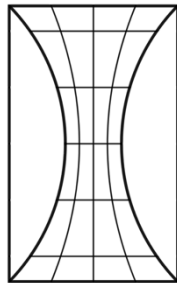


# THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



**THE WORLD THAT WAS**

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This book is a work of fiction woven around real history, real people and real science. Any references to historical events, people or places are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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**Can Matilda avert the solar calamity?**

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

*26 September 1124*

Matilda was soaking in her victory when a sharp pain suddenly exploded in her chest. She was flung from her feet and quickly lost amongst the ensuing chaos. Knights streamed towards the Earl who barked commands over the screaming onlookers, ordering his men to find the bowman.

Earl Robert cleared a space around Matilda and propped her up, revealing an arrow jutting out from her dress and a small pool of blood. The Earl, Baron and Bishop gathered around her, their faces etched with concern. Wasting no time, Sir Phillip ripped his knife through her dress with a practiced hand to examine the wound.

“Oh!” they all exclaimed in unison when greeted by the sight of Matilda’s chainmail. Even as she struggled to breath, her ribs almost certainly broken, Matilda knew that the Institute’s parting gift had saved her life. The shirt had split under the force of the assassin’s shot but it had prevented the arrowhead from tearing deeper into her skin. She pulled the arrow from the remnants of her dress, hands shaking as she registered her own blood upon the tip.

“There’s more to this woman than meets the eye,” Sir Phillip noted with admiration. “That’s one mighty fine suit of mail you’ve got there!”

Matilda gave a meek smile before passing out from the shock.

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The sky was dark when Matilda woke. She found herself inside a tiny square cell, barely wide enough for her to lie across. She was still in the tattered rags of her dress, though someone had kindly left a change of clothes by the heavy oak door. She sat up gingerly and also saw some mouldy bread with cheese beside a goblet of wine. Matilda could guess which of her hosts had provided each element.

Matilda shrugged off her rags and struggled out of her chainmail, wincing at the combined pain of her small cut and at least one broken rib from the arrow’s impact. She examined the wound by the moonlight that streamed through a small barred window. It was the width of her smallest finger but deep enough that she would have liked to stitch it. Taking her wine, she cleaned the wound before draining the rest of the goblet. She passed on the bread.

Matilda mournfully fingered the small tear in her chainmail, wishing she had the means to repair it. Knowing it still offered protection even in its flawed state, she donned both the mail and her new dress before examining her surroundings.

A quartet of guards were stationed outside her door, two from Bishop Godfrey and two from Baron Walter. Matilda heard them bickering but they ignored her calls.

“Shut up woman,” Godfrey’s guard eventually called out. “You might’ve impressed the Earl but the Bishop says you’re still his until the third day. Even if you are from the future, it’s just not natural.”

Even Walter's guards grunted their agreement.

Matilda returned to her blanket and pondered her predicament, wondering what more she could possibly show the following day.

Her elation at uncovering the Roman coins had been short-lived. The discovery of the Beau Street Hoard had fascinated her as a child and she had visited the coins on display in the Bath museum each summer. Her Institute friends had often joked that they were certain to be rich as there were treasure-troves to be found no matter where they were sent. Matilda was glad that such special coins could serve a more noble purpose, demonstrating knowledge that could only come from another time. She hoped that the stunt would convince people to at least consider her claims.

But she had no clue how to surpass the coin discovery. Without William's reinforcements or her tools, every idea paled in comparison. She slumped down against the wall, lost in thought. Each breath brought a distracting stab of pain and Matilda was still without answers when sleep finally claimed her.

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Matilda woke to thundering knocks upon the heavy cell door early the next morning. She barely had time to sit up before the door crashed open and Godfrey's rat-faced assistant strode into the cell.

"I beg your pardon!" Matilda exclaimed, suddenly fully awake.

"Get up," Peter ordered. "Quickly now!"

"Settle down. Why the rush?"

"The Earl is eager to show your treasure to his wife. And the Bishop wants you away from here without delay, before your corruption has time to spread. So move along!"

Matilda propped herself up and glared at the Assistant. "I'd have thought a priest would know to give a woman some privacy? Wouldn't want to risk corruption would you?"

"Be quick or I'll have the guards drag you out in whatever state they find you," he called as he left.

A guard sniggered from the doorway but abruptly stopped when he saw Matilda's slightly cocked head and deadpan stare. He reluctantly closed the door.

Matilda dragged herself from the floor, wincing from her broken ribs. She felt surprisingly refreshed, despite her total lack of a plan. Her hands were bound once more and she was led to the now familiar cart. It was empty besides the heavy chest of coins.

"You take good care of that for me," the Earl said with a smile as he rode past the cart. "Though I'm sure you could just find more. You had me worried after last night's antics but I hear you're relatively unscathed. I look forward to seeing whatever you have in store for us back in Bristol."

Matilda's stomach dropped.

