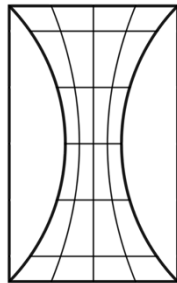


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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Can Matilda avert the solar calamity?

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

28 September 1124

William was woken by a commotion outside the dungeon. The Earl's jailor grumbled as he trudged up the tight spiral staircase, flicking through his ring of heavy iron keys as he went. Having enjoyed the previous evening's festivities a little too much, each clang reverberated through William's head.

"Some guards we are," the Young Priest noted sleepily, pushing himself up from the floor to stretch his stiff legs. He held out a hand to assist William. "What's all the racket?"

William flinched at the priest's offhand comment. It wasn't the first time he'd let Matilda down by falling asleep.

"I'm not sure," William replied as he accepted the outstretched hand. "Perhaps the crowd didn't get enough of Matilda last night?"

Upstairs, the screech of rusty hinges signalled that the jailor had found the right key and a flurry of footsteps echoed down the stairs. Anticipating trouble from the Bishop, William was looking around for a weapon when Elizabeth burst into the dungeon.

"Willy! You missed such an amazing party! It was better than Matilda's mill. And Rachel's wedding. No offence," she called over her shoulder.

Margery burst into the hallway, followed by a waddling Rachel.

"None taken," Rachel said as she manoeuvred her stomach around the tight staircase.

"The whole family's here?" William asked incredulously.

"We sure are," Elizabeth replied. "Baron Walter said the Earl has sided with Matilda and we can take her up to the castle walls to celebrate. He even sent along a breakfast basket. It's upstairs with Ma."

"The Bishop's men will be watching," Margery added, "but at least we'll get some time away from the masses. A little more like being back at Holford."

"Yeah, but on top of a castle!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "When have we ever done that before?"

The jailor shuffled back down the stairs and clanked through his keys to open Matilda's cell. Elizabeth barged in and tackled the Foreigner, prompting a stream of sleepy obscenities.

"Come on Tilda!" Elizabeth cried, dragging the bleary-eyed time traveller out and up the spiral staircase. Rachel groaned at the prospect of climbing back up the stairs.

They all rushed outside where Ma and Pa waited patiently. The Young Priest led them above the castle gate which was flanked by a pair of towers. They climbed another spiral staircase and exited onto the ramparts in between where they could watch Bristol wake. The Baron had provided an assortment of leftovers from the previous day's feast and a bottle of fine wine.

William sensed that Matilda was nervous. She picked at her food and a slightly vacant look betrayed that her mind was elsewhere.

Matilda's ears pricked up when Margery recounted William's frantic return to Holford.

"I was finally asleep after tidying the mill all day when suddenly William's back and calling for help at the top of his lungs. He didn't care who he asked, he just ran from house to house beating on doors and calling for assistance."

"Seriously?" Matilda asked.

"Bloody William," Elizabeth chimed in, "who we hadn't seen since the fire, running through Holford like some crazed demon."

"Hey!" William protested. "Watch it! They'll put me on trial too."

Margery continued, "The whole village gathered in the square and tried to calm our poor brother. He'd travelled throughout the night and was absolutely haggard but blurted out his story. Following the Bishop, the Baron's intervention, the Earl's summons. The excitement sent a buzz through Holford but everyone was weary after yet another mill fire..."

"It is becoming a bit of a habit," Matilda admitted.

"...so we agreed to get a few extra hours of rest before coming to your rescue. It took both Ralph *and* Matthew to convince William that he needed sleep. Even then, he was one of the first people up.

"Everyone got involved the next morning, packing anything we could to aid your rescue. Well, almost everyone. Martin's grudge is still pretty strong."

"He loathes you," Rachel interjected softly.

"That's right!" Matilda cried. "Rachel! What are you doing here? Where's Alan?"

Rachel looked down at her hands.

"I missed William's entire return. I was awake, the baby had been kicking my bladder all night. But Alan insisted that there'd been enough evening excitement in Holford and locked me indoors. I was relieved that my brother was alright, as surprising as that might seem. But I obeyed my husband and went back to bed.

"The whole village was abuzz in the morning but I was trapped, not even allowed outside to collect vegetables. Alan made me sit inside, the windows shuttered and door barred. I realised that I couldn't take it. That I shouldn't take it. I strode to the door and wrenched it open.

"I've never seen Alan so mad. It was scary. He commanded that I return to my place by the fire. He looked so serious. Too serious. I couldn't help it. I laughed.

"It was uncontrollable. The final step to breaking Alan's spell over me. I felt free. So I left. I just got up and left. Something inside me snapped and I just didn't care anymore. It was worth it just to see his face. That instant when he tried to fathom what was going on. How anyone could dare to defy him. Oh that was sweet."

