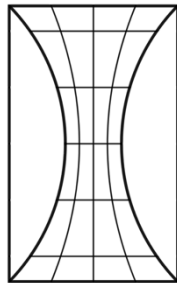


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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ISBN: 978-0-6458509-0-1

First published by StoryPlot Studios in 2023

www.the-world-that-was.com

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

6 February 1124

John stared longingly out of the library's small window. The sky was grey and dreary yet people passed through the palace gate below and into the town of Bath. Coming and going as they pleased. John envied their freedom.

The scratch of Adelard's writing drew John's focus back indoors and onto the stack of parchment before him. Progress on Godfrey's Book had slowed to a crawl and John had resorted to consolidating his notes to search for additional clues he might've missed. Yet still the text made little sense.

"This is impossible!" John cried out, tossing his quill onto the writing desk. It ricocheted onto the floor, the sound reverberating around the Bishop's small library.

"Is it just?" Adelard asked, looking over at John with a hearty chuckle. "The impatience of youth. It's undoubtedly it's slower than you'd hoped, but translating a text is difficult work. Let alone from an obscure dialect that no soul speaks. Add in the complex subject matter, then remove the first half of the text and the task seems nigh on impossible. It's a wonder you haven't torn out your remaining hair. You've done well to get this far. It'll just take time."

Adelard's compliment cooled John's frustration. "But how long Adelard? I don't have time!"

"Ha! You've got plenty of time, boy! I'm afraid the Bishop has you firmly in his clutches. From where I stand, you're barely off your mother's teat and will see many more moons yet. I suspect the Book will take years to fully comprehend, even if it was in Latin."

John sighed in resignation. "I'll still be locked in this room when Godfrey's cathedral is finished, though with luck we'll have a new bishop by then. Father Cuthbert will probably still be teaching us initiates. I don't think death could stop him."

"Religious life isn't such a bad existence," Adelard reassured. "There's food in the kitchens and a solid roof over your head. Put in a few tough years now and you could escape to a rural parish, out from under the Bishop's thumb."

John pondered the idea. "It doesn't sound totally abhorrent... I was always destined to become a priest, being father's youngest. But what I really want is to travel the world, like you."

"Ah yes," Adelard said wistfully. "Life on the road is uniquely free. Each day brings a different sight and new people. I can see the appeal to a caged sparrow like you. It's not easy, mind. There are many long hungry days and danger always keeps you on your toes. I don't know how you'd fare...the priest life has turned you soft," Adelard poked with a twinkle in his eye.

"I could join a Crusade," John countered. "Surely they could use a budding priest to sanctify their journey, in exchange for my passage and a bit of protection."

“I don’t know which is funnier,” Adelard roared. “The thought of *you* whipping the masses into a zealous frenzy or scrawny little John armed with spear and struggling under the weight of a shirt of mail. Either way, the Holy Land would fall in days!”

They both burst into laughter. Adelard always knew how to lighten the mood.

John collected his quill before begrudgingly turning back to the impossible task of cataloguing the unfamiliar words and strange topics locked in Godfrey’s tattered Book. Adelard strolled over and rustled through John’s notes.

“What I would give for that other half...” Adelard said wistfully.

“What I would give to meet the author!” John rebutted. “How did he learn so much, about so many topics? I wonder who he is?”

“A singularly strange man,” Adelard agreed. “Why write such a masterwork in English? Surely it would reach a wider audience in Latin, or perhaps Arabic. Even the script is strange. I’ve never seen such perfectly formed characters, repeated identically page after page. Your writing isn’t quite as good but the practice is paying off. Your notes are pristine!”

“It’s never enough for Godfrey,” John replied grumpily. “This cursed splint doesn’t help either. How much longer must it stay on?”

“You want to be certain it has fully healed this time, those guards didn’t hesitate to re-break it,” Adelard noted with concern. “I’d guess another week or two.”

“It could’ve been worse,” John said. “Who’d have thought that all those years of fighting my older brothers would help some day. I even managed to give a little back in return,” John added with a grin.

“Yes but was it worth it?” Adelard asked, sage as ever. “The Bishop’s guards are brutes at the best of times but now their eyes blaze with bloody murder each time they catch sight of you. I’ve heard them. They hold no love for you. Watch yourself...”

As if on cue, the library door burst open and one of the Bishop’s guards strode into the room. He was quickly followed by Godfrey himself, dressed in frumpy formal robes for a busy day of errands. His pompous assistant followed on his heels.

“What’s this chatter?” Godfrey barked impatiently. “There’s work to do. You’ve progress to report?”

“We were just discussing John’s work to date, Your Eminence,” Adelard answered diplomatically. “And pondering the tome’s origin. The author must be a truly unique and knowledgeable man.”

