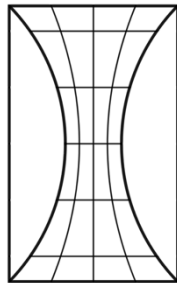


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

15 January 1124

Godfrey had grown weary of his assistant's morning briefs. The man brought nothing but bad news.

"John has disappeared again," Peter shared. "This is the third time since you separated him from the Monk. I think you may need to concede their...friendship. I already have guards looking for him in all the normal places."

Peter nervously scanned his notes, searching for a safe topic.

"The blacksmith wished to inform you that his latest attempt at plate armour was unsuccessful. He said your changes made the plates too thin and they split during shaping."

Godfrey thumped the table with his fist.

Peter paled. "He wanted to remind you that he is still awaiting payment for the previous experiments."

Godfrey smouldered and Peter continued cautiously.

"Regarding money, the Jews have been asking how you wish to settle the debts for the cathedral."

"Settle the debts!? That was Bishop John's doing. He signed me up for their un-Christian money trap before he went and died. As if his cathedral debacle weren't bad enough. I hope he's writhing in hellfire!"

Peter blanched at the Bishop's casual mention of eternal damnation. "Well, they would like to know if you'll be continuing the arrangement or settling the debt. Without alternative means to pay them, I believe we have no option but to continue with the arrangement."

"I guess we don't," Godfrey huffed sarcastically. "We'll have to visit them and discuss."

"If you plan to leave the palace today, might I recommend a visit to the cathedral? There are more concerns with the design and a visit could boost the workers' morale. Masons have continued to leave as the pay issues drag on."

"Dammit man, have you no good news!?"

"Well," the Assistant said, rifling through his notes once more. "Your messenger returned from Stowey. There was no sign of the Book but he managed to locate the Foreigner's bag."

"That's something at least. Very well, it seems I am overdue for another tour of the town. Send word when my carriage is ready."

Peter was visibly relieved that they were finished. He handed Godfrey a sealed envelope before scuttering from the room.

"This arrived for you today."

Godfrey waited until he was gone and opened the letter at his desk. The wax seal was unadorned but he knew it was news from the rebellion in Normandy.

The Bishop read the letter twice before scrunching it into a tight ball and hurling it into the fireplace. More bad news. King Henry had arrived in Normandy and joined forces with his infernal bastard son, the Earl of Bristol. The rebels were in disarray but winter provided a chance to regroup. The cardinals wouldn't be pleased.

Godfrey poured himself a goblet of wine and drained it instantly. He was juggling too much and there were problems on all fronts. The tactical intricacies of running his bishopric were an annoying distraction from the cardinals' more strategic tasks. There was little he could do from afar to support the rebellion and, closer to home, the ongoing battle between priests and monks showed no signs of letting up. He poured another drink.

It was difficult to know what to focus on. Yet despite everything, Godfrey's biggest concern was John. The Bishop was convinced that the answer to all of his problems lay within the Heretic's Book and John remained the unfortunately uncooperative key. The Novice knew too much about the Book and its contents to be dismissed, yet also understood more than Godfrey and couldn't be...disposed of.

After months of deciphering the Book's contents, the well had run dry. John had translated all that he could and every avenue of investigation had reached a dead end. Their work ground to a halt and it became clear that they desperately needed whatever was in the first half of the Book to make sense of their half. Godfrey cursed himself yet again for tossing away the wrong half and blamed the Heretic for sparking his rage.

Peter was right. Dismissing Adelard had also slowed their work. The Monk had proven to be an insufferable know-it-all, frequently correcting the Bishop and claiming greater knowledge of the world. The Monk did possess a unique intuition for deciphering the meaning of John's translations but Godfrey had thought it prudent to cut ties before he too learned too much.

John's renewed efforts to escape were an unfortunate consequence of the dismissal. The Monk and the Novice had developed a strong friendship during their secluded hours working in the library. The puzzle of the Book provided a shared interest and Adelard had kindled the comradery Godfrey had hoped to generate with John himself. But without translation work or friendship, John's efforts to escape became more frequent than ever.