"Didn't he try to stop you?" Matilda asked.

“He didn’t really have time. I just closed the door and left. Didn’t even bother to take clothes. By the time he came outside I was already next to Pa in the wagon and we were on our way. I did risk a glance over my shoulder. Alan stood there yelling until he realised we weren’t coming back. He looked like an abandoned puppy. So so sweet.”

“Good for you!” Matilda applauded. “It’s not easy to leave.”

“It’s really not. But for that I should thank you. And apologise. You opened my eyes, that night at the mill. I didn’t want to admit it but, ever since, I saw Alan’s bullying for what it truly was. I got there eventually.”

Matilda got up and gave Rachel a warm hug. Seeing the former enemies embrace felt odd to William. But nice.

The family enjoyed some lighter conversation but were eventually interrupted by the Baron and Sir Phillip.

“It looks like you’re all having fun,” Baron Walter called up from the castle gate. “May we join you?”

The pair clambered up the gate tower and joined the family’s meal.

Baron Walter was in a particularly good mood. “I knew you’d worked wonders Matilda but I never thought you’d achieved so much. The Earl is most pleased. He’s all but guaranteed to bring your case to the King. Godfrey’s seething!”

The Baron did a little jig.

“Patience,” Sir Phillip advised. “Don’t count your chicks before they’ve hatched.”

“Bah! You heard Robert. We’re going to London!”

Sir Phillip shook his head and laughed, helping himself to dried fruit and shifting the conversation to Holford’s future.

Baron Walter was on his third mug of wine when they heard a commotion coming from the town. They peered through the crenellations and saw a large crowd thronging towards the castle. Godfrey strode at its head.

As they drew nearer, William saw a scattering of priests and monks in the vanguard, mingled amongst commoners carrying prayer beads and crosses. Further back, several townsfolk carried torches and a group of men bore a second deconstructed pyre.

Seeing Matilda on the wall, Godfrey called his mob to a halt.

“Ho, Bishop!” the Baron cried out jovially. “You’re a little early. The Earl is still resting.”

The Bishop wasn’t amused. “We’re here for the Foreigner. Hand her over to me, you oafish boar.”

“You’re getting a little ahead of yourself Godfrey. The Earl has yet to pass his judgement.”

“Bring her down to me. At once!”

“I won’t be doing that. We agreed that Robert would decide whether she sees the King. You can’t rescind now.”

“Who are you to obstruct the Church!?” Godfrey shrieked. “Bring her to me!”

The Bishop's refrain was directed at his mob of followers. Led by the youngest priests, the fervent crowd heeded their Bishop's command and streamed into the castle.

Hesitant to lay hands on clergymen, the stunned gatehouse guards let the mob in unimpeded.

Sir Phillip swore. "They'll crucify her. Block the doors!"

He and Baron Walter each ran to a gatehouse tower and barricaded the doors. The family stood rooted in disbelief but Matilda summoned them and spoke urgently.

"This looks unlikely to end well. I don't know who but someone is going to get hurt. Just do what they say and keep each other safe."

Elizabeth trembled.

"William, you've been with me every step of the way. My right-hand man. You know my mission better than anyone. Promise that you'll make sure Holford keeps going. No matter what."

"But..." William tried to object.

"No matter what," Matilda insisted.

William gave a solemn nod.

"And John. We've only recently met but you've shown kindness, compassion and an awareness of *why* I'm trying to teach. Can you work with William to ensure the lessons are put to sound use? To prevent corruption and ensure they're shared for the benefit of *all*?"

"I will," John promised.

"Great. Everyone else, keep up the hard work and make sure word spreads. None of this will be worth it if it stays in the hands of the few. Whatever happens, know that I am truly grateful. You've shown greater kindness than I ever deserved. I love you all."

The family mumbled their own thanks but Sir Phillip yelled out as the crowd pushed against the gatehouse door. William and Pa darted over to assist while John ran to help the Baron.

The door lurched as the crowd crashed against the other side. Sir Phillip fought like a demon.

In support from the ground, Godfrey's vile assistant led the mob in a crusader hymn.

"Amarae morti ne tradas nos."

The eerie chant empowered the crowd and their efforts against the door intensified. Godfrey's shrill shrieks cut a sharp soprano over the base of the mob's chanting to create an utterly unique war song.

Their melody was punctuated by a crash. Looking back to the other gate tower, William saw John and the Baron overrun. John lay curled on the ground being kicked by priests while others flooded towards Matilda. Pa rushed to protect Rachel but was clubbed over the head by a cross-wielding commoner. William cried out but his door also breached and he was shoved hard against the rampart.

William caught glimpses of red hair in the chaos that followed, watching in horror as Matilda successfully downed several assailants before being overrun. Godfrey's mob let out an almighty cheer as Matilda was baled up and dragged back down the gate tower.

