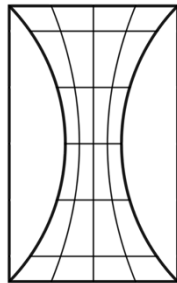


# THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



**THE WORLD THAT WAS**

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

22 December 1123

It was cold. And wet. Matilda was sick and felt miserable.

She'd been jabbed with every vaccine known to man before journeying back in time. The Institute doctors warned that she would encounter innumerable viruses and bacteria, many that hadn't been seen for centuries. Each would assault her immune system, though the doctors assured Matilda that none were likely to cause any lasting damage to a woman in her prime.

They also warned that she would inevitably carry diseases from the future, despite their best efforts to quarantine her from the outside world. Any interaction with the new world risked the exchange of an unknown number of bugs.

But being forewarned had done little to help Matilda.

All the vaccinations in the world couldn't have protected against her encounter with the Bishop and his thugs behind the rundown shack. The attack was seared into her memory and she regularly woke in a sweat as the scene replayed on loop, her mind enhancing each nightmarish detail. The vice-like grip on her arms. The putrid breath. The mocking looks in their eyes.

Matilda was angry at herself for allowing it to happen. Knowing she would be alone in a distant land, she had spent years before her departure learning self-defence and sparring against classmates. Years training her body to fight. But there was little anyone could do to protect against a club to the back of the head or a man at least double her weight.

She'd let her guard down in her moment of triumph. And she hated herself for it.

Her depression had been building for years, the Bishop's attack was just the last straw. Leaving her family for the Institute. Studying so hard. The final sprint to prepare for the looming Drop. Leaving behind all that she knew for a plan that had failed. It was little wonder she had fallen.

William had been her saviour. Not some strapping man with a chiselled jaw. She'd never have stood for that. But she had been too deep in her depression to save herself, so instead she was rescued by a farm boy.

It had been difficult seeing William when he first returned to her cave. He was a reminder of Rachel's cruelty. And a man. Matilda hadn't yet forgiven herself for her moment of weakness with the Bishop and she'd been cruel in her grief.

Matilda regretted how she had treated the Boy. He'd asked for her help, to cure a disease that she had in all likelihood inflicted upon his village. Yet she continued to wallow. She had let down her only friend in an alien world and hadn't seen William for days since.

*What was done was done.*

There was something so final in his parting words. He wasn't angry. Disappointed was an understatement.

Matilda reflected on everything that had happened since she arrived back in time. All so different from the Institute's meticulous plans. Her mission was in tatters. The window for arriving in London to meet the King was long gone. Matilda knew that King Henry would be in Normandy to put down a rebellion and wouldn't return to London for almost a year. Even more time for her best laid plans to go awry.

Matilda thought back to the day of her arrival, when she had toasted the fact that she was the smartest person on the planet. She knew now, that all the knowledge and training in the world meant nothing without also knowing *how* to use it.

But she wouldn't be defeated. Dragging herself from her cot, Matilda gathered up her belongings and wrapped them in her blanket. She looked back at the empty cave as she closed the door. Few traces of her occupation remained.

*There was no changing the past,* William had said.

But that was exactly what she was there to do.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*22 December 1123*

The sun had barely risen when Margery stealthily prepared for another day of hard toil in the fields. She shuffled around the gloomy cottage, searching for her missing shoe while desperately trying not to wake Pa or Mama. Their strange illness seemed to have worsened overnight and the sounds of their laboured breathing filled the room.

William already waited outside but Ma and Elizabeth joined in Margery's wordless preparations. Rachel was also awake and had resumed her vigil at Mama's bed. She had long since forsaken work in the fields, instead playing the role of carer for their sick family members.

"How's she doing?" Margery whispered.

"Fine," Rachel hissed, though Margery heard genuine concern in her voice. "She was completely delirious last night, thought I was either Aunt Susan or Papa. I don't know what more to do. Astrid was no help, stupid midwife. This is all that wicked foreigner's fault. She brought her filthy foreign disease."

Margery hummed in vague agreement, not wanting to fuel further angst towards the Redhead. Barely a day went by that Rachel didn't mention William's strange visitor, though they'd luckily seen no sign of her since Pa escorted her away to Stowey. Margery guessed that her elder sister resented the Foreigner's unrepentant freedom. She shared the sentiment to an extent, though didn't dare raise the topic. Margery hated conflict and knew that Rachel's anger at the woman could easily shift to her.

Ma silently beckoned to Margery from the door so she gave Rachel's shoulder a squeeze of encouragement and rushed out to start the day. Ma handed Margery and Elizabeth tools for the day's work and hurried them along to join William.

