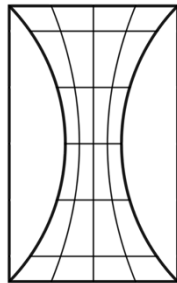


# THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



**THE WORLD THAT WAS**

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

*24 September 1124*

Matilda would've quite enjoyed the journey to Bristol, had it not been for her throbbing hand, pounding head, and general existential dread. She soaked in the views of the medieval countryside, watching peasants work fields that looked pristine and unspoiled. The wagon trundled lazily along dirt roads, some heavily rutted and others little more than animal tracks.

Godfrey was in no rush to reach Bristol and greatly slowed his pace after Baron Walter arrived. The two groups watched each other warily, the Bishop's men knowing they were outmatched and Walter's men not trusting Godfrey with his hostage. Matilda felt odd being the centre of such focused attention but tried to make the most of the strange situation.

Away from Holford's frenetic pace, Matilda could finally reflect on the bigger picture. She judged it had been almost a year since she had bid farewell to her family. Since Harry had died. Matilda hoped they would approve of everything she'd achieved. The mill. The village. The people.

Despite her immediate predicament, Matilda was proud of how she had adapted, no longer married so rigidly to others' plans and able to think on the fly. She would've particularly loved to show her Institute mentors how well her alternate approach had worked.

Although completely different to the original plan, Matilda was confident that her revised approach had sufficiently progressed society. Holford was on the path to increasingly advanced technologies and William could lead their work. Even if she never left Bristol.

Matilda refused to let her mind sink into melancholy and instead allowed the Boy to distract her. His transformation was even greater than Holford's. The impatient youth that stole Harry's knife was long gone, replaced by a measured and intelligent young man. They used their most complex modern English vocabulary to discuss their predicament, enjoying the stupefied looks from Godfrey's minders.

"What stratagem will you employ upon our imminent arrival at the misbegotten's domicile?" William asked, struggling to keep a straight face.

Matilda chuckled but shook her head. "Alas, my cognitive faculties are presently engaged in formulating a satisfactory resolution, rendering me uncertain at this juncture."

She also appreciated the quiet company of the Young Priest who also sat within the cart, watching them intently but reluctant to engage. He'd shown kindness after her abduction, a single ray of hope as she lay hogtied in a pool of vomit. Matilda wondered how the compassionate priest could be in league with the Bishop but his companions' animosity towards him suggested that he too wasn't there by choice.

The density of man-made structures ebbed and flowed as the group passed through the countryside but consistently increased as they neared Bristol. The town was much larger than Holford. Its cramped streets were lined with multistorey buildings containing stores dedicated to all manner of unique goods. Matilda

found it strange to see so many people in the one place but the putrid smells of stagnant refuse were strangely endearing. Just as she'd always imagined.

She longed to escape the convoy and explore but they were escorted straight to the castle. Townsfolk were stunned to see a bishop and a baron arrive unannounced and they stopped to watch as the strange company passed by. Matilda gawked right back at them with even greater intensity.

Matilda's stomach dropped as the castle came into view, reminding her of the seriousness of their journey. Located beside the River Avon, the party were led across a drawbridge and through the castle gate.

The wagon pulled up at the keep and an elderly steward emerged, followed by an army of attendants who quickly collected the party's horses and led them to the stables. Godfrey's men dragged Matilda from the wagon before it too was led away. The steward watched with veiled disapproval but maintained a diplomatic facade.

"Greetings Bishop Godfrey and Baron Walter. My lord has just returned from a hunt. He was expecting your arrival so won't be long. Please make yourselves comfortable inside."

The steward led the unusual party into a large antechamber and made polite small talk before leaving to attend to other matters. Another army of servants arrived bearing chilled water and bread.

The two groups milled around awkwardly, uncomfortable at such close proximity to their opposition. Matilda was stuck in the middle, wondering what fate awaited her behind the hall's heavy oak doors.

Godfrey scowled whenever she caught his eye and she received little more warmth from the Baron. When the bread and water was gone, Walter strolled up to her and spoke in a hushed voice for the first time since her rescue.

"Earl Robert is a serious man. Canny, but not known for leniency. Just keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking."

Matilda started to object but was silenced by the Baron's glare.

"Did you really write to the Earl about Holford?" she asked to fill the silence.

"Yes," Walter replied. "But only on the night of your capture. I wasn't about to let anyone steal my golden goose."

Their conversation was interrupted when the elderly steward emerged through the inner hall's main doors.