It was William's turn to have his hands bound. His family and Sir Phillip received the same treatment before being marched down to the castle courtyard. Only Walter's hands remained free, though he too received an unfriendly escort.

The new pyre was being assembled beside the stage when they were jostled into place and a gagged Matilda was quickly tied to its central beam. Her wrists were raw from her determined struggle for freedom.

A large crowd formed around the stage and a ring of priests served the role of guards. People streamed in from Bristol as word of the Bishop's intervention spread. William's neighbours shouted their protests, prompting scuffles with Godfrey's devout followers.

A hush fell over the crowd as Earl Robert and his wife emerged from the keep, dressed in their finest clothes and accompanied by a retinue of knights in similarly resplendent garb. Large flowing cloaks made of the finest fabric and trimmed with rare furs. Expensive leather boots. Exceptionally well-crafted swords. Such finery normally commanded respect and William's hopes rose.

"Godfrey!" the Earl bellowed as he marched towards the pyre. "What is the meaning of this!?"

"This woman is evil!" Godfrey answered. "A threat to Christianity itself. You have entertained her wickedness long enough!"

"This wasn't out deal, Bishop," the Earl shot with venom. "This is not your decision to make."

"On the contrary. I discussed the matter all night with holy men, from here in Bristol and further afield. We concluded that this woman used sorcery to manipulate the world around her. To beguile a hapless village after a boy stumbled upon her lair. The crowd before us too. Only through prayer and the cleansing power of flame can her wickedness truly be purged."

Godfrey's mob continued to build the pyre around Matilda as their superiors debated.

"Stop!" the Earl ordered desperately to both Godfrey and his minions. He drew his sword and his knights followed suit.

"Earl Robert," Godfrey chided, "you'd dare to bear arms against the Church? See sense, I implore you. Consider the costs. If we are wrong, a single innocent soul will be sent to the Maker, who would surely understand our position and grant her mercy. But if we are right, how many must go to the Devil before our mistake is rectified?"

The crowd gave a collective shiver. Even the Earl looked troubled.

"What makes you think you can just do this?" he asked. "In the heart of my own castle?"

"You need to relearn your place, Bastard," Godfrey spat. "Religion transcends royalty."

That angered the Earl.

“My father is King Henry, anointed by God. You can debate whether he lies beneath the Holy Father but he certainly outranks you.”

Godfrey’s smirk disappeared

“Look around you, stupid man,” the Earl continued, waving his sword at the festival stalls. “Everything we’ve seen over the past days. Surely that demonstrates her utility. Her value to the common good.”

“There is more to life than copper, pumpkins and pretty cloth. Such petty things are worthless in the Lord’s eyes. A waste of our time.”

“Hypocrite!” came a call from over William’s shoulder. He was further shocked when John continued. “If they’re so worthless, then why did you waste so much time trying to decipher the Foreigner’s Book!?”

“I never,” Godfrey denied unconvincingly.

“Yes you did,” Adelard confirmed as John pointed at his confiscated bag and a nearby priest withdrew the tattered second half of Matilda’s tome. “Plate armour with the blacksmith and countless days in your library. Every soul in Bath has heard whispers of your ungodly experiments on rats in your chambers.”

The Earl took the offensive. “Look Bishop, not even your holy brothers agree with you.”

“Fools!” Godfrey cried. “This is the Lord’s way. It’s what he would want!”

“No it’s not,” the blue-eyed priest from Nether Stowey cried. “The Lord I know teaches of compassion and mercy. Of care for thy neighbour. And forgiveness.”

Father Daniel agreed too, adding his voice to those condemning the Bishop.

Seeing the priests divided confused the crowd. Even clergymen in Godfrey’s protective ring looked puzzled. Holford villagers led other members of the crowd to add their calls for justice and grace.

The tide turned, drowning out the cries of Godfrey’s followers and the Bishop found himself at the centre of a hostile baying mob once again. He spun around searching for support but found only his Assistant and a handful of devout faithful.

He stopped spinning and looked at the Earl. “You’ll regret this Robert,” he snarled. “You dabble in arenas you cannot even begin to comprehend and set your father’s kingdom on a dangerous path. The Pope has shown little patience for the petty politics of Man. He castrated the Holy Roman Emperor with the Concordat of Worms. Now that is your future too.”

With a malicious smirk, Godfrey tossed his torch onto the pyre before pushing his way through the crowd. Flames sprung up instantly.

William yanked himself away from the priest restraining him and urged anyone nearby to free his wrists. The Earl and his men barged through the crowd and rushed towards Matilda but the flames were already at shoulder height when they arrived. The Earl tore off his expensive cloak and beat at the fire while others hauled heavy timbers out of the way.