Margery's brother sat out the front of the cottage, waiting impatiently for his sisters to emerge. He was antsy and already in a foul mood. The first weeks of William's adult life had been a trial by fire. He was the man of the house in Pa's absence and shouldered the majority of the family's work. Margery felt sorry for him but it was admittedly nice to see him finally pull his weight. He'd gotten away with the bare minimum for too long but the protections afforded by his extended childhood were gone. Now he too got to see the world for what it truly was. Warts and all.

"Where's Rachel?" William asked tetchily.

"She's staying behind again to look after Mama and Pa," Ma responded wearily. "They're both getting worse. And Rachel said she needs to 'perfect her tending skills' before her wedding."

There was an uncharacteristic hint of sarcasm in Ma's voice. The stress of their late harvest and sick family weighed on her too.

“But we need all the help we can get,” William whined. “The cold weather’s setting in and the crop’s already starting to rot.”

“Don’t worry about it Willy, we need to get going. Besides, we’ll get more done if you two aren’t at each other’s throats.”

With a shrug, William conceded that Ma had a point and the four of them departed to the field. As they walked, Margery noted the thinning numbers of villagers that still worked their fields. Some had also succumbed to the mystery illness while others had already finished their harvest and awaited their turn with Holford’s single plough before sowing the winter crop.

Most of the villagers had noticed her family’s struggle, though none had offered to help. A few had given friendly smiles as the family trudged home after another long day, a mix of empathy, encouragement and approval at seeing William finally pulling his weight. But nothing more. Everyone was too busy caring for their own sick family members. One’s own clan always came first.

Margery was concerned by William’s mention of rot. It was a curse for the slow or lazy that accelerated with each drizzly day. It would determine how comfortably the family would live through winter. If at all. The family had discussed the food situation during the cold evenings and it looked dire no matter what they did. It was just a question of how dire. The promise of a hard winter, full of hunger and haggling for food, only further dampened their motivation to work in the fields.

The family made for glum travelling companions and even Elizabeth was silent. They were already flat upon arriving at their field. Before they’d even started working. They dumped their belongings beneath the grand old oak and, without a word, collected their tools and dispersed to begin their prescribed tasks. Each moved as if wading through honey.

William marched into the field with Pa’s scythe and hacked at the crop with unusual ferocity, driven by some unspoken rage. Ma and Elizabeth took the role of baling the cuttings so Margery was left alone to thresh the family’s semi-dry wheat with William’s flail. She preferred it that way, being alone. She threw herself into the work, trying to extract every grain she could.

*Burning arms today is better than an aching stomach in the winter.*

The morning passed with its usual monotony. Other villagers started to arrive around midday to deliver food to the few remaining workers. Margery saw Joan Miller pass by with a basket for her latest love interest. Joan and Rachel were the queens of Holford’s youth, friends one moment and bitter rivals the next. The only thing guaranteed to unite them was the promise of tormenting their younger siblings.

Joan’s younger brother Henry was Margery’s age and her only friend in the world. They were both outcasts after their elder sisters’ endless taunts and the pair had established an alliance that blossomed into a friendship. Margery occasionally dreamed of it becoming something more. That would mean having Joan as a sister-in-law but she’d survived childhood with Rachel and could always build a nice little cottage on the far side of Holford. Margery wished Henry would bring her a basket.

Instead, her family paused beneath the almost naked oak for a dreary meal of the previous evening's stale bread. The conversation was as sparse as their food but Elizabeth did spot a rainbow, pointing it out to her solemn companions with child-like glee. It was the highlight of their day.

The family returned to their solitary tasks and worked until it was dark. The family collected their tools and Margery poured the day's takings into a sack. It wasn't even full.

They were all exhausted as they trudged back towards the house and the weather mimicked their mood, suddenly buffeting them with sheets of sleet. Ma and Elizabeth shared some weary banter while Margery and William lagged behind, preferring to walk in silence.

When they arrived at the cottage, Margery was irked that Ma and Elizabeth had paused at the front gate rather than going straight into their warm home. Eager to dry herself and the grain by the fire, Margery walked up to see what was the matter. And almost dropped their grain in shock.

The red-haired foreigner sat on a log beside the front vegetable patch. Water ran down her face and she was sopping wet but she squinted up at the family with a big smile.

"Hello there," she called jovially. "Back from a productive day in the fields I hope? Terrible weather."

"What the hell are you doing here?" William hissed through gritted teeth, further shocking Margery with the hate in his voice.

"I tried to wait inside but Rachel threw me out. Something about causing your grandmother undue distress, though she used much more colourful language. So I pulled up a log to wait until you returned home."