Godfrey had personally requested that John's responsibilities be increased at the seminary and that the strictest masters keep a particularly close eye on him. It obviously wasn't enough and Godfrey needed to revisit the seminary to discuss further reducing John's freedoms. Yet another task.

Annoyed, Godfrey lay down his goblet and left his quarters to find the Assistant. He eventually found Peter in deep discussion with the palace staff but he wound up as Godfrey approached. The help dispersed with purpose. Despite often being the bearer of bad news, Godfrey admired Peter's fastidiousness and ability to make things run smoothly. He too was indispensable.

"Your Eminence!" Peter called. "I have the messenger here to see you. Shall we retire to the library?"

Godfrey nodded and followed Peter and the scruffy messenger to the palace's most secluded room. With John gone, the room was empty.

"So?" Godfrey asked. "Did you have any luck?"

The messenger looked nervous and eyed the door eagerly.

“Yes and no, Father. I spoke to the Priest again. A most friendly fellow.”

“I don’t care what he was like! Did he have my damned Book?”

The messenger flinched. “No Bishop. He said that books were rare in the town’s castle, let alone in the streets. But he did have this.”

The messenger revealed a familiar leather satchel, dusting it off before passing it to Godfrey.

“The Priest said he found it discarded in an alleyway during one of his walks through the town.”

“That’s convenient,” Godfrey mused. “Did you press him on this?”

“No Father.”

“Unfortunate.” Godfrey gave a menacing look. “Did you ask the townsfolk if they had seen the red-headed foreigner?”

“No Father.”

“Disappointing again!” Godfrey cried, brandishing the satchel. “This is definitely hers.”

He opened the bag and rifled through, more delicately than the first time he’d held it. Nothing struck him as particularly useful but he thought the contents might provide a momentary distraction for John when he returned. Godfrey wiped his finger across a white crust and sniffed. It smelt caustic and burned Godfrey’s nose.

“Well, better than returning empty-handed,” he said, giving the messenger another intense stare. “Listen here. I want you to return to Stowey immediately and do your job. Properly this time. Don’t return until you have asked every living soul whether they’ve seen the girl or heard word of my missing book. The Priest was right, something so precious would not be left abandoned in the street. Someone must have taken it.”

The messenger bowed deeply and rushed to leave the room. Godfrey shouted a final command.

“Press the Priest for more information. It’s too convenient that he found the satchel and nothing else. Search his chapel if you must”

The messenger disappeared and Godfrey looked over to Peter. “Is my carriage ready yet?”

The Assistant led his Bishop to the carriage waiting by the palace entrance.

Their first stop was to the blacksmith on to the outskirts of the town. He was not the finest craftsman but Peter assured Godfrey that he could be trusted to be discrete.

Godfrey longed to create the armour depicted in the Book, seeing it as the most direct way to assist the cardinals’ rebellion in Normandy. Despite initial confidence that he would find a solution for the heavy plates, the Book lacked detail and none of the Bishop’s efforts to recreate war instruments had worked.

Just as Godfrey had dedicated his limited time to deciphering the Book, so too had he devoted his limited financial resources to the project. He siphoned coin earmarked for cathedral construction to fund the blacksmith’s endless attempts. Peter disapproved but was smart enough to hold his tongue.

“Still no luck, Bishop,” the rough smith told Godfrey when he emerged from the carriage. “I don’t know who’s giving you these measurements but they’re all wrong.”

Peter gave the blacksmith a silent warning but he continued anyway.

“I don’t mind tinkering with these experiments, so long as the coin keeps coming. I’ve got a family to look after you know.”

“What would you suggest changing?” Godfrey asked, ignoring the man’s insolence.

“Stop trying to do it all. Forget the helmet and fancy joints. Keep it simple. Perfect the breastplate and we’ll go from there.”

“So be it,” Godfrey said, already returning to the carriage as Peter counted out coins.

Next, they stopped at the Jews’ house to visit Godfrey’s lenders. There was no established community of Jews in Bath but a single family from the wealthy community in Bristol had built a home in the shadow of the cathedral they had financed.