"The Earl will see you now," he told them simply, before turning and leading the party into the hall.

Godfrey dismissed his mercenaries and Walter waved away his knights, permitting only Sir Phillip to enter with him. William made to follow the pair into the hall but Walter irritably shooed him away.

"The Boy comes," Matilda said firmly.

Walter was struck by her boldness but reluctantly conceded when Matilda stood firm. William rushed after the men into the hall. The Bishop followed with Matilda in tow, escorted by a priest on each arm.

The Earl's hall was also just as Matilda had imagined. Tapestries depicting grand battles hung on stone walls, nobles awaited their own audience and spear-wielding guards were stationed around the room. A fire crackled within a large fireplace, filling the hall with a smoky haze.

Earl Robert sat on a throne upon a raised dais at the head of the hall, still dressed for hunting. A woman sat on a smaller seat to his right. His wife, Matilda guessed.

Everyone watched with genuine intrigue as the unusual group of petitioners entered the courtroom. The Earl appraised them with an intelligent gaze which gave Matilda hope.

"So this is the cause of your quarrel?" he mused as they approached.

"My lord," Walter started with a deep bow. "Thank you for granting this audience at such short notice."

"You made decent time, Baron," the Earl noted. "My riders updated me on your progress. And Bishop Godfrey, we meet again."

The Bishop didn't bow. "We do indeed. You were absent at the Feast of the Assumption."

"I was still returning from Normandy, as you were no doubt aware. But I shall attend your Christmas service as compensation. Please, tell me about this woman."

Intrigued by their stilted interaction, Matilda vaguely recalled reading of a feud between the Earl and his stepmother – England's new Queen and Godfrey's former charge.

Walter leapt in before the Bishop could speak. "My Earl, three nights ago, Bishop Godfrey slipped into my territory to abduct this woman. Like so many other barbaric foreigners before him, Godfrey set fire to her dwelling and spirited the woman away under the cover of darkness.

"This woman is precious to me. She has brought great prosperity, teaching my villagers new skills and my craftsmen new technologies. She has singlehandedly increased the output of my lands. Threefold."

"I see," the Earl said thoughtfully. "Bishop Godfrey, by what right do you think it acceptable to apprehend another lord's peasant?"

"You will find she is a foreigner, not one of his serfs," Godfrey replied in a bored tone. "This is a matter for the Church, transcending the petty laws of Man. The woman is an enemy of Christendom."

Scandalised gasps issued from the crowd. Matilda knew it was a serious accusation.

The Earl quietened them with a raised hand. "A bold claim, Godfrey. On what grounds?"

"Sacrilege and heresy. Baron Walter has failed to mention that my men and I arrested her as she butchered a fellow man. Before a willing crowd of the Baron's villagers, no less."

The Earl's expression hardened and his wife blanched. "Is this true?" he asked Walter.

"I knew nothing of it," Walter stammered while looking at Matilda in horror.

"Such little awareness of his own lands," the Bishop chided. "I have been watching the woman for months. Our paths first crossed at Stowey castle where I was assisting the Baron after a...hunting accident. I

had almost finished my treatment when she suddenly arrived, claiming first to be a healer and then to have cured the Baron with a cheap trick. It was then that I first became suspicious.”

“Does she have a name?” the Earl’s wife squeaked.

“I beg your pardon?” Godfrey asked tetchily.

“The woman standing before us in chains. What is her name?”

“Matilda, my lady,” Matilda replied, earning a sharp look from the Baron.

“Carry on, Bishop,” Earl Robert said with intrigue.

“I listened for news about the mystery healer, knowing she was bound to stir up more trouble. Then, several months ago, I learned of a sleepy village transformed by a red-headed woman, as if by magic. So I tasked someone to watch her. A friend she would never suspect.”

A chill ran down Matilda’s spine. *Warren was no friend. Who could it have been?*

“My source’s messages grew stranger with every week. There were unusual plants that grew a yard each day. Mysterious metals that didn’t rust. Women and children learning to read.

“The entire village was besotted with the woman and her power over them was absolute. Villagers who spoke up against her were beaten or banished. Lives were lost in her overworked mine, some at the hands of her misguided attempts at healing.

“But it was only in the past weeks that my concerns truly ripened. I received reports of artificial suns, orbs that hung in the night sky to make a room as bright as day. Such a feat could only be explained by sorcery. I admit that even I was fearful to confront such unnatural power. But then my source’s messenger arrived at my doorstep.