The Foreigner's jolly mood didn't match the bleakness her surroundings.

"I don't care why you're on the ground," William spat. "Why are you here? Back in Holford? Shouldn't you be skulking in your cave?"

Margery gave William a curious look at the mention of a cave. *Wasn't she supposed to be in London?*

The Foreigner's head drooped like a chastised child. When she looked back up, her smile was gone and she spoke seriously.

"William, I've thought long and hard about what you said to me back at the cave. About how you've helped me over these past weeks when I couldn't help myself. And about how I repaid your kindness..."

The Redhead paused, suddenly aware that the family were all staring down at her.

"Anyway," she dismissed. "I owe you an apology. I owe you my gratitude. You were there when no one else was. You kept me company. And kept me alive. So I'm here to make up for being a complete ass."

Ma scowled at Matilda's foul language.

"I think I can help Pa, and Mama," Matilda continued. "If you'll let me?"

Margery's ears pricked up at the promise of assistance and her hope multiplied when she remembered that the Foreigner was a herbalist. Ma's scowl remained firmly set though her eyes also shone with anticipation.



But William stared at the Foreigner with distrust, weighing the sincerity of her words. He looked torn and even wearier than when they'd left the field.

"Fine," William eventually replied.

"Oh thank God," Margery exclaimed, butting through the gate and inside to escape the rain. She dropped the flail by the door with a thud and crept into the cottage, hanging up her wet coat and placing the grain by the warm hearth.

Pa gave a nasty cough and Rachel glared at her for the sudden disruption. Margery considered telling her sister about the Foreigner but decided against it. She would find out soon enough.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*22 December 1123*

Matilda's limbs ached from sitting in the cold for so long but Elizabeth helped heave her up from her log. Matilda hugged the friendly girl, grateful for the small kindness.

Margery had already barged into the hut and Ma promptly followed to check on her husband and mother. William passed next. He placed the family's scythe under the building's small awning with great reverence before wiping the rain off its long blade and gesturing for Matilda to enter the hut.

The poor boy looked exhausted. His face was grim and he avoided making eye contact. Matilda was relieved that he had relented and permitted her to join the family indoors. Sitting in the cold had given plenty of time to consider her strategy for mending things with William. There'd be a long, wet walk back to her cave if she failed. But William granting access to the hut was a positive step.

It was dark inside, the only window firmly locked to keep out the weather. It smelt terrible, the homely cooking aromas of her previous visit replaced with a revolting combination of stale sweat, bile and faeces. The family were either oblivious or had learned to cope. A smouldering log warmed the building's single room. It was nice to be out of the rain but the heat was stifling. Rachel must have been trying to burn the sickness out. Or summon the devil.

Margery stood by the fire, drying her hair and talking to her eldest sister in hushed tones. Rachel knelt like a nun at the foot of Mama's bed. Her head was bowed in prayer, though she conversed with Margery through a series of dignified grunts.

Ma took Matilda's makeshift coat – her drenched blanket – and hung it by the fire. William closed the door with a bang, causing Rachel to jump.

“Be quiet, fool,” Rachel hissed as she turned from Mama's lumpy form. “You'll wake them u...”

Rachel froze mid-scold when she saw Matilda. Her eyes burned with white-hot fury and she longed to scream but didn't dare wake Mama. Rachel regained a touch of composure before speaking.

“What the devil is she doing in here?” Her voice was perfectly level but it failed to mask the manic look in her eyes. “I wasted precious time keeping her outside and you just let her in like some mangy cat?”

She directed her question at Ma and Elizabeth, ignoring Matilda and William altogether.

Like the rest of the family, Ma was exhausted and in no mood to argue.

“Rachel, please. We know you don't like the girl but she's here to help. Isn't she Willy?”

William nodded.

“I don't care!” Rachel cried. “I've been helping here all day while you've been out messing around in the fields. It was me that tended to them, keeping them fed and watered and warm. Now you want some stranger, some wicked stranger, to come and try doing it better?”

“You know better than anyone just how much Mama is struggling,” Ma continued. “And we won’t finish everything in the fields without Pa. We need our family happy and healthy. So who are we to look a gift horse in the mouth? Here you are praying for assistance and we have a herbalist, who’s supposed to be in London,” Ma glanced at Matilda with a raised eyebrow, “miraculously arrive at our front door. We should at least hear what she has to say.”

Rachel crossed her arms and pouted but didn’t say another word.

“Well love,” Ma said to Matilda, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “There’s no point waiting around. Fix my family!”

Ma gestured to a shape lying by her feet just behind the door. Matilda realised it was Pa rugged up on a low cot.