They were just about to depart when the Young Priest vaulted into the back of the cart, a heavy sack slung over his shoulder.

“Sorry!” he apologised to the driver, who grunted and whipped the cart into motion. “Godfrey asked me to watch over the troublemaker.”

He sat opposite Matilda and gave her a warm smile but gratefully didn’t force conversation. Matilda settled in for another long ride, wincing in pain as the cart went over each bump, and started concocting a plan to fill the afternoon. She hoped that William would be waiting for her at the Earl’s castle but knew she needed a contingency.

She was deep in thought when the priest piped up.

“Having the Earl take up a shovel was truly inspired.”

Matilda stared at him vacantly, her mind still busy searching for a plan.

“What have you got planned next?” he asked cheerfully, reading her mind.

“I honestly don’t know,” Matilda admitted despairingly. “Nothing seems good enough. It seems my only hope is William waiting for me at the castle.”

The priest gave a thoughtful look. “You just need to outmanoeuvre Godfrey. It shouldn’t be too difficult, he’s not exactly dynamic. The Earl is furious with him after the foolish attempt on your life. The archer was found dead before anyone could question him but it doesn’t take a genius to guess who put him up to it.”

The casual discussion of the attempt on her life sent a chill down Matilda’s spine.

“Godfrey claimed ignorance,” the priest continued. “Said any number of God-fearing townsfolk could’ve hired the man. He knows the Earl can’t touch him, there’s already talk of unrest from Godfrey’s most loyal followers. So perhaps this might help with your idea?”

Matilda was puzzled as he reached into his sack and started to remove clothes. And then, a very familiar bag.

“Consider it an apology for doubting your outlandish claims.”

Matilda wasn’t even listening. Her eyes were fixed upon her satchel.

“I’d appreciate if you kept this from my colleagues,” the priest said in a hushed voice as he handed the bag to Matilda. “I’m sure things are missing, Godfrey tends to take whatever he wants.”

“Th...Thank you, so much,” Matilda stammered. “Thank you...gosh, I don’t even know your name!”

“I’m John,” he said with a smile.

Matilda instinctively peered over her shoulder to confirm Godfrey was far away before ripping open her satchel.

Nothing was in its right place but simply seeing her familiar belongings was comforting. Her valuable metals and spices were missing but the first item Matilda withdrew was much more precious. The second half of her bible. She picked up the torn tome and, unable to help herself, gave it a kiss.

“Godfrey will be furious when he returns to Bath and finds that missing. I’d end up in chains with you. Probably worse.”

Matilda felt a pang of concern. “True! How will you ever go back to living with the Bishop?”

“I’m not going back,” John said with conviction. “Hostage life never suited me. I intend to witness the rest of your spectacle and then slip away into the night. So please make it worth it.”

Matilda nodded and resumed pawing through her possessions. Everything was broken or covered in dried mud. Her grandmother’s engagement ring was missing, the emerald no doubt a magnet for Godfrey’s greedy eyes. Matilda withdrew Richie’s toy soldier, smiling at the memory of painting with him while belting out their favourite songs.

At the very bottom of the bag was a crumpled piece of paper and tears welled in Matilda’s eyes before she had even unfolded it. It had been a year since she’d laid eyes on her family. The photo of them all eating ice-cream by the coast was the next best thing. Her only proof that they had ever existed. It was a fond memory, though now bittersweet. Tears streamed down Matilda’s face but it was exactly the motivation she needed.

She spent the following hours planning her approach, one that would undercut Godfrey’s best efforts to vilify her. She flipped through her ruined bible for inspiration but each idea felt underwhelming or incomplete. The Book continually opened to her annotated anatomy diagrams, which John said had particularly fascinated the Bishop. The seed of an idea started to form.

The sun had just begun its descent when they arrived back to Bristol. John motioned for Matilda to return the satchel.

“Don’t worry,” he said after seeing the scandal in Matilda’s eyes. “You’ll get it back. I promise.”

Matilda reluctantly handed the bag to John, though she hid the photo of her family in her boot. Merely knowing that they were close filled her with energy.

She needed the extra motivation as there was no sign of William or anyone from Holford when the cart finally arrived at Bristol castle. To make matters worse, the local townsfolk had erected both gallows and a pyre while they were away.

*Giving Godfrey options, no doubt.*

The Bishop rode directly to the keep but the Earl and Baron pulled up to supervise as attendants unloaded the treasure from the wagon. With everyone focused on Matilda and the chest, John and his illicit cargo slipped away without notice.

“I hope today is as stirring as yesterday’s exploits,” Earl Robert said excitedly.

“There will be less treasure, unfortunately,” Matilda replied.

“Never mind that, just prove Godfrey wrong. I want the viper gone from my castle.”

The Earl’s men hauled the chest down from the cart and lugged it into the keep. The nobles retired indoors to show off the treasure but Matilda remained in the cart, surrounded by guards and wondering if her half-baked plan would be enough to keep her audience engaged.