Godfrey paused, a rare look of mirth in his eyes. “Like no man you’ve ever met, I’d imagine. Novice, show me your work.”

The Bishop swept over to the desk by the window and peered over John’s shoulder. His clammy breath flowed past John’s neck, making his stomach churn.

“Dammit boy!” Godfrey cried, clapping the back of John’s head without warning and making him bite his tongue. A metallic taste filled his mouth. “Those are the same pages you showed me yesterday. I need something new!”

Despite his aching tongue, John made to respond but Adelard came to his aid. “We’re reviewing the previous work, Bishop. To confirm there’s nothing we’ve missed.”

“Very well,” Godfrey said, unconvinced. “Cease the chatter and get back to work, these endless delays are testing my patience.” He looked at John. “You’d better have something new when I return this evening. There are others who can speak English.”

John seethed but Adelard gave a silent look of warning as he ushered the Bishop from the room. “Leave it with us Your Eminence. I was just telling Brother John how laborious translation work can be. But there’s good progress, I’m sure of it.”

The Bishop grumbled as he was led from the room but didn’t give a backwards glance.

Adelard closed the door and John cried out in frustration. “He’s impossible!”

Adelard hushed him urgently, a concerned eye glued to the door. “Quiet boy!”

They waited until the Bishop’s footsteps had disappeared. Only then did Adelard relax.

“I can’t do this Adelard,” John said, tugging at his sore tongue. “The seminary. This stupid Book. I just want to be home, with my family.”

Adelard stepped over and gave John a consoling hug. “I understand, friend. Change is hard. Yet it is the only constant in life. Life itself is change. Best to focus on things we can control. Shall we go for a walk?”

“No, thanks. I just need some time alone. This is all so infuriating.”

Adelard understood and gave a consoling look. “It will get better, with time. But have some space, take care and I’ll see you for supper.”

John cupped his head in his hands as Adelard gathered his things. He heard the door close and waited again for the footsteps to fade away.

Then he leapt into action.

Godfrey’s casual abuse was the final straw. He needed to leave. For good.

John had learned from his previous escape attempts. There would be no witnesses this time. No sack of belongings. He’d memorised the guards movements and knew where they loitered. He had a plan. This time he would break free.

John collected his cloak and pocketed what possessions he could, taking trinkets to trade on the road but leaving enough to mask his illicit departure. The righteous voice in his head made him feel guilty for stealing but the wicked voice urged him to take the Bishop’s prized Book too. John considered the greater theft but eventually judged it an unnecessary risk that would only heighten Godfrey’s desperation to hunt him down.

With bulging pockets and nothing but the clothes on his back, he set out for Bath’s outer districts.

John's heart pounded as he peered into the corridor, confirming that it was empty before scurrying along the wall like a stealthy mouse. He avoided Godfrey's grand staircase and instead took the steep servant's stairs, throwing himself behind an old barrel near the pantry as a pair of monks headed towards the kitchen. The smell of a hearty lunchtime stew made his stomach rumble but John tore himself away, knowing that most of his fellow clergymen would also be drawn by the food and not wanting to waste his opportunity.

There was a precious window of time before someone came looking for him. Godfrey would assume that John was diligently at work and Adelard would be gracious enough to give him space.

John scampered into the palace courtyard and skirted around its circumference towards the gate, keeping to the shadows to avoid attention and finding a crate from which he could keep watch. He spied Adelard talking in animated discussion with a pair of elderly priests across the courtyard and prayed that his friend wouldn't be punished for John's departure. That he would understand John's need to escape.

The courtyard was busy despite the promise of a midday meal and a constant stream of clergymen and servants flowed through the main gate. John watched and waited, growing increasingly desperate as time passed. Godfrey's guards cast a watchful eye over each passing person and John had little doubt that they had been forewarned to look for the Bishop's troublemaker.

He was still waiting for an outbound group that he could join when a burly farmer entered the gate carrying a large sack. John paid him little attention, cursing his bulk for obstructing the view. But the man headed straight towards John's shadowy corner and showed no sign of stopping. Not knowing where else to go, John scrambled onto the low rampart of the palace walls and hurled himself against the ground to keep out of sight. The farmer unceremoniously dropped his sack mere feet from where John had hidden and casually exited through the gate.

John's heart was still racing at the near miss when he realised he'd made a terrible mistake. Guards lazily patrolled the ramparts on either side of him, though they were luckily less attentive than their brethren at the gate. John crawled up against the crenelated wall and tried to make himself as small as possible.

He prayed for an escape, or just time to think, but a patrolling guard turned and headed back towards John. He was trapped from either side and trapped from below. There was nowhere higher he could go. In desperation, he looked over the wall and judged the distance. *It wasn't so high.*

The guard drew nearer and John realised he didn't have a choice. His throat was dry as he crouched onto the ledge and awkwardly lowered himself down using his good arm. He closed his eyes and, with a deep gulp, let go.