William watched Matilda's struggle intensify, her cries gagged but eyes screaming with desperation. He couldn't look away and sprinted towards her the instant a monk finally severed his ropes. He hurled himself into the fire, coughing amongst the smoke and burning his hands as he heaved at large logs with the Earl's knights. Matilda also suffered from the smoke and, through weeping eyes, William saw her consciousness slowly slip away.

Time lost all meaning as he fought towards her but eventually the smoke cleared and the flames shrunk. William felt helpless as he watched a pair of knights cut Matilda down from the beam and gently lay her beside the stage.

Her wrists bled from rope burn and her dress was singed but she was surprisingly untouched by the fire. William remained concerned, Matilda's medical lessons taught that smoke and heat could cause serious internal damage.

"Careful," he warned as Astrid emerged from the crowd but her knowing nod reassured him.

William hovered as the Midwife tended to their dear mentor, begrudgingly accepting a bucket from Ma for his own injured hands.

The mob crowded in, holding its breath until Matilda gave a ragged cough and pulled herself upright. She wordlessly fought for space but Astrid insistently pushed a cup of water upon her. Matilda coughed and spluttered but consumed increasingly more with each sip.

A wave of relief flowed over William and he looked around at the crowd. Godfrey's fervent followers had been overtaken by concerned onlookers and were nowhere to be seen.

"Where's the Bishop?" William asked the Earl bluntly.

"There's no sign of him. Nor his aide. Their horses are missing so he's undoubtedly bound for London. We'll need to make pursuit."

Taking several deep breathes, Matilda pushed herself to her feet. William and the Earl rushed over to assist.

"Stage," she croaked. "Secure the crowd."

They escorted her onto the Earl's throne, seating her beside his wife. John handed her Astrid's cup of water. The Baron had already assumed his normal perch so William and John took the Bishop's seat while the Earl turned to the crowd.

"The Bishop has fled and surrendered his prisoner to my custody. I see no arguing that Matilda is a blessing. A gift to the English people. She has demonstrated her ability to dramatically improve the lives of people around her. As such, I declare Matilda a free woman!"

The crowd erupted, ecstatic for a woman that most had only just met. Any opposition was drowned out by cheers and shouts, screams and whistles. It was so loud that William couldn't hear his own cheering.

Tears of relief streamed down Matilda's face and she took a moment to compose herself before gingerly rising to address the crowd. Their cheers stilled instantly as they strained to hear her raspy voice.

“I understand your hesitance in accepting me and my teachings. Change evokes fear. And so, I forgive those involved in this morning’s insurrection and ask that they see sense.

“I cannot prove my innocence any more than Godfrey can prove the existence of God. However, you’ve all replicated my lessons which should show there is no need for supernatural powers. Even Godfrey sought to use them for his own gain. What does his hypocrisy say of my innocence? Either my gifts are harmless and to be used to enrich the world. Or they’re evil sorcery, making all who seek to use them, including the fallen Bishop, evil dabblers in the arcane arts. It cannot be both.

“No. The true magic is the power of the mind. Man or woman, adult or child. You’ve all shown the remarkable ability to learn. Harness this and you will achieve acts that can truly be described as magic.”

The crowd stared up at the woman in awe. And yet she spoke once more.

“Enough seriousness. Resume the festival!” she added simply, gesturing to the tables and tents that remained from the previous days festivities.

The crowd erupted and music played. The mob streamed away, many back to the stalls, some towards the stage. The energy of their revelry was even greater than the day before.

“Enjoy this,” William heard the Earl say to Matilda, who was rubbing her tender wrists. “Godfrey is a bulldog and I’d bet my castle that he’s already planning his audiences in London. So rest and enjoy your victory, you deserve it. But we leave for my father in the morning.”

Matilda gave a simple nod. “Let the next step begin.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

29 September 1124

Matilda dreamt she was up in the clouds. White and fluffy. Surprisingly dry. Sunlight streamed through gaps between the clouds and wind whipped her hair around as she raced through the air, chasing Richie and William who darted along in front of her. But how were they flying?

Suddenly she was dropping. Trapped in an iron ball that plummeted toward the ground, heating as it fell and burning her hand. It burst through the sunny clouds and the world went grey and drab. The ground and trees rushed towards her. She ploughed through the branches, bouncing around like a pinball. But she was going too fast...

Matilda jolted awake in a comfortable four-poster bed, surrounded by a mass of pillows. Sunlight streamed through an arrow slit in the keep wall, illuminating the Earl's guest room with its luxurious carpets and tapestries.

It took a moment to realise where she was and recall everything that had happened over the previous days. She'd been clubbed, burnt, shot and burnt again. A lifetime of injuries, all in a matter of days. It took even longer to accept that she had made it through the whole ordeal. Timothy's death felt like a lifetime ago.