The nobles dallied indoors, no doubt enjoying a leisurely meal. Matilda's stomach grumbled – Godfrey's mouldy bread a cruel memory – and after a long while, a guard delivered her some fresh crusty bread. Matilda was absentmindedly gnawing on it when she heard a commotion at the castle gate. She stood in the cart and peered towards the gatehouse, hoping against hope that William had finally arrived.

“Get the Earl!” a gatekeeper cried as he ran towards the keep. “There's a mob from Bath demanding to see the time nomad! Whatever the blazes that is.”

Earl Robert and his guests emerged from the keep and marched to the walls above the castle gate. Matilda couldn't hear what was said but saw sweeping gestures followed by strong protest from Godfrey. After a short consultation with his steward, Robert descended the steps and marched towards Matilda and her cart.

“It appears yesterday's exploits have earned you quite the following,” the Earl told her. “Half of Bath followed us here to see what you'll do next. They've inflamed my own townsfolk too, the streets were full for as far as I could see!”

“Goodness,” was all Matilda could manage.

“They're on the verge of rioting but setting my guards upon them would be a terrible look, no matter what the Bishop might say. He's concerned the crowd might side with you.”

A sudden idea struck Matilda.

“Let them in, like yesterday. And, give them some food.”

Robert looked perplexed. Matilda forgot that feeding peasants wasn't second nature for an Earl.

“Nothing extravagant, just bread and water. They've travelled far and will love you for it all the same. It will calm them down and give us time to set up my next demonstration. You've still got the stage in front of the keep but I'll need a long table and three pigs.”

“Not that fable with the wolf I hope. Or is it possible to blow down a stone structure with nothing but wind in the future?”

“It is actually,” Matilda said absentmindedly. “But no, nothing like that. I promise it's relevant.”

The Earl looked at Matilda quizzically. “Madness. And pigs aren't cheap.”

“Do you think seventeen thousand silver coins might buy me a few pigs?” Matilda shot back with a cheeky smile.

Unable to argue with that, the Earl gave the order. He returned to the gatehouse and addressed the crowd directly, prompting a loud cheer.

“You'd better have something good planned,” Baron Walter warned, making Matilda doubt herself once more.

The castle yard filled with servants carrying loaves of bread and rolling barrels for the townsfolk. The crowd was let in and they collected food before assembling to watch the final preparations. Three pigs were brought to the stage and slaughtered with brutal efficiency. Matilda grimaced but the crowd watched the



purposeful violence completely nonplussed. A long trestle table was placed on the stage and the pigs were unceremoniously distributed along it. Blood pooled on the freshly laid planks.

The nobles took their seats and Matilda moved to stand beside the freshly killed pigs. She was surprised by the size of the crowd. There were easily over a thousand in attendance, with more collecting food from hastily erected stalls and a steady dribble continuing to arrive through the castle gate.

“Good afternoon everyone,” the Earl began. “This is the second day of our hearing for Miss Matilda...” Matilda waved to the crowd. “...who was arrested by Bishop Godfrey several days ago on charges of heresy and behaviour most unnatural. Matilda argues that her actions are perfectly explainable and none can deny that she has brought prosperity to the regions she’s touched. In the name of justice, I have granted Matilda three days to plead her case.

“Yesterday was truly extraordinary. Claiming to be from another time, Matilda dragged us to Bath in search of long-lost Roman treasure. From the time of Christ. As those of you from Bath can attest, she delivered exactly as promised.”

There were excited whispers from the Bristol crowd.

“Her argument, while supremely irregular, is quite convincing. Even Bishop Godfrey has conceded that our visitor could be from another time, though his charges of heresy and unnatural behaviour remain unchanged.

“Today Matilda has promised a second demonstration to prove her innocence. How she plans to do that with three butchered swine is beyond me so I too will wait in anticipation. Godfrey, anything you wish to say before she begins?”

The Bishop angrily dismissed Robert with a wave.

“Very well. Matilda, if you will?”

Hands still shackled, Matilda strode to the centre of the stage. She was bemused to still feel a familiar pit in her stomach at presenting before such a large crowd. Thinking of Harry, she elected for a charismatic approach.

“Thank you Earl Robert. I see some familiar faces from the dig. Didn’t we work you hard enough yesterday?”

There was some scattered laughter from the crowd.

“As the Earl said, Bishop Godfrey accuses me of unnatural behaviour. But what he failed to mention was that the Bishop arrested me in the act of cutting up a recently deceased man. One of my good friends.”

There were gasps from the crowd. The Earl looked shocked that Matilda would incriminate herself. Godfrey beamed with glee.

“I understand your horror,” Matilda continued, “but please, allow me to explain.”

Matilda knew she walked a dangerous line and risked losing the crowd. It was time for some audience participation.

“Are there any barbers here today?”

There were a pair of wary cries from the crowd and Matilda invited the two barbers up on stage. One had recently arrived from Bath.

