need of grinding, but Nathan still attended to his mill. He released its shackles of winch and brake and pulley to set it turning wildly until all the mechanisms that he'd known and sung to for his entire life became a hot, spinning blur. The sound that the mill made was incredible—as if it were singing every spell in every voice that had ever sung it. He heard his father there within that deep, many-throated rumble, calling to his mill in the strong, clear tones that he had once possessed, and humming as he labored, and sometimes laughing for the sheer joy of his work. And the softer tones of his mother, and all the other mistress millers, were there as well. *See, Nathan, how it sits, and how that band of metal helps keep it in place.... Now, it's getting near the end of its life....* Nathan Westover heard the sound of that stuttering pulley, and then of his own unbroken voice, which had caused its turning to mend. All the winds of this and every other earth sighed with him, and the mill's sails swooped, and the world revolved, and the sky unraveled, and the stars and the planets spun round in dizzy blurs, and the seasons came and went. He saw Fiona Smith, young as she was then, puffing out her cheeks before that huge cake at Stagsby Hall, when the place had still possessed lawns, and its oaks were unfelled. Saw her again at this very mill. *I have a proposal to put to you, Nathan....* Saw her as she was at the grain auctions, with the light from the tall windows flaming on her red hair, then sitting in that bizarre machine that rumbled across the countryside, when that same hair was twined with smoke trails of gray. Saw all of these things, but felt, above all, the warm, soft pressures of her body in those few glorious moments when he had once held her on this very millstone floor, and the hot, amazing reality of the taste of her lips and mouth against his own.

The mill roared and Nathan roared with it. Axles smoked, joints screamed, cogs flew, and then, as something final sagged and broke, the top face of the millstone itself bore hugely down on its lower half, screaming a brilliant cascade of

sparks.

* * * *

That memorable night, the villagers of Stagsby were already swirling like ants around what was left of the steam mill when they looked up and saw that the windmill up on Burlish Hill was also burning. Amid the chaos, a ragged line was established to pass hand by hand, slow bucket by bucket, what little was left of the waters of the lake. But the distance was too far, and the mill was already massively ablaze, its flaming sails turning against the night in what seemed to be no wind at all. The heat soon grew far too ferocious to approach, although many stood back to watch, such was the terrible, beautiful sight it made—like some great, mythic bird.

Afterward, there were many rumors. Most popular in Stagsby itself was that the steam mill had long been in decline, and that the grandmistress had been purposefully engineering its destruction to claim on the insurance when she'd been caught out by the suddenness of the blast. Also popular, especially amongst those who had little idea of what insurance was, was that she'd been doing some extra overtime with one of her workers, if you get the meaning, when things had got, well, just a little *too* hot. And as for the old windmill—most likely it had been caught by a spark flown up by the blaze, and everyone knew that the place was half ruined anyway, and doubtless tinder-dry. All assumed, for want of any other sightings, that the miller himself had died inside his mill. The perfunctory official investigations gave people little reason to vary their views. The other theory, which was that the wealthy owners of the latest self-condensing machines had used the so-called Men of the Future as a means of destroying competition, received little credence, and then only amongst those who were in their cups.

Soon, as the wind lifted the ash and bore it westward, and the rain dissolved the charred wood and the grass regrew, nothing but a circle of stone was left on Burlish Hill. Nor was the steam mill down in the valley ever reconstructed. Farmers now sold their harvests on wholesale contract to the big new factories, thus giving up their financial independence for what seemed, for a while, to be a good enough price. Stagsby Hall was acquired by one of the leading families of the steam guilds as a country retreat. Soon, its lawns were reestablished and the lake was dredged and gleamingly refilled; the interiors were extravagantly refurbished in the latest style. The ruins of the steam mill were shored up and prettified with vines and shaggy moss. Five years on, and they could have been a bit of old castle; a relic from an entirely different age. But much of this was hearsay. To judge by all the chuffing, huffing modern carriages that came and went that way through the village, parties were frequently held at Stagsby Hall, but they weren't of the sort to which anyone local would ever be invited. You really had to climb up to the top of Burlish Hill to get any real sense of how fine the big house now looked. From up there you could still watch the clouds chase their reflections across the lake, and see the sunflash of its windows, and breathe the shimmer of its trees, but few ever did, apart from stray couples seeking solitude—for what, otherwise, would be the point?

* * * *

Weevils, woodworm, fire, and rats are the four apocalyptic demons in a miller's life, and, of these, fire is the worst. But, Nathan reflected as, burned and breathless, he looked back up at the river of flame that steamed westward from Burlish Hill, there were worse things still. At least, he told himself as he walked on, he hadn't left his mill, for there was nothing left to leave.

Following no particular direction, he kept walking until morning, and came across a railway station that he dimly recognized from his journeys as a Man of the Future. He sat and waited there, and took the first train, which bore him all the way to the coast. It was a bright day. Even this early in the summer season, families were camped out on the beach behind colored windbreaks. Laughing children were bathing in the ocean's freezing shallows, or holding the tethers of snapping kites. Nathan watched and felt the bite of the salt against his face, happy to see that the world still turned and the winds still blew, whether or not there was a mill on Burlish Hill.

The rails went everywhere now. They took you places it was hard to imagine had ever existed before the parallels of iron had found them. Even when the timetables ran out and he discovered himself sitting on an empty platform at a time when he knew that no train would be coming, their shining river still seemed ready to bear him on. He traveled. He journeyed. He leaned out of carriage windows, and looked ahead into the fiery, smoking sunset, and licked the salt smuts from his lips. Had he the breath left within him, he might have sung to the teeming air.