The fall was over in less than a heartbeat. John landed heavily with a muffled thud but picked himself up and brushed himself off as the guard above passed by without a care. John marvelled at his fortune to survive two near misses and prayed that his luck would hold out.

Finally free from Godfrey's inner sanctum, John refocussed his efforts on escaping the second layer of his hellish prison. Bath's city walls had four gates. John's family lived southwest of the town and it was at the southern gate that Godfrey's men had caught him procuring a horse during his previous escape. John reasoned

that the Bishop and his guards would assume that he would head for his family once more. So that was exactly what he did.

John darted down back-alleys away from the Bishop's palace before joining a main street and casually strolling towards the southern gate. He made no secret of his presence, stopping at stores to inspect their wares and greeting familiar faces. He told anyone who would listen of how he'd been asked to collect plants in the southern forests to freshen up the Bishop's library.

The false trail was weak but John wagered that an angry Bishop wouldn't pause for rational thought.

John was about to loop around to the western gate when he spotted the master of the southern stable. The man looked to be on hard times and yellowing bruises suggested that he'd also been punished for his uninvited role in John's earlier escape attempt. Their eyes met and John snapped still, rooted in place. Then the damnable man started to yell.

"Fugitive! That's the Bishop's boy, somebody stop him!" He called for his stable boy and hobbled towards John.

John saw people turn toward him but didn't wait to explain. He ran.

Fleeing only brought more attention and John heard others join the stablemaster's pursuit. Hands grabbed at his arms and robes but John tore himself away and ran faster. He wove through the crowd and made for the maze of quieter backstreets, running northwest as though his life depended on it.

Tall buildings muffled the shouts of John's pursuers and he slowed to a brisk walk. Oncoming strangers gave him questioning looks as he rushed by but he tried to even his breath and remain inconspicuous, as much as possible for a tonsured priest with a broken arm. Deciding that the western gate was an obvious place for Godfrey to set up an ambush, John changed course and headed north. Returning to his family could wait, first he just needed to escape.

John darted across another main street which prompted fresh cries from his pursuers, spurring John back into a run. He dodged past bewildered onlookers, apologising when he knocked a basket of bread from an old lady's hands. He wanted to help gather her belongings but the shouts of his pursuers drew closer and John could only manage an apologetic smile.

John sprinted down unfamiliar streets, wishing he'd had a chance to explore the city before attempting another escape. He rounded a corner and barged straight into the chest of the city's Jewish elder. The man's attendant shouted his disapproval but the Elder met John's gaze with a quizzical look.

Utterly exhausted, John gave a wordless plea.

A cry from one of his pursuers echoed down the alleyway. They were getting closer. The Elder gave John a knowing smile and stepped aside to grant him passage, prompting more disapproval from the underling. John didn't think twice and ran through. When he looked over his shoulder the Jews had resumed their casual stroll and shortly after John heard bickering and shouts as they impeded his pursuer's path.

John's chest was tight and his robes drenched with sweat when he finally arrived at the northern gate. He was relieved to see that it was calm and news of his escape had not reached the northern walls. John dropped back to a casual walk and stepped into the street. Hiding his sling in his sleeve, he brazenly strolled directly to the gate and stepped through as if it were nothing. He didn't dare to even breathe until he was a stone's throw from the wall but Bath's guards remained idle and paid him no attention.

Wanting to obfuscate his path further, John clambered down into a ditch and skirted back around the town wall towards the western gate. He joined the steady flow of travellers on the road towards Bristol and breathed easier as buildings faded to empty fields.

He fought not to break into a run, though in truth he was physically spent from his dash through Bath. Instead, he maintained his brisk walk and searched for a decent place to hide but there was only an endless patchwork of fields and a sparse scattering of trees.

John walked for miles and passed several small villages. He began to enjoy his freedom. The sky seemed brighter and the air fresher. He planned where he might go when he arrived in Bristol and who might be willing to purchase some of his stolen trinkets. He imagined the look on his mother's face when he returned.

John passed through a small forest before reaching another plain of fields. He marvelled at the industry of his fellow man, being able to bend the Lord's land to the task of feeding the masses. Just another thing to be thankful for.

It was then that he heard horses, thundering at full gallop rather than the leisurely clip-clop of regular travellers. John looked over his shoulder and his stomach sank. A trio of horsemen wearing the Bishop's colours bounded down the road, their eyes firmly fixed on him. John desperately looked around for cover but even the sparse trees were gone.

Knowing there would be no escape, he turned and defiantly awaited the inevitable.