“I’ll need a third assistant for this demonstration,” Matilda called out. “If there are no more barbers, then perhaps someone that has experience with battlefield wounds?”

“I’ll help.” Matilda jumped as a call came from directly behind her and Sir Phillip stepped forward.

“Thank you Sir,” Matilda said, regaining her composure and asking him to stand beside the other two volunteers.

“Everyone knows that barbers provide vital services, beyond just trimming beards. Tooth extraction. Sewing a wound. Amputations. These are common procedures, no?” Matilda asked the barbers, prompting an enthusiastic nod and a nonchalant shrug.

“These valuable services reduce suffering for sick family members or save the lives of injured neighbours. Bishop, have you never had a tooth removed by a hasty visit from a barber surgeon?”

Godfrey mumbled something unintelligible.

“So there is nothing unnatural or heretical about these valuable services. I ask you all, is amputation not a form of dissection?”

The crowd’s murmurs were unsure.

“Understanding how the body works is key to saving countless lives. Today I hope to show you the lessons I sought to teach my village before the Bishop’s interruption.”

Godfrey leapt up in protest. “You cannot teach these people your filth!”

“No, Bishop!” Matilda said firmly, the nerve of her assertiveness sending a disapproving ripple through the crowd. “I won’t let you deprive the world of an ability to save lives. Today’s work is butchery at worst. There are no human bodies so there can be no claims of desecration. Swine are not ideal but they will suffice. So let us begin.”

Unable to find an appropriate rebuttal, Godfrey sat down in defeat.

Matilda set each of her volunteers behind a pig and talked them through the first steps of the dissections, using each beast to highlight a different system within the body. The volunteers handled their tasks with grit and determination, unfazed by the gory work and eager to demonstrate their surgical abilities for the assembled crowd. Matilda was holding up a pair of lungs to describe the circulatory system when she was interrupted mid-sentence.

A guard elbowed his way through the crowd and ran onto the stage to whisper in the Earl's ear. Behind him, the trickle of townsfolk entering the castle had become a flood, complete with carts and beasts of burden. Familiar faces led the swell. At its head was William.

Matilda yelped in excitement and vaulted off the stage, weaving her shackled wrists through the crowd before the guards could apprehend her. She sprinted across the castle courtyard and ploughed into William, navigating her bindings to draw him into a bear hug so tight that her broken ribs screamed.

“You made it! You came!”

William grinned sheepishly, embarrassed at Matilda's affection.

“Of course I did. You didn't think I'd abandon you?”

“I was so worried,” Matilda confessed. “I took everyone to Bath to find Roman coins so they'd believe I'm actually from the future. And I got shot with an arrow. But when we arrived back today and there was no sign of you...I thought I'd have to do this alone.”

“Never!” William replied, looking genuinely scandalised. “It took some time to convince everyone what had happened, and given you'd told the Earl, to persuade them that you were from the future. Then when they finally understood, *everyone* insisted on coming along to help which took even more time! Well, almost everyone. The Brewers and their lot stayed behind. I really hope there aren't bandits in the Quantock hills because there's barely a soul left to protect Holford!”

Matilda looked over William's shoulder and saw that he was right. They were all there, each person bearing the fruits of their year's labour and looking weary from the hard walk. Luke Ploughman's cart carried her metallic pod and a collection of Elizabeth's plants. Even Father Thomas had journeyed from Nether Stowey, accompanied by the repentant large thug who'd restrained Matilda behind the ruined hut at Godfrey's command. His weaselly friend was nowhere to be seen.

Seeing the villagers with all of their projects, an ingenious plan instantly formed in Matilda's mind. She was saved!

“We're going to need more pigs...” Matilda said airily.

The guards finally caught up to her and grabbed Matilda's shackles. Ignoring them, she greeted her fellow villagers. Even Rachel had made the journey. Heavily pregnant, she had ridden with the recovering Roger beside Matilda's plough in the back of Luke Ploughman's cart.

“We had to stop to rest overnight,” William told her, “and some of the older villagers had to take a slower pace but they should arrive by tomorrow morning. We somehow collected extra people along the way. They insisted on coming along when they heard what was happening.”

Matilda couldn't believe her eyes. Matthew and Ralph followed behind the convoy, large saw blades swinging wildly from their own overstuffed cart. Matilda welcomed them all, urging them to grab food and to settle in with the rest of the crowd. Only then did she remember the audience that she had left waiting. She urged her guards back towards the stage, making a beeline for the Baron and the Earl.

Matilda took great pains to explain the significance of the new arrivals. She outlined her plans for the next day and breathed a huge sigh of relief when Earl Robert approved. She turned to address the crowd waiting before her.

“Everyone, your attention please! Apologies for dashing off but some very distinguished guests have arrived. We’re joined by the inhabitants of Holford, a village in the shadow of the Quantock Hills. The village I have been honoured to call my home for the past year.