Matilda hadn't slept so well for an entire year. She was surprised to have slept at all. The trauma of the previous day was still painfully fresh. Tied to the pyre, she'd been completely powerless and left to the whims of others. It strangely mirrored her mission which, at the end of the day, all came down to others. Matilda could never stop a solar flare by herself. It was the people she touched along the way that would make the real difference.

The bright beam of sunlight heralded a beautiful day for beginning the next phase of her journey. The journey to London. A step that should've started a whole year earlier. *Better late than never.*

Noises outside the door told her that the castle was already awake and in full preparation for the trip. Knowing that her travel companions would be eager to catch up to Godfrey, Matilda pried her crusted wrists from the Earl's clean sheets and begrudgingly rose from the comfortable bed.

She strolled to the arrow slit and peered into the courtyard below. Her room faced away from the stage but heard shouts as an army of workers dismantled her festival. Matilda was relieved that the ordeal was over but already missed the energetic festival atmosphere. With a sigh, she washed her face and collected her few belongings before departing to see how she could help.

Matilda wandered through the keep, appreciating the building's militaristic practicality but admiring the minor artistic touches that indicated it housed nobility. It felt strange being suddenly free within her former prison but that didn't prevent her from stopping by the keep's kitchen for a bite to eat. The kitchen hands fawned over her, insisting that she try their festival-inspired experiments.

The castle courtyard was a hive of activity when Matilda finally emerged from the keep. Bristol townsfolk hurriedly packed up tents and tables. The Holford villagers had already loaded their remaining goods into the carts and milled around to say their farewells.

An army of attendants fussed over a pack of horses, making sure that they were equipped with everything that their lords might need for the journey to London. Seeing Matilda, an attendant ran over and indicated the horse assigned to her. He offered to load her satchel into the saddlebags but Matilda politely declined. She would be needing it.

Matilda made straight for the Holford villagers who quickly gathered around her, making space at the front for William and his family.

“Good morning!” she called. “I can’t thank you all enough for coming to my rescue. I wouldn’t be here today if not for your valiant efforts.”

The ashes of the pyre smouldered behind them. It had served as another impromptu bonfire for the previous evening’s celebration.

“More than that, thanks for your hospitality. For welcoming me into your lives. It has been an absurd year. Busy beyond belief. But you’ve taken everything in your stride and shown amazing perseverance and community. I’ll remember it for the rest of my days.

“This isn’t goodbye. I will return to Holford and continue what we started. The village has truly become my home and you,” she said looking at Ma and Pa, “have become my family. I must pursue the Bishop, to ensure he cannot slander our hard work. I’ll seek the King’s blessing, along with extra resources for Holford’s continued growth. The Council will continue their guidance but keep reminding them that they serve the whole village.

“Please return home and, after a well-deserved rest, dive into your work with even greater energy than before. You’ve seen the impact your projects can have on your neighbours. And on the world. So keep up the good work and I can’t wait to see how far you have progressed when I return.”

Matthew led the villagers in three cheers for Matilda and they swarmed around her to say their farewells. The Council members filed through first. Walt wrung her hand with his gnarled paws before giving her a rib-crushing hug. Matthew and Ralph complained that they would have too much spare time given the departure of their biggest customer and quiet Astrid gifted her a woven bracelet.

The Holford villagers came next, filing through one by one to say their farewells before joining the convoy for the journey home. Matilda was amazed at how many people she’d gotten to know. It felt so quick but she remembered touching the lives of all but the newest of newcomers. And they hers. She had finally found a place she belonged.

Finally only the family remained. Matilda felt herself getting emotional already.

“Guys, I...just...thank you all so much.”

They piled in and gently embraced Matilda as a group.

“Don’t you go getting sappy on us now young lady,” Ma said with a tearful smile as they broke away. “Don’t think there won’t be a mountain of chores waiting when you finally return from galivanting around the kingdom.”

“Of course,” Matilda replied. “I’d be offended by anything less.”

“We need to thank you too, dear Matilda,” Pa said gruffly. “You’ve done so much for us. The family. The village. The region. Words can’t express the depths of our gratitude, but you’re a smart girl so I’m sure you understand.”

Matilda gave a wordless nod.

“How was it sleeping in the keep last night?” Elizabeth asked excitedly. “You’re pretty much royalty now right?”

“Not quite,” Matilda laughed. “I’ll keep an eye out for any eligible princes for you while I’m in London.”

Elizabeth melted into a fit of giggles.

Matilda turned to Margery and Rachel.

“I’m sorry for all the disruptions I’ve caused...”

“Are you kidding?” Margery answered first. “If not for you I would never have met my friends. I would’ve never learnt how to read. I’d still be the same timid girl, moping around and feeling sorry for myself. If anything, I should apologise to you. I still feel terrible for talking to the deaf priest and leading the Bishop to Holford.”