Godfrey wouldn't be happy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

11 February 1124

William didn't know how it had happened but he'd been tasked with babysitting the Miner while he sobered up. Matilda and Matthew often disappeared to work on their other projects, leaving William alone with the human garbage. William resented their casual abandonment, as though he wasn't knowledgeable, talented or old enough to assist with their more technical work. He resented them being able to spend time alone. Together. But most of all, he resented the Miner.

In his sixteen years living in Holford, William had heard scattered gossip about the Brewer's ne'er-do-well older brother but only ever caught glimpses of the man. Ma had quite rightly protected her children from the Miner's sinful existence and the old copper mine had always been out of bounds for children. While this normally would've served as a challenge for William, even he knew not to risk his parents' wrath by breaking that particular rule.

To call the Miner a pig of a man was an insult to swine. The man was sin personified, guilty of gluttony, greed, sloth, anger and jealousy. William had little doubt that, given the chance, the Miner would've also been guilty of lust but his long hair was matted, his odour repulsive and his language would make a maid blush.

The only sin he couldn't be accused of was pride. Despite William's efforts, the man remained almost always drunk and he had stashes of food and drink scattered around Holford. His filthy clothes strained against the mass of his stomach and were covered in drippings from meals months prior.

From a young age Ma and Pa had preached the importance of looking presentable and keeping clean at all times, not just when going to church.

"People respect a clean person," Pa would say. "It shows the world that you're in control."

Living with Matilda had further reinforced the importance of hygiene, for both reasons. She taught William that Ma and Pa's daily cleaning rituals actually served to kill jurms, tiny invisible devils that made people sick.

"The fleas that live on fleas," she described them.

The Miner knew none of that and lacked any hint of self-respect. He was quite comfortable rolling around in filth and cared only about the source of his next meal. His younger brother, Holford's successful Brewer, had always provided.

That would change today, William thought. Today you'll earn your supper.

"Get up, slug," William grunted at him, nudging the seemingly unconscious man with his boot.

"Gerroff me," the Miner groaned.

"Up!" William ordered as he tossed a bucket of water over the man. "You're showing us the mine today and we want to get out of that death-trap alive."

The sopping Miner bellowed in anger and tried to surge at William. He hauled himself upright but only managed a couple of staggered steps before he collapsed back into the mud.

“Fine, you win. At least give a man some water, to drink this time.”

It was the first time he'd requested anything but alcohol so William happily obliged. The Miner guzzled half the bucket, water streaming down his face.

“Tha's better,” the Miner said before letting out an almighty belch just as Matilda and Matthew arrived.

“Classy,” Matilda said with a look of disgust. “Is he really ready?”

“I'm fine,” the Miner slurred. “Bit wet but tha's the boy's fault.”

“Ready as he'll ever be,” Matthew judged, turning to William and looking impressed. “I haven't heard him string so many words together for years. Well done.”

“He still looks under the weather,” Matilda noted with concern. “I hope he's lucid enough to know what he's doing.”

“He'll be fine,” Matthew said as he wrenched the wretched man to his feet and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. “Here Will, help me keep him steady.”

William walked over and supported the Miner's other side. The man smelt even worse up close up.

The group set off towards the mine at a slow pace, wading through a dense fog and battling against a fierce wind. Matilda detoured to the burnt shell of her mill and ran inside to collect tools for their inspection. William was disheartened to discover that Matthew and Walt had already moved their own equipment into the yard. His monopoly of Matilda's time was over.

They resumed their slow journey, regularly stopping for the Miner to urinate, throw up or curse. Matthew tired of the vulgar antics and walked ahead with Matilda, leaving William to endure the Miner's putrid body odour alone.

“So what happened to your mine?” William asked the Miner, hoping conversation might distract from the smell and Matthew's obnoxious flirting. “No one ever talks of it but it must've been bad to do...this.”

“Wha's there to say? There's nothin' there. Either empty or underwater. Dunno why you lot are interested all of a sudden.”

“The Baron didn't really give us a choice,” William said tetchily. “He's convinced that Matilda can resurrect it.”

“The Redhead? More copper in her hair than left in those rocks.”

“Surely there's something still down there?”

“Nah. We worked it for ages. My Da's grandad dug down there, an' even he weren't the first. Never a huge production, mind you. Not enough to warrant bickering between the lords. But good enough. My brother's brewin' only started cos we had enough scrap ore for him to make his brewin' cauldron. Never thought it'd become the family business.”

“So what happened?”

“The damn thing flooded,” the Miner said bitterly. “We dug deeper’n deeper. My workers refused to go down after the cave-ins started. Only a handful remained when I took over from Da an’ they left when I couldn’t pay ’em. I got stuck with a wet hole in the ground.”

William sensed growing agitation and dropped the subject.