The Bishop would’ve preferred that they had in Bristol but reminded himself that Christ had been a Jew and that Godfrey’s various projects wouldn’t be possible without the income generated by taxing the thrifty newcomers. He begrudgingly respected the way that their culture instilled an understanding of numbers and letters in their young, even though it undermined the monopoly otherwise held by the clergy. It was little wonder that they could rise above the uneducated masses.

But they were different. Nobody ever liked different.

Godfrey was greeted at the door of a simple townhouse by a young assistant and shown into a room where an elderly man sat behind a large desk. Peter’s face matched the shock Godfrey felt at seeing a room so lavish within such a simple building. There were even three books chained to a shelf, the expensive beginnings of a personal library.

“Welcome Your Eminence,” the elderly man said. “Is this not the first time you have humbled my home with your presence?”

Godfrey nodded.

“I am Isaac. I trust you’ve come to discuss the terms for continuing the loan that was agreed by your predecessor. Ah, Bishop John. A truly inspiring man. Unorthodox but so dedicated to the health of his flock, from the lowliest peasant up to His Majesty himself.”

“His death was a great loss,” Godfrey replied stiffly.

“Quite,” the Jew replied, eying the new bishop with suspicion. “So, you wish to continue our arrangement?”

“That’s presumptuous,” Godfrey said.

“Merely observant. I see no chests of gold and the cathedral remained incomplete when I last checked. What other reason could there be for your call?”

“Some astute observations. You are correct. We’re here to express our willingness to continue the arrangement...” Godfrey thought on the fly. “...but I must also inform you of a new tax.”

The old Jew looked displeased with Godfrey’s sudden revelation but held his tongue like an expert diplomat.

“That is news to me Your Eminence. Please accept my apologies for our tardiness, I will see that you have full payment before you leave.”

The elder waved over his shoulder, and his young assistant left the room.

“Will you also require the additional funds for the cathedral?” Isaac asked with a knowing grin.

Godfrey was once again baffled by the wealth contained within the simple building. He and Peter departed with a chest containing enough gold to fund three months of cathedral works, plus the tax Godfrey had invented only moments before.

His carriage had just departed towards their next stop when it was caught by one of the palace runners. Matching their pace, the runner shared a winded exchange with Peter through the carriage shutter. Peter barked some brief instructions and the runner changed course back towards Godfrey’s palace.

“They found John,” Peter said irritably.

“Well that’s positive,” Godfrey replied.

“It would be, if he’d just stop trying to escape. Back when I was at the seminary they had ways of breaking even the most insubordinate neophyte’s will.”

“You’re right, a change of tack is required. We’ll deal with him after the cathedral workers.”

“Indeed. I’ve ordered he be confined to his room until we return.”

“Very good,” Godfrey approved.

The carriage pulled up at the cathedral. The master craftsmen insisted on repeating the same tired tour of the building’s shell. The design complaints related to trivial details, though they seemed offended when Godfrey dismissed them as such. This was quickly forgotten when Peter presented the Jews’ gold and Godfrey ordered them to pay the workers what they were owed, plus a month in advance. The Bishop personally delivered this news to the workers in a rousing speech and the worksite buzzed with renewed energy when he returned to his palace.

“Peter, I’ve been thinking about my Book,” Godfrey said as the carriage trundled home.

The Assistant looked unsurprised. “How so?”

“It seems we are surrounded by incompetence wherever we turn. I wonder if the Heretic was perhaps not dealt with as permanently as instructed.”

“Would you like me to put a call out for any information about a red-haired foreigner? And a missing book? I’ll ask the parishes but we might have more luck if you offer a sizeable reward.”

“Yes, that would be good. If I can’t have the full Book then perhaps we can find a way to extract the information directly. If she is still alive.”

The carriage finally pulled up at the palace. Godfrey was exhausted and craved more wine. But one last task remained.

Peter peeled away when they arrived and Godfrey went straight to John's room. A guard stepped aside to grant the Bishop passage. Noting the man's heavy chainmail mittens, Godfrey summoned him into the room too.