“Not at all,” Matilda replied with a reassuring smile. “You weren’t to know and no real harm done in the end. As for your reading, I think it would be best if you looked after this for me. To make sure it re-joins its other half.”

Matilda reached into her satchel and withdrew the tattered second half of her bible. She handed it to Margery who stared in awe at the treasure Matilda had just bestowed upon her. And then Matilda was surprised by a sudden embrace from Rachel. The bulge of her belly pushed into Matilda’s hip.

“I need to apologise and thank you too,” Rachel said emphatically. “We had a rough start and I regret not getting to know you better. But without you I’d still be stuck in a loveless marriage, fearing for myself and my child. Ignore everything I’ve previously said, I am so glad that you came to our village. Things are headed in a much better direction now.”

Matilda didn’t know what to say so she just returned the eldest sister’s hug. The genuine warmth made her heart sing.

She eventually disengaged and turned to face William. The boy who had started her journey. Who had saved her from the depths of despair. He was no longer a boy, she noted as she saw the man he had become. The events of the previous days looked to have aged him by several years.

“William. I can’t even think where to begin.”

She paused awkwardly and turned to Ma and Pa.

"I've already caused great disruption to your family and deprived you of so much time with your children, so it hurts me to ask. But I really must."

She took a deep breath.

"Would it be alright if William joined me in London?"

Ma and Pa considered her question and looked at each other before bursting into laughter.

"So formal Matilda!" Pa said, clutching his sides. "Of course he's going with you. I don't think anyone could stop him. He's already packed his bag for Christ's sake!"

Only then did Matilda notice the bag slung across William's shoulder. She smiled in spite of herself.

"I'll admit that I'm not thrilled to see another child venturing away from the nest," Ma said. "But they've all come back so far. And usually better than when they left. Just promise to take care of him while you're gone. And William, you take care of her too, ok?"

The pair gave Ma sincere nods before exchanging an excited glance.

"Well then," Matilda said, "we should find you a ride."

She spotted the steward and approached him to ask for a spare horse for William.

"I really ought to ask Earl Robert but you need to depart soon. Fine, but it won't be the finest mount."

He strode off toward the stables.

"Does he realise there isn't a single horse in Holford?" William asked.

The family were still laughing when Earl Robert emerged from the keep, deep in discussion with John. Baron Walter and the Earl's wife followed behind. Seeing Matilda, the Earl led them over to her.

"John here has provided invaluable insights into the Bishop and his network of allies in London which should help us navigate any potential schemes. I'd have preferred that John join us in London but he says he's had enough of politics, the Church and the Bishop to last a lifetime. He even went so far to say that he'd prefer a stint in my dungeon than another audience with Godfrey. Point made."

John looked quite proud of himself.

"I'd like to go to Holford, if they'll have me." John told them. "I thought about the promises you asked of William and I yesterday and would love to start up a school. Godfrey left without saying goodbye so it's fair to say I'm free of any obligations to him. I renounced my vows to the Earl's chaplain this morning."

"A time of big changes," Matilda said. "I've gifted my bible to Margery but I'm sure she would welcome another scholar to help interpret its contents. As for the village's willingness to take you in, do you see any issues Pa?"

"None at all," Pa said with a smile. "A friend of Matilda's is a friend of Holford."

"Very well," the Earl said impatiently. "We'd best be off. There's no telling how quickly the Bishop will arrive in London and I'm loathe to give him time to turn the court against us. Mount up!"

The party of knights and nobles mounted their horses and Matilda vaulted up into her saddle as well. William struggled with his burned hands and Elizabeth had to hold onto the reins while Pa boosted him onto the saddle, much to the family's amusement. But in no time, he too sat atop his mount and the party was ready to depart. The family gathered closely around Ma and Pa as they said their final farewell.

“Thanks again, for everything,” Matilda called as the party started moving. “Goodbye!”

William's horse had a mind of its own but Matilda rode alongside him and helped him keep control. Matilda looked over her shoulder and saw the family standing alone in the castle courtyard. An unfathomable sight only a year earlier. She gave one last wave as she exited the castle gates.

Outside the castle, Bristol's inhabitants lined the streets to catch one final glimpse of the red-haired time traveller. Their cheers started as soon as the procession emerged and continued until they had reached the town's outer limits. Even then, some of Bristol's younger inhabitants ran alongside to keep up with the horses. Matilda flushed with pride.

It wasn't until they were clear of the town and had settled into a steady pace that the magnitude of the departure struck Matilda.

At long last, her mission was underway.

EPILOGUE

3 July 2025

“...And that, Your Excellency, is how the Chronomad finally embarked upon her mission to see the King.”