“These amazing people have journeyed far to show you the wonders that can be achieved by ordinary folk possessing the knowledge of the future. And show you they will, for tomorrow we will hold a festival, the likes of which you have never seen. There will be food and fighting. Dancing and handicrafts. I promise it will be a festival to remember.”

The crowd thronged with excitement and the newly arrived Holford villagers were warmly welcomed. They were instant celebrities and locals rushed to befriend a Holfordian.

“But before tomorrow,” Matilda continued, “let me finish the demonstration I so rudely disrupted. Rest assured that these beautiful beasts won’t go to waste. At the conclusion of the demonstration, there will be a feast.”

The crowd met this news with an almighty cheer.

Matilda resumed her demonstration with renewed energy, calling upon Astrid to help show how to cut out specific organs from the circulatory, respiratory, nervous, digestive and reproductive systems. The crowd correctly named most of the organs as the barbers removed them, getting particular bawdy with the reproductive system. Some more outgoing folk hazarded guesses at the organs’ functions before Matilda described their true role, associated diseases and how to fix them.

The crowd was divided between those fully enthralled in Matilda’s work and others more preoccupied with socialising. Matilda completed her demonstration as the sun started to set and the Earl ordered that several spits be erected over Matilda’s pyre for roasting the pigs. The Earl supplemented Matilda’s contribution with additional pigs and even some barrels of ale. By the time the sun had fully set, the castle courtyard was full of singing and food and music.

The Archer family were permitted to bring food to Matilda and they sat together to plan logistics for the following day’s activities. Ever the killjoy, Godfrey insisted to Earl Robert that Matilda remained his prisoner and that she should be locked away once more. The crowd let Godfrey know they thought of his decision, pelting pork scraps in his direction.

Matilda didn’t care. She was elated by the arrival of her dear friends and the joy that her more recent acquaintances were taking from the spontaneous party. William, Elizabeth, Margery and John insisted on escorting her to the dungeon to spend the night together but were all shooed away at the jail entrance.

Godfrey followed Matilda all the way to her cell, lingering by her door’s iron bars as the jailor retreated to his post.

“You’ve done well,” the Bishop conceded. “You have the crowd eating from the palm of your hand and Earl Robert fawns over you. Enjoy it while you can. I’ll find a way to have your head. I promise.”

His utter determination sent a shiver down Matilda’s spine.

“I pity you Godfrey,” she called as the old man began to slowly ascend the spiral stairs. He turned to face her. “Your lonely bishop life, with its incense, cathedrals and gold crosses. It has sapped all of the imagination and wonder from your mind. You poor little man.”

Godfrey looked at her with a vacant stare before leaving the dungeon without a word. Matilda couldn’t know for sure but she felt that she had finally found a chink in the Bishop’s armour of arrogance.

She turned to her familiar cell with its cold stone walls and old rushes scattered across the floor. It reminded Matilda of her cave.

Matilda savoured going to sleep without the pressure of finding a new idea. She was excited for the festival. A chance to show off Holford’s hard work and allow others to participate in the spectacle. Matilda took Godfrey’s threat seriously but couldn’t help smiling. There would be no closing Pandora’s box, even if he somehow managed to take her life. Word of Matilda’s teachings would be out in the world.

Her mission would be a success.

## CHAPTER FORTY

*27 September 1124*

Bristol was abuzz the next morning. Fuelled by free food and drink, the revelry had carried on late into the night and many people were undeniably worse for wear. Yet even they were up and about, bleary-eyed and grumpy but driven by the same expectant excitement.

John was baffled at how quickly news of the festivities had travelled. Even before sunrise, a flood of people began to arrive from the surrounding villages, lured by the promised festival and a chance to glimpse the mysterious red-haired woman rumoured to be from another time.

So great was the influx that John and Adelard struggled to move along the bustling streets leading into the castle. After passing through the large gatehouse, they escaped the crush by climbing the castle walls to watch the festival take shape.

“They’ve been busy,” Adelard noted as Matilda’s villagers darted around below. The villagers had spent the previous evening planning a meticulous layout for their displays. Fire pits were dug, tents erected and long tables set up to display the villagers’ wares. The aroma of exotic foods filled the air and bolts of colourful fabric were hung around as makeshift banners, adding even more life to the bustling festival.

Eager to capitalise on the swell of potential customers, Bristol’s townsfolk also set up stalls in the castle courtyard. There were so many that the Earl’s steward opened up the outer courtyard for additional stalls. It was the biggest festival John had ever seen.

The Holford villagers were in their element, each knowing the specific role they had to play.

“That’s Matilda’s protégé,” John told Adelard, pointing out the shaggy-haired boy who ran around in a frenzy, shouting orders to ensure that everything was just right.

“Amazing to see such respect for one so young.”

Adelard was right. William was obeyed instantly, mixing Holford and Bristol stalls to create specific zones dedicated to particular crafts and increase the transfer of knowledge.