Another summer was coming, and the fields were ripening across the wide and heavy land. He sat on the steps beside the bridge of a riverside town where a mother and her daughter were feeding the crusts of their sandwiches to the geese and swans. They were both red-haired. Nathan's fingers bunched the knotted lock he still kept in his pocket. He often longed to release it, and to feel the special giving of a final wind-spell. But he remembered the look in the last embers of Fiona's eyes, and he wondered what he truly had trapped there; what, if released, he might be letting go.

North and south, he traveled on through the many nights, and the landscapes that lay around him in the darkness were stitched in flame. Dawn brought rooftops, chimneys, on every horizon. Swallowed in giant buildings, spat out with the litter and the pigeons onto surging streets, he gawped and wandered. He was cursed, bumped into. Leering offers were made in return for money he no longer had. The sky was solidly gray here, and the airs that rushed up to greet him from the chasms of streets were disgustingly scented. This was a place without seasons, or with seasons that were entirely its own. Nathan had grown accustomed to the tides or delays of departures at stations, but here he was lost.

He wandered the darkening city, taking odd turns as he sought some direction that was neither north nor south, east nor west. Far behind him, the girders of some vast structure were being erected, their black lines gridding the sky, but there were fewer people here, and those who were became furtive in their glances, or ran away

at the sight of him with screams and clatters of clogs. Not a place to be, he thought, for anyone who doesn't have business here. But, more and more, he felt that he did. He almost ran, and the bricks rushed by him, whispering with the echo of his dried-out lungs. Whispered, as well, with the glow of all the spells and talismans that were scrawled across them. Some, he was almost sure, belonged to his own guild. Others, he thought, had the taint of the sea about them. And here were the symbols of men who tended the tallest roofs, and of other guilds of those who worked in high places, and breathed the changing airs as they looked down on a different world.

Wheezing, exhausted, light-headed, he stumbled on. There were gates and walkways. The hidden thrumming of vast machineries ground up through the earth. Dawn, though, brought a different kind of landscape. He was tired beyond exhaustion, and it amazed him that his feet dragged on, that his heart still stuttered, that his lungs raked in some sustenance, but the city had cast itself far behind him—so far that the shifting horizons had smeared it entirely out of memory and existence. Here, puddled and rutted lanes unwound and divided to the lean of empty signposts, bounded by endless hedgerows: fences, gates, railings, snags of string and wire and thorn. And the wind blew everywhere, and from all directions—and the world fluttered with the litter of what seemed like the aftermath of some archetypal storm. Hats and scarves, stray shoes, newspapers, the pages of books, umbrellas, whole lines of washing, the weathered flags of guilds, even the torn sails of ships, fluttered everywhere, or were snatched to tumble in the sky like wild kites.

Nathan's fingers bunched once more around the knot of Fiona's Smith's hair. Here, if anywhere, was the secret of how she might be released. He understood now what all his wanderings had been about, which was to get here, wherever *here* was, and find the spell, the secret, that might unlock that last knot. But he was tired. He was tired beyond believing. Walking, he decided as he leaned against another blank signpost, was an activity he might still just about be able to manage, but he wasn't so sure about breathing, nor sustaining the increasingly weary thud of his heart. But still he pushed on, and the winds, as they came from every and no direction, pushed with him, tearing at his clothing, afflicting him with hot and cold tremors, spiraling around him in moans and whoops. Then he heard another sound—it was a kind of screaming. Although he now had no idea what it was, it drew him on.

Another fence, its slats torn, flapping and rotting, and another gate, which turned itself closed and then open in the wind, although that wasn't where the screaming came from. Nathan had to smile. It was simply an old weathercock, fixed to a fencepost, and turning madly, happily, this way and that in the wind. So familiar, although he'd never stood this close. The one odd thing about it, he realized, as it screamed and turned on its ancient bearings, was that the four angles of the compass that usually projected beneath such devices were entirely absent, even as rusty stubs. Then the gate reopened, and the weathercock screamed and shifted in directions that lay beyond any compass, and the wind also turned, pushing him along the path that lay beyond.

There was a house, although its windows flapped and its slates and chimneys were in disorder, and there was also a garden of sorts. That blurry sense that he'd felt all morning was even stronger here. There were trees that in one moment seemed to be in blossom, but the next were green, then brown, then gold, then torn to the black bones of their branches in sudden flurries of storm. Roses untwined their red lips and then withered. This was a place of many seasons, Nathan reflected as he gasped his way on, although it belonged more to winter than it did to summer, and more to autumn than to spring.

As much as anything, the hunched figure that lay ahead seemed to be shaped out of the ever-changing territories of the air. Not just windy days, or the sudden bluster of summer thunderstorms, but also the hot stillness of afternoons that seemed to be without prospect of any wind at all, at least until you saw something separate itself from the gray shimmer of the world below. The wind-seller had his sack laid open beside him. He was gathering the tumbled sticks of a nearby willow that shivered and danced its wild arms. Somewhere inside Nathan's head, that weathercock was still screaming, and with it came a sobbing agony in his lungs. He knew he didn't have the strength left to tell the wind-seller what he wanted, and it was a release and a relief to him when the man simply held out his pale fingers, which looked like stripped willow themselves, and took from him that glorious red tress. As Nathan Westover stumbled and fell into the puddled mud, he saw the wind-seller's hands working not to release Fiona Smith's last breath, but looping her hair again to draw another, final, knot.