After a brief silence, the cold stone corridor echoed with John's helpless whelps but no one was around to hear them. Godfrey emerged with a grin. He saw little risk of ongoing disobedience.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

18 January 1124

Rachel's wedding was a lavish affair. Matilda had grown so accustomed to quiet rural life in the month since her arrival at Holford that it was a surprising assault on the senses. The reception was held in an unused field, with a giant bonfire at the centre surrounded by makeshift furniture and tents serving endless food to the guests. Musicians played pipes and lutes and drums. Barrels of ale, mead and cider flowed freely. Sober guests generated a buzz of conversation which was intermittently punctuated by drunken revellers who boorishly yelled out to one another or sang bawdy drinking songs.

Matilda had daydreamt of such a cultural experience during her classes at the Institute. It was just like the party scenes in all her favourite novels and films, only the guest of honour wasn't turning eleventy one. Earthy smells from the field and warmth from the bonfire proved that the experience was very much real.

Despite the worsening weather, the wedding had been brought forward at the bride's insistence. Rachel hadn't set foot in the family cottage since the revelations about Mama's death and she had practically replaced the family with her new in-laws. Poor Ma had been a wreck for weeks, having lost both her mother and daughter in the same day. But Rachel was blind to her mother's grief and only interacted to demand ever more as the wedding drew closer.

Despite the bride's well-known petulance, the whole region had turned out for the event. There were attendees from villages as far as Stowey. Many shared Matilda's views of Rachel's cruelty and Matilda even overheard one woman whisper that the bride and groom deserved one another.

Instead, it was the promise of an extravagant event that drew the crowds. Rachel's new father-in-law was Holford's brewer and had developed a reputation for producing some of the finest ales in the region. He'd spared no expense for his eldest son's wedding and rumours had circulated in the preceding weeks that there would be an entire season's production of ale, five whole cows roasted on spits, musicians travelling all the way from Devon and a bear fight. People's excitement grew as each rumour turned out to be true – except the bear fight – and Holford was buzzing before the revelry had even begun.

The ceremony itself appeared a mere afterthought. Matilda unremarkably hadn't received an invitation to Holford's chapel and instead pottered around the cottage which had begun to feel like home. The family had adopted her as their own and insisted that there would be enough people at the reception for her to avoid Rachel's wrath.

Matilda snuck into the field when darkness had fallen and the party was well underway. She found a position on a hill at the edge of the celebration where she could watch the crowd. She'd always preferred people watching to being at the centre of things.

Despite the medieval twist on the gathering, she was amazed by the similarities to large celebrations back in her own time. Embarrassing drunken family members and scolding wives were eternal. Revellers overindulged,

volunteers slaved over hot coals and children wove amongst the proceedings on their own adventures. Just like home.

Watching the interactions between Holford's various social cliques reminded Matilda that politics was everywhere, even tiny Twelfth Century villages. Field workers and craftsmen, housewives and younglings. The fabric of medieval society. The villagers easily slipped into their places and Matilda enjoyed spotting the few people that belonged to multiple groups, stitching the whole community together.

Matilda had met enough of the villagers that her people watching became a medieval-themed game of Where's Wally. Rachel did the rounds with her new husband to thank their guests, though a peevish expression betrayed her displeasure with the lack of attention given by her groom on their wedding night. Ma and Pa were in deep discussion with Martin Brewer and his wife – Rachel's new parents-in-law – at the long bridal table. Margery sat at the fringe of a group of young adults talking with the Miller's son. Old Timothy held court with a collection of elderly gentlemen and Matthew Smith flirted with some out-of-town maiden.

Matilda eventually spotted William and Elizabeth walking towards her, each laden with armfuls of food and a big clay jug. They joined Matilda at the party's outskirts and lay out their takings.

"We tried to bring you one of everything," Elizabeth declared proudly. "So you know just how well Holford throws a party!"

The siblings insisted that Matilda try each of their favourite treats and they shared the jug of mead between them. Matilda felt as though she might explode, a sensation she hadn't felt since arriving back in time. Their stomachs also full, Elizabeth and William joined in her people watching and provided a running commentary.