An enormous crowd had gathered in the castle courtyards by the time Matilda was finally escorted from the dungeon. Guilty or not, she was responsible for the spontaneous festival which awarded her instant celebrity. She was greeted with ear-splitting yells from the crowd as she was marched onto the makeshift stage, a conflicting mix of mocking jeers and adoring cheers. The guards elected to leave Matilda’s arms and feet shackled, though it didn’t seem to bother her in the slightest. She just stood on the stage soaking in the crowd’s mixed energy while waiting for the nobles to arrive.

The doors of the castle keep finally opened, prompting even more noise from the crowd. The Earl and his wife led the way. They were dressed in surprisingly simple clothes which looked just like those of their subjects, though each garment was crafted with incredible care and still using the finest materials. Behind them came the Baron and the Bishop. Baron Walter revelled at the size of the crowd and the good favour of

his Earl. Godfrey was the complete opposite, surly and withdrawn. His eyes widened as the full scale of the audience became apparent.

The nobles made their way back onto the stage and settled on their bench while the Earl called the crowd to silence.

“Good morning and welcome!” The crowd erupted. “I can already tell that today promises to be a most interesting affair. But first, a reminder of the serious reason for today’s proceedings. Bishop Godfrey?”

Godfrey sprang up enthusiastically.

“My dear flock, I am burdened to reiterate the charges faced by this woman that stands before us.” Elements of the crowd booed and one particularly bold man yelled at Godfrey to get on with the festival. “She showed extreme luck in unearthing her treasure and her anatomy lessons were filled with dubious contradictions of the widely accepted medical humours.”

“Rich coming from the walking contradiction himself,” Adelard muttered to John.

“Do not let her silver and feasts blind you to her wickedness. She is a dangerous woman and wishes to guide you down a treacherous path. A path of sin. Toying with an animal as you butcher it could be called excessive or wasteful. But to do the same with the still-warm corpse of a fellow human is a crime against God himself.”

With that Godfrey finally succeeded in sobering the crowd. A small number of particularly pious quietly exited the castle as Godfrey took his seat.

“Matilda? Anything to say?” Earl Robert asked.

Matilda walked slowly to the front of the stage. Some onlookers hurled abuse but most of the crowd stood deathly silent, ready to hang off her every word.

“There is always something scary about the unknown, the new or the unusual. We’ve all felt it as children, scared of the depths of an unexplored forest or the flame of a blacksmith’s forge. Only as we grew did we discover paths to beautiful forest glades or appreciate the awesome utility of the forge’s fire.

“The Bishop has made serious allegations but you saw yesterday how I only wish to heal. Today you will see firsthand that my gifts have nothing to do with sorcery or wickedness. Is the blacksmith a sorcerer for hardening metal by quenching with oil? Is the brewer a warlock for turning barley into beer or a midwife a witch for guiding new life safely into the world? I think not.

“You will see that there is nothing special about the knowledge I have gifted. Anyone can do it. Many of you have already seen the scale of what is on display today. Surely keeping track of every single project would be too much for any one mind to follow, even for the most powerful of sorcerers. I assure you that I won’t be in a dark corner whispering incantations or casting spells.”

This earned scattered laughter from the crowd.

“I intend to spend the day in the company of our esteemed hosts, explaining how each innovation works. I’m sure that the holy presence of the Bishop will only further reduce any chance of wickedness.

“Which leaves the rest of you to enjoy the day free from their supervision. Embrace the unknown and try to learn something new. But most of all, enjoy!”

There was a rush as villagers raced back to their stalls and others dashed off to see what was on offer. The festival was suddenly in full swing. The air came alive with unusual music and the cries of excited children.

John and Adelard pushed against the streaming crowd and back towards the stage.

“What are you doing here?” Godfrey snarled.

“I wanted to introduce Adelard to Matilda,” John said with more confidence than he felt.

“Why would she want to meet some lousy monk?” Godfrey sniped, only to be cut off by Matilda.

“Adelard!? This is *the* Adelard of Bath?”

Everyone but John was surprised by her enthusiasm.

“Yes, my lady,” Adelard replied with a bemused smile.

“As salam alaykum,” Matilda said with a bow. “It’s an honour to meet you. You’ll be pleased to know that your work on Arabic numbers greatly influenced English science and your translation of Euclid’s Elements was the oldest to survive to my time.”

Adelard looked genuinely touched.

“I didn’t realise we had such notable thinkers in our midst,” Earl Robert said. “Please brother Adelard, you and your friend must join us.”

“Well,” Matilda said excitedly, “what would you like to see first?”

The Redhead led the Earl, his wife, the Baron, Godfrey and Peter around the stalls. Everyone hung off her every word. Eager to get the same experience of the festivities as his subjects, the Earl ordered his knights and retainers to follow behind at a specified distance. They were visibly uncomfortable at keeping so far from those they were sworn to protect.