Seeing Pa was even more confronting than the hut’s smell. He was gaunt and his previously strong frame looked frail after weeks of wasting away in bed. He was covered in a sheen of sweat which felt wrong given the endless patter of rain outside. Matilda didn’t know how the figure before her was the same man who’d singlehandedly carried three sacks of grain.

“Is Mama the same?” Matilda asked no one in particular, trying to keep the concern out of her voice.

William nodded and Matilda walked to the other side of the room to inspect the grandmother. Rachel blocked Matilda’s path and belligerently stood her ground. Matilda tried to look unthreatening but it was only after a stern look from Ma that Rachel reluctantly stepped out of the way.

Mama somehow looked even worse than Pa. Her feeble chest shuddered with every breath and a trickle of spittle seeped from the corner of her mouth. She too was covered in sweat, despite Rachel’s efforts to wipe her brow. Alongside a pungent bucket of vomit by the bed, Matilda noticed a bowl of water perfumed with flower petals and a small square of silk, a surprising luxury that would’ve been incredibly difficult for the family to come by. Rachel had taken her tending duties very seriously.

Matilda bent down to get a closer look at her more desperate patient but Mama’s reaction was instant. Unable to make any intelligible sounds, Mama made an awful gurgling noise and attempted to roll her weak body away from Matilda.

Rachel’s response was equally visceral. She threw herself at Matilda with an ear-splitting shriek, tackling her to the ground and dragging her away from Mama. She pulled at Matilda’s hair and scratched with her nails, causing Matilda to cry out in a mix of shock and pain.

William and Margery leapt in to pull the young women apart.

“Quiet! Both of you!” Ma cried. “Come now! You’re here to help, not make things worse.”

The room fell silent again, except for Mama’s agitated rasping breaths.

“Sorry Emma,” Matilda apologised. “I need to see what is wrong. I can’t help if I don’t know what’s causing this.”

Ma gave a defeated sigh and threw her hands up in the air. "I don't even know anymore! Do whatever you can. Please. But stay away from Rachel and Mama, they clearly want nothing to do with you. Even if it means fixing this whole mess."

Ma sat down heavily at the table and started to weep. Elizabeth shuffled over and placed a comforting arm around her shoulder.

Matilda walked cautiously back to Pa for a more thorough investigation, rubbing a particularly nasty scratch above her elbow. She looked at the poor man with his wasted face and brow beaded with sweat.

"Rachel?" Matilda asked cautiously. "Why is it so hot in here if they're both sweating so much?"

Rachel replied with attitude. "They both feel like they're on fire yet complain constantly about being too cold. Whenever they can speak that is."

Almost on cue, Pa let out a wracking cough, his whole body shaking with the effort. Matilda placed her hand on Pa's forehead. Rachel was right, he was burning. She felt Pa's pulse and lymph nodes, recalling the years of medical training the Institute had drilled into all of its pupils. She placed her head on his chest and listened to his raspy breath.

"When did they get sick exactly? What happened?"

"Over a week before I asked you for help," William replied testily. "Pa was slowing down in the fields but thought it was just a cold. He was weary before the morning meal and completely exhausted by midday. A couple of days before I came to you he was completely bedridden. Said it felt like he'd been struck with a sledgehammer."

"Mama started later but got bad quicker," Elizabeth added.

"Has anyone else been sick?" Matilda asked.

"None of us," Elizabeth continued. "There's talk that others in the village have been confined to their beds and Old Man Cooper died but we've been so busy with the harvest that we don't really know what's happening."

Matilda nodded and ran the symptoms against her mental checklist, discarding possible diagnoses and determining the most likely suspects. Without thinking, she pulled down Pa's blanket and began to remove his shirt to inspect his torso.

The room erupted in protest.

"What are you doing!?" Margery yelled.

"You shouldn't do that," William advised.

"I told you she was a whore!" cried Rachel.

Poor Ma was lost for words and just sat in place, crying and shaking her head.

"Sorry everyone, sorry!" Matilda called, raising her hands in apology as she quickly realised her mistake. "I meant nothing inappropriate. I need to see what's causing this, if there are any signs on his chest or arms."

The family didn't reply. Their faces relaxed slightly, though their expressions remained scandalised. Matilda took their silence as tacit approval to continue her investigation and lifted Pa's shirt, bunching it around his head like a nun's habit.

Matilda saw in the dim light that Pa's chest was covered in red spots. Some of them had started to spread down his upper arms.

"Shit," Matilda exclaimed. "Typhoid perhaps? Or Typhus. It's hard to tell."

Matilda didn't know of any recorded outbreaks in the region and wished she could consult her bible. It would explain the darkness, the pair were probably both sensitive to the light.