The group broke out of the tree line and entered a gusty stretch of fields. The Miner directed them up a slight hill towards a lonely outcrop of trees with a dilapidated hovel that had suffered years of neglect. Disused equipment in varying states of decay was scattered around the structure, the remnants of a once thriving work site.

The mine was a stone’s throw from the hovel’s front door, a deep gash straight into the flat ground. The sloping gradient straight into the earth reminded William of Matilda’s cave but while her gully appeared to have been gently scooped away with a spoon, the mine looked like it had been hacked with a knife.

The group gathered around the mine and peered down into the entrance. Matilda looked uncharacteristically uneasy. She too eyed the support timbers that framed the mine’s entrance, their rot matching the decay of the surrounding site.

“Nope,” Matthew said bluntly. “I’m not going down there. I work with metal by the light of day, by the light of my forge if I’m really pressed for time. But taking ore that’s still trapped in rocks straight out of that hell hole? No thanks, I’m not ready to be buried just yet.”

The Miner shrugged and returned to his hovel.

“Suit yaself,” he called over his shoulder. “Long way to come just to chicken out now.”

“Better a chicken ranging freely above ground than a lion buried in stone,” Matthew defended. “Those timbers look like the gates to Hell!”

“How ’bout the rest of ya?” the agitated Miner asked, brandishing a handful of makeshift torches at them. “Ya drag me away and hide all me drink. Ya’d better not bail on me now.”

William’s inner voice screamed with terror but he resolutely stepped forward and claimed a torch, determined to prove that he was braver than Matthew.

The Miner went to pass a torch to Matilda but she shook her hand.

“No thanks, I’ve got my own,” she said as she withdrew her magical light box from her pocket. She wound its delicate handle a few times before motioning for the Miner to lead the way.

The Miner looked perplexed but shrugged. He stepped under the rotten logs and into the cramped passage of the mine, using the walls to keep upright. Matilda gave William an encouraging smile as she followed. William’s stomach was a knotted mess but he followed too.

The world was muted the moment he stepped into the artificial cave, the howl of the outside wind replaced by the muffled echo of the trio's footsteps. Matilda switched on her torch, its sharp beam of cool light further enhancing the otherworldly feel.

The mine was so tight that not even bats dared to explore it. The jagged rock walls narrowed as they walked, to the point that William's shoulders scraped against them no matter which way he leaned. The narrow passage was carved through solid rock with a slight bulge on the sides. The shape of a coffin. Every visible surface was the same stony grey and covered in chisel marks, creating a disorienting monotony that was only broken by the occasional smear of coppery green.

New branches of the mine infrequently came into view as they walked on. Some took awkward turns, weaving to and fro or veering off at odd angles.

"Followin' promising veins of copper or dodgin' the harder rock," the Miner explained, his voice echoing off the walls. His answers to Matilda's many questions grew more authoritative as they delved deeper, completely different to the incoherent slob from the surface.

Other tunnels were dead straight and went as far as the eye could see, ending in a distant coffin of darkness. William's mind ran wild imagining what demons hid in the shadows, just out of sight. He longed for the safety of daylight.

Even then, the most terrifying tunnels were those with collapsed ceilings. Hidden worlds of darkness lay behind the fallen rocks, formed in an instant of crushing destruction. William's desire to run back to the surface increased with each one that they passed but he forced himself onward, refusing to abandon Matilda or be outdone by the filthy Miner.

Not that he had a choice. The journey had taken so many twists and turns that William had no idea how to return to the surface. The thought of wandering aimlessly in the dark was even more terrifying than being crushed.

The passage grew progressively narrower, first requiring them to crouch and eventually turn their bodies and shuffle awkwardly. The dry dirt floor became muddy and more waterlogged with each step. Still they shuffled on, until the Miner abruptly stopped.

"This is as far as we can go without swimmin'. We dug deeper but the tunnels are flooded"

"I've seen enough," Matilda said.

The Miner gave her a shove. "Come on then. Move along boy, back where we came."

The group turned around and walked back into the smothering darkness. The Miner pushed past as soon as the corridor widened and the knot in William's stomach started to unfurl.

The return journey felt much quicker and it wasn't long before the glow of sunlight overcame their makeshift torches. William heard Matilda turn off her torch.

The first breath of fresh air was the sweetest of William's life. The sound of wind passing through the trees was wonderous and even the cool fog on his exposed skin made him feel alive.

“You made it!” Matthew called as he pushed himself up from a mossy rock, his face flushed with relief. “You spent long enough down there. I was worried.”

“Not worried enough to come looking for us,” William sniped.

“What d’ya think?” the Miner asked Matilda, ignoring the bickering. His exaggerated gruffness seemed to mask a faint glimmer of hope.