"See the guy carrying two jugs?" William asked. "That's Herbert. Pa said he's so daft they had to tie his boots for him when fighting for the King. But he can fell a tree with a single swing of his axe. Works for the carpenter now."

"And that lady in the blue skirt is Widow Beatrix," Elizabeth pointed out. "Her husband worked a field near ours before he went missing off Kilve beach. William thinks Vikings took him."

"No I don't," William denied unconvincingly before quickly changing the topic. "That younger lady next to Beatrix is Mabel. Ma's not a fan, says that she..."

Matilda had just gulped a mouthful of mead when William finished his vulgar sentence and she snorted, making the amber liquid run through her nostrils. Elizabeth fell into hysterics, having sampled a fair amount of mead herself.

"I think I'd better get her back to Ma and Pa," William said, his face red. "She's well had it."

Grasping Elizabeth by the elbow, William led his sister back toward the bonfire. Matilda was left alone to digest her food in peace.

But as the pair melted into the crowd a voice sounded behind her.

"I thought I might find you here," said a familiar voice.

A chill ran down Matilda's spine as she turned warily towards the robed stranger. The bonfire's flickering light illuminated his face and she was thrilled to recognise the friendly priest from Nether Stowey.

"Oh! So good to see you." Matilda shakily leapt up and gave him an awkward sideways hug before remembering that he was a priest and retracting herself. "I never caught your name!"

"Thomas, my dear," the Priest said with a laugh. "I see you've been sampling the Brewer's creations. He sure knows how to put on a party."

Matilda offered the jug but he politely declined with a raised hand.

"It's good to see you," Matilda repeated. "Do you come to Holford often?"

"I don't think I've been here for over twenty years. I'm a little too comfortable in my chapel. An old man set in his ways. When I heard of a great gathering in the hills, I absolutely had to try my luck finding the Baron's mysterious healer."

He stared off at the bonfire and the dancing villagers. A comfortable silence fell between them. Matilda sipped from the jug.

"The Baron missed you that day," Thomas said. "It's not often that a miraculous healer denies him the chance to bestow a reward."

"I needed to be away from that place," Matilda explained with a hiccough. "From those vile people. I've never felt so afraid in my life."

The conversation put a rock in Matilda's stomach.

"I can't begin to imagine. I'd bet it's hard to believe but they're not bad people. One is the most loving father and the other dotes over his aging mother. It was that Bishop's doing. Power can make even the gentlest of people do horrendous deeds."

The flames of the bonfire reflected in his eyes.

"Not that it forgives their actions," Thomas continued. "Not at all. I just thought you ought to know of their remorse. Neither has missed a single Mass since."

The priest was right, they weren't forgiven, but the rock in her stomach did lighten slightly.

"I'm sorry for shoving you, behind that shack," Matilda said with an apologetic smile. "Some way to thank my saviour."

"Not to worry child, no harm done. I'm just glad to find you here in one piece." Thomas paused. "You should know that Bishop Godfrey has been looking for you. Three times now I've had visits from his messengers asking about that afternoon. Now he's put out a call to the parishes seeking any word of a red-headed foreigner."

"Oh," Matilda said dumbly. "That's not good."

“Not ideal, no. I told them I have no idea where they might find the woman they described. I’m staying with Father Daniel in Holford’s chapel tonight and will have a quiet word with him before I leave. It seems you’ve helped the village more than enough for him to see the value in holding his tongue.”

“Thanks Thomas. You’re kinder than I deserve.”

“Kindness begets kindness. Anyway, this old man needs his bed. Do come back to Stowey someday. I’ve no doubt that Baron Walter still wishes to give you your reward. And I could always use an extra hand sweeping my chapel.”

He began to set off but suddenly stopped in his tracks.

“Fool! Trust me to venture so far only to forget the reason why! Old age, I tell you.”

He reached into the cloth bag slung over his shoulder and pulled out a bulky object.

“Might this belong to you?” he asked with a cheeky smile.

“My bible!?” Matilda cried as she beamed up at him. “How?” she managed to choke out.