"What's that?" Ma asked, her voice equal parts concern and hope. Matilda smiled, simply knowing something's name could reduce fear.

"It's a disease, caused by dirty water or fleas. It can be quite curable, with the right...concoctions."

Matilda cursed inwardly. She'd brought a small dose of antibiotics with her from the future that would've been perfect but they'd been in the satchel that the Bishop had stolen. She had an antibiotic culture somewhere back in her cave but it would take weeks to produce a new batch of the drug. They'd have to settle for merely managing their symptoms and preventing anyone else from getting sick.

She pulled Pa's shirt back over his head and joined Ma up at the table.

"I can find some herbs that will ease their headaches and coughs. Perhaps Elizabeth could help. They'll both need to drink plenty of water and replace the nutrients that they're, ah, passing. And we need to make sure they're eating well. A meat broth if you can manage it."

Ma blankly nodded her assent. The poor woman was shell-shocked. She picked up a knife and started shakily chopping root vegetables for the evening meal. Matilda reached over and took it from her.

"Here, Ma. I'll take care of that for you."

Matilda began chopping as she continued to share her prognosis.

"I'd like to see where you get water for drinking and cleaning. You'll have to start boiling it before using it for anything, not just drinking. You should probably tell your neighbours to do the same. We'll also need to clean the hut and remove all possible nests for fleas and mites. The cats won't like it but they'll need a good scrub. We can make some soap. It could still take weeks for Pa and Mama to fully recover but if we can do all that, they should be healthy again in no time."

The mood remained uncomfortable but Matilda's confidence injected some energy back into the room. Margery and Elizabeth helped Matilda prepare a stew for the family, chatting with Ma to make her feel included. William remained by the hearth, whittling a stick with Matilda's knife and watching the strange scene taking place in his home. Rachel returned to wiping Mama's brow.

When the meal was prepared and boiling by the fire, Matilda got up and collected her dry blanket.

"I'll be back in the morning to see what more we can do for them."

Matilda walked over to the door and pulled it open. It was fully dark outside and the rain had only gotten worse since she'd arrived. She didn't like the thought of the long walk back to her cave in such weather but also didn't relish being trapped in the mournful house, surrounded by illness and people who would rather she wasn't there. She'd already well and truly worn out her welcome.

"Like hell you will!" Ma called. "You'll stay right where you are and eat some food. You can sleep here for the night and everyone will help you tomorrow. It's the sabbath so we can't work in the fields anyway."

Matilda started to rebut but was immediately cut off.

"Ma, we don't have enough food for another mouth!" William protested.

"I won't hear it," Ma said. "We wouldn't have a clue what to do if it weren't for this lady. The family's fate would be in the Lord's hands. Some worldlier intervention won't hurt."

Matilda saw that there would be no arguing with the woman and settled in for the night. William continued to stubbornly refuse to acknowledge her presence and the others avoided conversation, each wrapped up in their own thoughts. Ma thrust a bowl and spoon at Matilda who ate sparingly before settling into her lonely corner to sleep.

Matilda listened to the sounds of the hut as she waited for sleep to claim her. Mama's raspy breathing, William's snoring, Rachel's muttered prayers. Ma's breathing suggested that she at least was sleeping soundly.

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Matilda woke early the next morning and quickly set about her tasks.

William and Elizabeth showed her the stream behind their hut where the family collected their water for washing, cooking and drinking. Cupping her hands, Matilda inspected the cloudy liquid. Sediment stuck to her skin and Matilda only had to look upstream to see signs that it was used by others in the village for disposing of household waste. Matilda was mortified.

Next, she asked where to find some specific herbs for Pa and Mama. Elizabeth gleefully led the way, taking Matilda by the hand and guiding both her and William deep into the forest behind the family's hut. Elizabeth pointed out natural landmarks along the way. Odd trees with branches that jutted out at weird angles. Ancient trees that she swore were as old as the world itself. A patch of stinging nettles that would make an arm swell for a week. Matilda was impressed by the girl's knowledge.

They returned to the hut with armfuls of herbs and Matilda taught them how to brew a tisane to ease Mama and Pa's symptoms.

Rachel begrudgingly accepted Mama's cup but refused to let anyone tend to her grandmother. The old woman spluttered as soon as the warm liquid touched her lips and Rachel pulled it away from her instantly.

"It's too hot!" she protested. "I'll give it to her later."

Pa downed his brew with gusto. He forced himself to lean up and swallowed the entire cup in a couple of gulps, challenging the disease to keep him down longer.

*It's a start, Matilda thought. And now we wait.*

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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