It turned out that the Earl wanted to understand everything and had a flood of questions for both Matilda and his subjects. John found it comical to see the Earl, dressed in his peasant clothes, comparing the size of local pumpkins to the larger ones grown in Holford. The commonfolk shared his amusement but, despite stifled giggles, John marvelled that they all left with an increased respect for their relatable leader.

The Bishop was furious that the Earl was so engaged and that the event was going so well. And yet he too couldn’t resist being drawn in by what Matilda was saying. John and Adelard shared the sentiment. A chance to finally understand the Book’s contents, directly from the source.

Matilda led them around the yard, introducing villagers and their projects. Matilda humanised each of the stallholders, emphasising the sheer effort that went into each project and the unique contributions that each person had made. She served as a bridge between the vastly different worlds of the Earl and the commoners,



drawing the conversation along and making the commonfolk feel comfortable talking in his presence. A masterful decision, this only further emphasised that the villagers had done the work themselves and that Matilda was merely a guiding hand.

Matilda was a gracious host, taking the time to answer all questions, even if they had already been asked before. She also engaged with stallholders from beyond her village, praising their own craftsmanship and telling the nobles the natural philosophies behind how a particular bread was made or why a wooden axe handle returned less shock when shaped a certain way. She tactfully explained what could be done to improve various wares and there wasn't a single stall that didn't buzz with excitement as the group left for the next tantalising display.

At midday the party returned to the stage where a long table had been prepared for the nobles. A decadent array of dishes was spread along the table, a combination of Matilda's culinary introductions and the finest local fares. Matilda called upon William's youngest sister to exhibit the exotic uncooked plants used to make each dish. Matilda described the distant lands of their origin before getting each cook to personally introduce their dishes.

The nobles gushed praise, declaring each delicacy more marvellous than the one before. Some lit the tongue on fire while others made it sing.

"No more!" Earl Robert cried in mock distress. "I cannot take another bite. This food is more than fit for a king. I swear, my father will have my head if he learns that he missed such brilliance!"

Matilda complied and instead summoned some Holford performers onto the stage to perform music for the assembled crowd using their strange instruments. John marvelled at their playing. The instruments looked familiar but the sounds were completely ethereal.

At the insistence of her villagers, Matilda herself took up an instrument and, despite her shackles and burned hand, joined in a handful of songs. She started with a traditional piece that transported John back to the fireplace in his parents' hall before transitioning to an energetic number that invoked images of running through a forest. The music was so eclectic and unusual that members of the crowd gasped at its quick twists and turns, bursting into cheers when it came to an abrupt end.

"And on that note," Matilda called over the applause, "I think it's time we returned to the festivities."

She urged the crowd away and directed her fellow performers to play another lively jig to reenergise the nobles, who still looked comatose from their meal.

Fortunately, the afternoon proved to be even more interactive.

Matilda first took them to a makeshift archery range where attendees compared traditional longbows to the strangest bow John had ever seen.

"It's called a recurve bow," Matilda explained. "Easier to transport than a longbow and the power can be adjusted with different limbs."

She made each noble have a shot. Earl Robert and Baron Walter proved the most competent, though Adelard was surprisingly close. John's first attempt missed altogether but Godfrey's frail arms struggled to draw the bow at all.

The group followed Matilda to a giant metal sphere which looked to John like the eye of some enormous cyclops. They each clambered inside as Matilda told them how she had journeyed from the future and lost her partner.

Next, Matilda led them to a large loom, more complicated than any John had ever seen before.

"Come my lady," Matilda urged the Earl's wife, who had kept to herself all day despite showing keen interest in the developments. "Feel this cloth. Have you ever seen a weave so fine?"

"Goodness no," she said in awe as she marvelled at the patterns William's mother had managed to create. "It's so delicate. And woven directly into the fabric."

"Come," Matilda prompted. "Have Emma show you how it works."

William's mother led the Earl's wife around to the loom and in no time, she was creating her own brilliantly coloured patterns.

"Good lord Matilda," Earl Robert remarked. "She's a natural. And I've never seen her engage so quickly. You have a real talent."

"It's no talent my lord, merely courteous treatment. I've been watching as we traipse from stall to stall, she's much shrewder than she's given credit."

Earl Robert was pleased with Matilda's appraisal of his wife, looking at her in a new light before walking to the blacksmith stall next door. Baron Walter gave her a wordless nod of approval.

As the day progressed, it became clear that the Earl clearly saw the economic and societal benefit of Matilda's inventions. Still, Godfrey tried at every turn to convince Earl Robert that the tools and techniques weren't sanctioned by the Church and wove all sorts of fanciful stories about how the creations could corrupt.

"Who knows what evil could be concocted with this device," he said as Holford's priest demonstrated his printing press. "Giving commoners access to the written word is a recipe for depravity."