Matilda thought for a bit. “It’s hard to say, but there’s potential. I saw signs of missed copper and we should be able to lower the water level...”

“We bloody tried that!” the Miner snapped. “An’ it took workers away from actual minin’.”

“I can try building a pump. And hoses,” Matilda replied. “But first I’d be interested to see the refuse pile. With a bit of experimenting we might be able to extract even more copper from the stone.”

The Miner straightened up even further. “Don’t know why ya’d wanna do that but sure, I’ll show ya round back.”

Matilda and the Miner disappeared, leaving William and Matthew standing in frosty silence.

“I’m worried about those supports,” Matilda added as they returned. “You’ve been lucky to avoid accidents so far but they’ll need reinforcing before you resume any major mining activity.”

“Easier said than done,” the Miner parried. “Wood and tools aren’t free ya know. Hard when ya not pullin’ anything from the ground.”

“I know,” Matilda reassured. “That’s why Matthew’s here. He can provide the tools...” She held up a hand to halt Matthew’s protest. “...and I’ll talk to the Baron about payment. What would you need to get the site back up and running?”

The Miner paused. “A couple of gents to start. Three I guess. A set of tools for each of us, maybe some wood for makin’ ya supports.”

“Is this possible?” Matilda asked Matthew. “On top of everything we discussed back at the mill?”

“Perhaps, if we can find some additional hands to help at the mill. At this rate I might need to take on an apprentice.”

Matthew looked at William appraisingly.

“No way,” Matilda objected. “I need him, you find someone else. That said, it wouldn’t hurt for him to learn a bit more about what you do...”

William felt like a goat being auctioned at market. It was nice not being ignored but he wasn’t sure that he liked that type of attention.

Matilda turned back to the Miner. “Get this place cleaned up and put a call out for your team. It’ll take some time to get everything in order but it’d be good to start as soon as winter breaks.”

The Miner beamed with disbelieving gratitude and practically bowed at Matilda.

“And you must know,” Matilda added, “knowledge is my currency. My advice isn’t free. I’ll expect the first loads of copper for my own projects and will take a percentage of what is produced after that.”

William saw the Miner deflate.

“Don’t worry,” Matilda promised. “Even with my fee, it’ll be well worth your while. Just ask Matthew.”

“She’s right,” Matthew said. “It’s already been a blessing and she’s only been in Holford a couple of months. Plus, surely anything beats the endless drinking? Eh Edric?”

The Miner paused, unsure if he should be insulted. “Ya, there’s truth to tha’,” he conceded.

With everything agreed, William joined Matilda and Matthew on the trip back to the village. Edric stayed behind and had already started tidying the yard as they left. He’d found a broken broom and swept furiously, as though desperate to remove the years of personal neglect.

The trio walked back to Holford side by side. Matthew was impressed at William’s willingness to venture into the mine and both he and Matilda were interested to hear what he’d learned from Edric on their outbound journey.

William felt appreciated. *Finally.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

23 March 1124

“Noooooo!” Joan Miller shrieked. “I won’t go!”

Margery looked up from her miserable bowl of gruel and struggled to keep a straight face as Arnold’s spoilt daughter performed her daily ritual. Watching Joan’s struggle with the ‘hardships’ of normal life made the tasteless gruel almost palatable.

“We can’t afford another night here,” Joan’s mother insisted. “The landlord threatened to summon the constable.”

“You think this backwater has a constable?” Joan cried “No! I want a roof over my head. And proper food.”

“You think I don’t?” Arnold thundered back at her. “We lost all that when bloody Holford took my bloody mill. The world isn’t fair.” He calmed himself and made his voice sickly sweet. “But I’ll find work, I promise. Then things will get better. Ok precious?”

Arnold’s pandering made Margery want to throw up but Joan settled down. Margery was baffled that Joan was stupid enough to buy Arnold’s same line every morning. But she did and so the ritual continued. The Miller family finished eating, packed their meagre belongings and started another day of walking.

The day slipped away, both fast and slow at the same time. There was no break for food – they had none – leaving Margery to ponder the time since her hasty departure.

It had been almost two months since Margery impulsively elected to follow the Miller family as they fled from Holford’s frenzied villagers. In the emotionally-charged aftermath of the mill fire, fear of losing Henry had loomed larger than anything. Her only true friend. She hadn’t paused to consider the consequences. But she dearly wished that she had.

Since then, the Millers had trudged from village to village, through the depths of winter, without a plan. Arnold had relied upon the hospitality of friends and his network of neighbouring millers but always managed to wear out their welcome.

His stubborn pride prompted several premature departures in their first weeks. Arnold took offence at being told that Holford’s revolt was his own doing or that there was little chance his mill would be returned. When he finally acknowledged his family’s desperation and looked for work, Arnold took offence whenever told there was nothing for him and that he should try the next village. He was deaf to his peers’ voices of reason and instead decided that the world had turned against him.