“I wasn’t about to leave your belongings lying in the mud. I flicked through the Book myself but couldn’t make the slightest bit of sense out of it. I unfortunately had to surrender your bag and its contents to Godfrey’s men but I somehow convinced them that I hadn’t seen your Book.” There was a naughty twinkle in his brilliant blue eyes. “Take care of it. It sounds like Godfrey will move Heaven and Earth to get his hands on it. And be careful referring to it as your bible, some might find that to be poor taste.”

Matilda couldn’t help herself. She leapt up from the ground again and pulled the old man into a tight embrace.

“Thank you Thomas!” she gushed. “You have no idea how much this means.”

Even in the dim light, Matilda saw a blush on the man’s cheeks.

“No worry at all,” he blustered. “I know the value of a good book.”

The Priest headed off back into the crowd, leaving Matilda to pore over her beloved bible in the firelight. The spine was torn, pages were falling out and a crust of mud obscured the embossed cover. But it was the most precious object she’d ever seen. A reminder of the world that was.

She sat in a stupor for what felt like hours, soaking in the familiar pages and remembering exactly where she’d been when she wrote her various notes. The rock in her stomach had completely dissolved, replaced with a warmth that emanated throughout her entire body. She felt reborn.

Matilda was so absorbed that she barely registered William, Margery and Elizabeth’s return.

“I couldn’t get Elizabeth to stay with Ma,” William complained. “She kept chasing after me. She’s calmed down a bit now, just hide the jug.”

“Shut up Willy!” Margery interrupted, pointing at Matilda’s bible. “What’s that?”

“You got your Book back!?” William asked excitedly.

“You’ve a book!?” Elizabeth cooed.

“You know how to read!?” Margery cried.

The trio descended upon Matilda and watched completely enthralled as she flipped through the pages. She told them that a kindly priest had returned it to her but omitted the details of how she’d lost it in the first place.

“Can you teach me to read?” Margery begged. “I’ve always wanted to learn!”

“Definitely,” Matilda replied with enthusiasm.

They were still poring over the pages when a pair of elderly villagers passed by as they retired for the evening. Intrigued by the suspiciously quiet gathering of young people, they strolled over to see what was happening.

“Ho ho! Look at that Stephen, a book!” Timothy Potter exclaimed.

“Well I’ll be. You don’t see many of them in little old Holford. Not enough people that know reading.”

“Always beyond me,” Timothy replied. “But no surprise that this one can. Stephen, this is the girl I was telling you about. The one that carried the flour. Who *claims* to know how to make glass,” Timothy added teasingly.

Matilda flipped roughly through her bible until she found the page with photos of glass blowing. She thrust it up at the elders.

“Would you look at that!?” Stephen said. “She might just be telling the truth Timothy. Amazing.”

“So did you salvage the family’s flour?” Timothy asked, still inspecting the image of glass.

“Most of it,” Matilda replied. “The Miller charged another obscene fee but we left someone standing guard while we moved the last of it. I don’t know how Holford lets him get away with it.”

The two old men looked at each other and burst into laughter.

“Let him get away with it? Ha! Dearie, there’s no other choice!”

“It’s just the way it’s always been,” Stephen added. “We work until we’re blue in the face. The Miller swoops in and takes a hefty portion, just because he can. Then the Baron takes a bite, and sometimes the King too. We’re left with just enough to get by. It’s the circle of life.”

“But it doesn’t need to be that way!” Matilda complained.

“I’m afraid it does,” Timothy told her with grave sincerity. “There’s no other way, never has been. Every miller since the dawn of time has known that they have the power. Arnold runs the only mill within miles so nobody is willing to risk losing access.”

“What about the old mill, the ruined one on the way to Stowey?”

“That hasn’t worked since my Pa was a kid. Folks say it’s cursed. Look, no one likes a miller. These kid’s grandparents knew that well enough, no offence. But there’s nothing anyone can do about it.”

On that cheery note, the old men wished the young ones a good evening and resumed their journey back to Holford. The siblings all returned to the Book, flipping through its pages and marvelling at the lifelike pictures.

But Matilda sat in silence, staring into the flames of the dying bonfire. The Miller's stranglehold over the village was so unfair.

If only there was something she could do about it.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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