Ris fell silent and watched her rotund host process her tale’s conclusion about the distant past. The rest of his entourage looked bored and disengaged, continuing their own mundane work as they humoured their superior’s play at being an amateur historian. Ris felt insignificant in a room full of such powerful people. Standing before the starship’s viewport, with the big blue planet as her backdrop didn’t help.

“Wonderful! Truly marvellous!” her host proclaimed with solitary applause. “I’ve never heard Matilda’s story told in such detail. With such perspective. And finished just in time for the Chancellor’s address. You must promise to finish the Chronomad’s story when we return.”

His entourage came to attention and hurriedly prepared to fly down to Earth’s surface. Ignoring Ris, they bundled up the priceless torn Book on display and followed their enormous superior to the landing craft. Powerful people had gathered from across the Galaxy to watch the event responsible for catapulting Humanity into the stars.

The Dawn of The Long Day.

They would gather on Earth’s surface and enjoy the solar spectacle amidst an orgy of pomp and gluttony, protected from the charged ionosphere by rudimentary technology that was far beyond anything Matilda could’ve imagined.

But not Ris. She was a scholar, not a businessman or bureaucrat. She would remain on the starship and watch from space. Not that she minded, it meant more time to admire the planet and would allow her to witness the full magnitude of The Long Day.

Ris stared out from the starship’s viewport and into the depths of space. The stars of the Milky Way were denser than she’d expected of the outer galaxy but augmented annotations from her Eyepiece revealed that many of the dotted lights were actually other orbiting spacecraft also awaiting the historical event. The closest star was much bigger than the rest, a particularly bright yellowish-white dwarf. Sol, the source of the event they were all there to see.

Ris was amongst the lucky few selected from the galactic colonies to witness the Event in person. She’d become a leading historian on the period that followed Matilda’s arrival, yet it was her first time visiting the Sol system and she’d still never set foot on Earth. She hailed from the inner galactic colonies and the prohibitive costs of the long journey to Sol had always obstructed firsthand studies. She’d hoped that her expertise might one day merit funding to see the Cradle of Humanity and had been pleasantly surprised as the Long Day approached.

Ulrichs from across the Galaxy had flocked back to Earth and each sought a noteworthy historian for their pilgrimage. The Ultra-Rich were akin to the feudal lords that Matilda had tried to topple on her journey back

in time. They terraformed planets and owned entire solar systems. It was their actions that now filled the history books and their existence proved the inevitability of human greed and oppression. Power breeds power, plus ever greater thirst.

Their mere existence was an insult to Matilda's memory. Yet when an Ulrich had invited Ris to witness the Long Day, she'd found herself unable to decline. She earned her passage by answering the Ulrich's many questions as the multi-day journey unfolded. Her benefactor could have easily achieved the same result with artificial intelligence or using comms arrays but the physical presence of a notable scholar was an antiquated symbol of prestige. Ris found the level of wealth in her lavish quarters aboard the Ulrich's starship to be morally repugnant but who was she to turn down the opportunity? Her host did have a passion for historical truth so surely he couldn't be completely bad.

Looking down at the planet, Ris knew that Earth's Chancellor would be lecturing his wealthy guests on the important role his planet had played as the origin of humanity's spacefaring civilisation, undoubtedly ignorant to the irony of his planet's current dearth of technology. Earth was the capital of a fallen empire but desperately clung to the myth of its glory days. The days of Galileo and Newton. Einstein and Sam. Matilda and William.

Matilda had been Ris' childhood hero, a fellow red-haired woman who'd dared to jump into the unknown. Ris confidently argued that no single person had played a larger role in shaping humanity. With the help of William the Explorer and at great personal cost, she'd initiated a chain of events that catapulted civilisation forward.

Beyond only technical gifts from the future, Matilda had unknowingly established the Seeker philosophy. A school of thought that morphed into a religion, it promoted the pursuit of understanding and personal growth to enhance the freedoms of others. The Seekers directly contradicted the Ulrich way of life and had been persecuted for centuries as a result. But like many other philosophies over humanity's history, suppression had only fuelled its grow. Ris' parents were ardent believers and had taught their daughter in secret. Its illicit nature only increased Ris' excitement to learn more about the time traveller. *And it all began on this pale blue dot.*

Ris' Eyepiece flashed a warning that the coronal mass ejection had commenced, meaning that the Long Day would begin in approximately eight minutes. The starship's other lowly inhabitants – crew, assistant, droids – poured into the viewing room and claimed seats around the vacated amphitheatre. Ris tried to claim a seat of her own but familiar faces urged her back to the front.

“Oh great Historian,” an engineer mocked, “what are we seeing?”

Ris cringed at the sarcastic tone but other cries of genuine interest convinced her back to the front to explain.

“Um, ok. You will all be aware of Matilda, humanity's first Chronomad. She used primitive technology to make the first journey back through time, seeking to advance humanity into a new era. It is common knowledge that a great calamity was the catalyst for her voyage and her goal was to prematurely inject science in the hope that future generations would avoid The Long Day. That is the Event we are about to witness.”