Like his daughter, Arnold was also prone to tantrums and exploded each time word of his underhanded business practices preceded the family’s travels. His biggest outburst was at Stowey Castle the day after his eviction when Baron Walter showed little sympathy for Arnold’s situation. The Miller’s arrogance was such

that he ranted at the Baron, demanding a new position and prophesising that Holford would be doomed without him.

Arnold's harsh words only irked the Baron, who asked why he would need a miller stupid enough to be *caught* sabotaging his competition. The confrontation ended with Baron Walter telling Arnold to leave Stowey by nightfall or face his dungeon. That was the first of many nights the Millers had spent without a roof over their heads. And so began their arduous life as nomads.

The winter had been relentless. The Miller family were buffeted by storms as they crossed fallow fields and the bare forests provided little shelter. Margery's teeth had chattered constantly and she worried that she might never be dry again.

The Millers had been forced to leave Holford in such a hurry that they were poorly equipped for life on the road. Arnold's wife Edith had prioritised collecting her finest clothing and jewellery which did little good when stomachs rumbled in the evenings. The fool resisted parting with her finery to raise funds for food or shelter, preferring that her family stayed hungry rather than harm her delicate pride.

The resulting conditions were far from ideal but were less of an adjustment for Margery than they'd been for the Miller family. Margery was shocked to discover that they didn't know the basics of survival, things that Ma and Pa had instilled in their children from a young age. The Millers struggled to start a fire outdoors and Edith often spoiled their meagre supplies in failed attempts to cook.

Margery was forced to adopt a leading role in the family. She took time to teach them how to prepare food or find an appropriate place to set up camp. No longer able to just hide in the shadows, Margery became the family spokesperson and helped negotiate prices at markets or politely asked fellow travellers for directions and gossip. Unfortunately for Margery, the Millers' entitlement was so strong that these tasks were soon just expected and her lessons were quickly forgotten. As was any appreciation for Margery's efforts.

The biggest letdown of the entire fiasco was Henry. The whole reason she'd even left in the first place. Margery and Henry had been close for years, enduring bullying by Holford's older children fuelled by the taunts of their older sisters. The pair stuck together out of necessity and eventually discovered that they enjoyed each other's company.

But their time together had been limited and Margery always returned to her family's cottage at the end of the day. There was no respite now that their time together was uninterrupted, meaning that once niggly annoyances ballooned into full blown irritations. Like the rest of the Miller family, the pair were often peevish with each other and their previously easy-going companionship was frequently strained.

Henry barely spoke to her anymore. None of them did. The Millers all blamed Margery and her family for their plight. For bringing Matilda to Holford. They treated her with ever growing coldness and tolerated Margery's presence only as a source of food and shelter.

Margery couldn't fend off all of their animosity and it started to colour her own feelings. Her family *had* been the one to invite Matilda into Holford and Margery's own taunts had so often driven William away.

Perhaps she was guilty.

The Millers' animosity made for an incredibly lonely existence and there was ample time for introspection during the long days of walking.

Margery trudged on but eventually realised that, despite the dying sunlight, the Miller family still had no plans to set up camp. She was about to make the decision for them when she spotted a small wooden chapel nestled in the woods.

The Millers raced towards the building, each member eager for a night out of the rain with a roof over their heads. Margery followed slightly behind, amused at their almost primal need for comfort.

As they drew closer, Margery saw that the chapel lay on the outskirts of a tiny hamlet. There appeared to be no more than four rundown huts gathered at the bottom of the valley, each made of mud and even more dilapidated than Holford's worst house.

The Millers gathered around the door of the chapel and waited for Margery to assume her role as their voice. Motioning for them to wait in place, she lay down her meagre belongings and poked her head through the chapel door.

"Hello?" Margery called out. "Father?"

There was no response, just the eerie quiet of the dark and lifeless room. A musty odour paired with the unnatural stillness to make Margery feel uneasy but she didn't relish the thought of another night in the wilderness. Or a repeat of Joan's tantrums.

"Father? Are you there?"

A shuffling sound came from a room behind the altar, putting Margery further on edge. An incredibly elderly man stepped into the room, his face gaunt and skeletal arms straining with the weight of a large candle. Margery called out again but he paid her no attention and continued his shuffle around the altar.

Margery walked to the altar and tapped the priest on the shoulder. The poor man nearly leapt out of his skin.

"Sorry Father, sorry!" she said, raising her hands unthreateningly.

"Oh my Lord," he said, holding a skeletal hand up to his chest. "You nearly scared the life out of me."

Margery didn't doubt it. "Sorry to startle you Father. I'm here with a family. We wondered if we might shelter here tonight."