"Come now Godfrey," Matilda said, as though she were talking to a petulant child. "Even you can't deny the marvel of a device that could print hundreds of bibles in only a handful of years. Surely that is a machine that can do the Lord's work?"

Godfrey reluctantly approached the press and the Holford priest delicately showed his superior how the device worked.

"Just rearrange the letters, like so. Then turn that wheel."

Godfrey spun the press down, giving it an extra squeeze for good measure.

"There you have it," Matilda said as she handed the page to the Bishop. "Page one of the Godfrey Bible."

Godfrey beamed despite himself and rushed to show Peter.

“A little smeared,” Matilda whispered to Adelard as they moved on. “Amateur!”

John marvelled at her bravado.

Dusk had just started to fall when Matilda called the group to a halt. They were all weary but the Earl’s enthusiasm remained.

“My lord,” their red-haired guide said. “I think it would be wise if we considered calling the festivities to a close soon.”

“But there’s still at least a quarter of the stalls left to go.”

“I know, but your party looks exhausted. There is only so much a mind can absorb in a single day.”

“Very well,” the Earl said begrudgingly.

“We could,” Matilda continued immediately, “resume the last of the tour tomorrow, before you announce your verdict.”

“That would be good...”

“And although it has been a big day of revelry, why not treat your subjects to another feast. There’s already plenty of food.”

Earl Robert paused in thought.

“Bah, why not?!” he cried, summoning his steward. “Bring more ale and pigs, the crowd is even larger than yesterday.”

Hearing of another free feed breathed a second wind into the crowd and they swarmed in to help set up. Matilda’s musicians mounted the stage once more and the party was soon back in full swing. Matilda sat on the stage with the nobles, discussing the day’s events and answering their many questions.

When darkness had fully settled in she surprised them all by withdrawing one final wonder.

“It’s called a telescope. A pair of lenses that bend light to make distant objects look much closer. Here, look at the moon.”

“Amazing,” the Earl whispered. “Truly amazing! Look at all of those pockmarks! What I would’ve given for one of these on the battlefield.”

“That’s one use for them. But look, we can find the planets. Mars. Saturn. The same principle can be used to make impossibly small objects appear bigger. To learn about the body and disease.”

“I need one,” the Earl said insisted as he peered into the device once more. “Why haven’t I met the craftsman responsible for *this* marvel?”

“He’s unfortunately no longer with us,” Matilda replied mournfully. “It was his body that I was dissecting the night Godfrey abducted me. This is the problem with my knowledge being held by so few.”

Earl Robert dolefully handed the telescope to the next in line.

Adelard, always obsessed with the night sky, was similarly amazed by the device.

“You were right about the world being round,” Matilda whispered to him.

When Adelard was finally done, Matilda invited the crowd to follow the nobles. One by one they came onto the stage to peer up at planets in the clear night sky. John savoured the unique sight of the commoners joining the rich, all having eaten their fill and enjoyed the same entertainment.

The music eventually stopped and the musicians summoned Matilda. Everyone expected her to pick up an instrument once again but this time she merely stood in the centre of the stage. She nodded to her musicians and they started a haunting tune that sent a shiver down John’s spine. And then Matilda started to sing.

The lyrics were foreign but the raw emotion of the song wasn’t lost on a single member of the crowd. Matilda sang like a wounded swan, every word dripping with sorrow. There wasn’t a dry eye in sight by the time the last note quivered from her mouth. Not even Matilda’s.

A deathly silence fell over the crowd as they processed the emotion of her song. With the same tact he had shown since his raid on Matilda’s mill, Godfrey chose that moment to remind the Earl that he had promised three nights of imprisonment.

“Very well,” he said heavily as he stood to address his people. “My loyal subjects, today has been a day of wonders. Truly. But a young woman’s life hangs in the balance. Matilda will return to the dungeon for the night and I will weigh the evidence I have seen. Tomorrow morning, I will share my judgement.”

The Earl’s words cut through Matilda’s trance and incensed the crowd. In an instant, the good will of the food and drink was shattered and the crowd erupted into boos and profanity.

Godfrey tried to order silence which only increased the heckling. Fights broke out among the crowd.

“If I may?” Matilda asked gently.

The Earl gestured her forward.

“My friends. Please, be calm.” The crowd stilled. “I thank you all for being here today. For your open minds and, especially my neighbours from Holford, for your open hearts. Savour today, for we can never truly know what will come tomorrow. Enjoy the music, company and plentiful food while you can. I will see you all in the morning.”

With that, Matilda allowed herself to be led away by the guards. With Adelard’s encouragement, John insisted on following and was joined by William. Godfrey voiced his protests once more though the Earl peevishly waved him away.

“I thought you priests believed in compassion. Let them accompany her on this final night.”

The Bishop stormed off and Robert continued quietly, “Keep a close eye on her. I don’t trust that man, he’s not finished yet.”

The pair followed Matilda into the dungeon, standing guard outside her door and listening as the merriment continued outside.

Yet another gift from the future.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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