Everyone knew what was coming but there was still a swell of excitement from the crowd.

“Her premature demise robbed us of many gifts, but William took up her torch and illuminated a path out of the Dark Ages.

“We are left wondering what could have been. Where would we be today if she had managed to impart all that she knew? She didn’t share with us the secret to time travel, that is for sure. Deliberately most scholars agree. Although we eventually discovered it ourselves, it was left to us to learn the dangers of manipulating space-time. The Chronomad has left a permanent mark on our time. Literally. Our calendar was defined by the Chronomad’s arrival. To her, the Event we’ll see today occurred in 2025 rather than 902.

“We may never know just how much more Matilda may have offered but the fact that we can safely watch the Event proves that her mission was a success. I think she would be ecstatic to see all that we have learnt.”

There were murmurs of agreement from the crowd and Ris’s Eyepiece went off again.

“It’s about to begin,” she announced.

A hush fell over the crowd as the amphitheatre lights dimmed. Auroras appeared in the sky around them, surrounding the magnetic shields of the spectating spacecraft and darting across the surface of the blue planet below. Ribbons of light rippled across the planet, first around the poles and then over the entire surface with ever greater intensity.

“The Chronomad was only ten years old when this took place,” Ris noted. “See the magnitude of the excitations. Such intensity hadn’t been seen for over a century and the magnetic forces wreaked havoc on the simple electronic systems of the Chronomad’s time. Evidence suggests that corruption also played a role, with contemporary leaders funnelling funds into endless wars and corporate sponsors rather than essential infrastructure and environmental protection.

“Rudimentary shielding capable of guarding against the Long Day was developed only a century after Matilda’s arrival from The World That Was. Additional development in the eight hundred years since guarantees that there won’t be a single loss of critical infrastructure today. Instead, the Event can even be harvested as a source of power.”

Ris drew her eyes away from the planet and looked up at the other spacecraft, the slipstream of their own magnetic shielding making them look like an array of stationary comets.

“Of course, the other spacecraft watching with us today would’ve been astounding to Matilda. Even the most basic of them contains technology beyond her wildest dreams.”

Ris looked around the room and found her audience enamoured by the spectacle before them. Deciding to enjoy the sight for herself, she wondered what her hero would say if she could see it. The planet. The starships. The auroras. A single thought replayed through her mind.

It was beautiful.

30 October 2023

And so concludes the beginning of Matilda's journey!

TWTW was written as a stand-alone story, intended as a twist on the typical time-travel adventure of going back in time and wowing a king with wonders from the future. I had planned for people to just imagine what might come next...but there have been a number of requests for a sequel so (after the release and a much-needed break) I'll have to start fleshing out my plans for Matilda's next steps.

I want to say a massive thank you to everyone who has followed Matilda's journey from that very first conversation in her pod. Writing a book has always been a dream but to have an audience engage with it the way you have was more rewarding than I'd ever imagined!

I am dying to hear what you thought of the book so please leave a review on Goodreads or send an email to storyplotstudios@gmail.com. I have woven readers' feedback throughout the novel (check out the [completely revamped opening](#)) and any comments will help me improve my craft for future works. I have included the list of questions I provided to my test readers on the final page below and would love your thoughts too!

Finally, if you enjoyed the book, I would greatly appreciate your help to make it a reality. Share word of it with friends, family and/or acquaintances. Leave a rating at [Royal Road](#) or a review at [Goodreads](#). Consider [pre-ordering a copy](#) from my website, backing the upcoming Kickstarter or buying a copy when it releases on 1 March 2024 (unfortunately delayed due to issues with my printer).

This has never been a financial endeavour for me (hence releasing the entire thing for free!) but any sales will help me justify this as a serious activity rather than just a hobby (and therefore allocate more time for writing projects). I will be sharing everything I have learnt during the creation of TWTW in r/writing, including the spreadsheet used to develop the story, complete with the original 500 word chapter summaries. I hope that seeing the evolution of the book - from initial idea through to finished product - might help others with their own writing journeys. Good stories make the world a much richer place!

Thanks again for reading, thanks for your feedback, and see you again in the (hopefully) not too distant future.

With warmest regards,



THE WORLD THAT WAS

What would you give the book out of ten? Why?

How would you describe the book to a friend?

What did you enjoy?

What didn't you enjoy?

Which areas would you improve? How?

What was your favourite moment? Why?

What was your least favourite moment? Why?

Who was your favourite character? Why?

Who was your least favourite character? Why?

Which character would you like to learn more about?

Who would you have play Matilda, William and Godfrey in a movie?

What were the key themes of the book?

Who is the target audience? Why?