"I'm a little hard of hearing, dear," he told her with a vacant smile. "What did you say?"

"Can we. Please. Stay here. Tonight." Margery said loudly.

The priest stared blankly before spying the Millers huddled by the door. Realisation flooded across his face.

"Of course my dear, of course. My door is always open. Please, invite them in."

Margery ran over to summon the family but Joan barged through before she'd said a word, deliberately knocking Margery as she passed. The others filed in and the priest's eyes lit up. He seemed unaccustomed to having so many guests.

The poor man's hopes of a willing congregation were dashed when the family sat far from the altar and immediately began unpacking their evening meal. Seeing that they were occupied, the priest resumed preparations for his evening prayers. His shoulders were slumped and his movements even more sluggish than before.

Margery obediently prepared the evening meal while the Millers waited impatiently. They devoured their portions without conversation and dispersed when it was finished, eager to put another day of their nightmarish new existence behind them.

One-by-one they fell asleep, leaving Margery alone once more to contemplate her thoughts. She approached the altar and prayed for guidance through her hardship, taking solace in another familiar ritual. When she finished, she sat upon a simple wooden bench and looked around the small chapel. It was strange. There was no question that it was poor. There were no hangings on the walls and only crudely carved adornments on the altar. But the room was spotless and its few contents were meticulously placed. Each bench was perfectly aligned with the altar.

As Margery cast her eye around the room she spotted something on the pulpit that she hadn't expected. A Bible. Bound in gnarled old leather, it looked particularly out of place in such a poor chapel. It was the largest book she'd ever seen, even bigger than Matilda's. An absolute treasure, tucked away at the edge of the world.

The book called to her. Only upon seeing it did she realise how desperate she was to read again and how much she'd missed Matilda's lessons. She succumbed to the book's silent siren song and crept toward the pulpit.

She carefully opened the book and peered at the letters, struggling to make out the words in the flickering light of the priest's candle. Most were different to those Matilda had taught during her lessons but Margery sounded them out nonetheless and quickly recognised the clergy's Latin. She was thrilled every time she spoke a familiar word. It made the book come alive, the scribbled symbols suddenly more relevant to her everyday life.

Margery was completely entranced and lost track of how long she'd stood whispering to herself. She was halfway through her third page when a frail voice broke the silence.

"Most impressive, young lady."

Margery gave a muffled squawk and slammed the book shut, the sound reverberating off the bare chapel walls.

"I thought you were hard of hearing," she said defensively.

"I am, my dove. But it's easier when I know I ought to be listening. And I could see your lips move which helps."

The priest let silence linger, foolishly hoping for Margery to break it.

“Forgive me, I’d not taken you for a lady,” he finally continued. “I would’ve offered you my humble quarters, had I known.” There was sincere regret in the man’s eyes. “You keep very lowly company,” he noted, motioning to the slumbering Miller family. “It is so rare to see women of the nobility who can sing the sounds of the letters.”

Margery almost laughed. “I’m no noble Father. Only two moons ago I was ankle deep in mud, fighting to harvest a rotting crop.”

The priest looked taken aback. “No? But it is rare for the nobility to read, let alone a peasant woman. Where did you learn such a thing?”

“A question for a question,” Margery teased playfully, enjoying the genuine shock on the skeletal man’s face. “Why does such a simple church have such a wonderful book?”

The priest smiled, a distant look in his eyes. “A remnant from a past life. From before I moved to this sleepy hamlet. That was a life of nobles, though admittedly not one that I miss.”

“Frustratingly cryptic Father but very well. Our village had a visitor who stayed with my family. She had a Book of her own. Well, half a book. Seeing my family’s struggle with the harvest, she stayed to help. She taught me and my siblings to read as payment for food and lodgings.”

The priest was intrigued but didn’t know where to begin so he quizzed Margery on everything. Her family, the strange visitor, the fire, the Miller family, life on the road. It felt so nice to have someone finally listen and Margery spilled everything that was on her mind. They only stopped when Arnold woke to relieve himself outside.

“Well my dear, I think it is time that we both got some rest. My head pounds when I’m overtired and I’m sorry to say there is no mill nearby so you have another long day of walking ahead of you. But do not fear the future. You have a strong head on your shoulders and I’ve little doubt that you’ll find a way out of your current predicament. Goodnight dear.”

The priest pushed himself gingerly to his feet and blew out the large candle before hobbling into his small room behind the altar. Arnold returned from outside and quickly fell back to sleep.

Margery was left sitting in darkness before the altar, staring at the silhouette of the bible on the simple pulpit. Finally voicing her concerns about leaving Holford and causing the Millers’ plight had lifted a weight from her soul. But as she stared up at the Bible, she still felt guilty.

As though she had said too much.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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