“He arrived by horse, exhausted from travelling overnight with dire news. An elderly villager had died and was so tightly gripped by the woman’s spell that he had volunteered his earthly body for her vile healing lessons. She planned to cut him to pieces before a willing crowd.”

“Goodness, no!” the Earl’s wife cried.

“I’m afraid so, my lady,” Godfrey said with surprisingly genuine sorrow. “We were too late to stop her desecration; may God have mercy on the poor man’s soul. But we interrupted her butchery and clapped her in irons before setting the building alight to cleanse her unholy presence.

“We were travelling to the sanctity of Bath Abbey when Baron Walter interrupted and ordered that we bring the woman to see you. I really must insist that I resume my holy duty and see this *abomination* safely dealt with on sacred grounds.”

A shocked silence hung over the hall as Godfrey finished his account. Even Matilda shared their scandal at the Bishop’s convincing recollection. He looked victorious as he soaked in the crowd’s horror.

The Earl sat deep in thought, a troubled look on his face and his hands propped up before him.

“A most disturbing account, Bishop. Very disturbing indeed. Walter, did you know of this?”

Matilda watched the Baron's options tick through his head. His hesitation didn't fill her with confidence.

"Ah... No, my lord. I knew of her improvements in the village and our increased taxes. But of the dissection, I knew nothing."

"Curious," the Earl said. "A mysterious woman bringing unknown, and unnatural, gifts from a foreign land. How bizarre." He stared at her with a grave expression. "Who are you Matilda? Where do you come from?"

Matilda felt every eye in the hall turn to her, projecting the room's collective curiosity and disdain. The Earl's questions sounded rhetorical and yet she felt compelled to answer. She gave a wry smile to William before turning to address the Earl. Her situation was dire. It was time.

"The future, my lord."

The room's silence was absolute, so quiet that Matilda could only hear the fire crackle. Then, like a rolling wave, the crowd started to grumble and then grew into shouts.

"Don't play games," the Earl warned. "Your life is at stake."

"It's the truth my lord," Matilda replied calmly, though her stomach felt like lead. "I am from the future. The year two thousand and thirty-seven of our Lord, to be precise. I was sent to help, to avoid a calamity that devastated my own time."

The Earl stared at her in disbelief. "Woman, you continue this farce?"

"The proof is in my work, my lord. The developments I have introduced are nothing unnatural. Anyone can do it. Young William here can replicate many of my achievements and Walter himself has made the orbs shine. Simpler than lighting a candle, with the right tools. There is no need for magic."

The Earl eyed William before settling his sceptical gaze on her once more. He was intrigued.

"Don't believe a word she says, Robert," Godfrey chimed. "She has already enchanted many. Any sane person can see that she calls upon the supernatural."

The crowd grumbled disapproval and warning at the Earl, giving Matilda little doubt that they sided with the Bishop.

"Your father will die!" she cried with desperation. "Eleven years from now, eating lampreys." All eyes snapped back to Matilda and the Earl stared intently. "His death will throw the Kingdom into chaos and war. Your cousin Stephen will betray your sister and claim her throne."

The room erupted once more.

"You *prophesize* His Majesty's death as your defence against supernatural activities?" Godfrey sneered in disbelief, savouring the chaos.

"Quiet!" the Earl ordered, pale as a ghost. Godfrey flinched at the rebuke. "How does a foreigner know of his love for lampreys?" he whispered.



“It is one of many things recorded of your time,” Matilda said simply. “I know that you have just returned from a campaign against rebels in Normandy, though many here already know that. But I also know that you have Sir Amaury imprisoned in your dungeon at Gloucester. Tell me, if the Bishop has watched me for months, how could such a secret reach an inconsequential village like Holford?”

The Earl balked and even Godfrey looked shocked at this revelation. A hush fell over the room.

“I don’t know what is more difficult to believe,” the Earl croaked, “that you are from the future or in league with Satan. Perhaps both?”

“I can prove it, my lord.” Matilda said delicately. “I’ve travelled far to share knowledge from another time. I intended to show your father, before Godfrey’s first assault disrupted my plans. I’ve given up too much to be scuttled by a jealous bishop. Please, I humbly request a chance to prove myself. A week to show what we have made in the village and how it works. Let me prove my innocence, and I will teach your subjects all of my tricks.”

The Earl mulled over Matilda’s words. Walter looked particularly displeased by Matilda’s final offer.

“This is indeed an issue well beyond my jurisdiction,” the Earl started, prompting a flash of victory from Godfrey. “But you have little hope of a fair trial at the hands of the Bishop....”

“There is no question Robert, this woman is guilty!” Godfrey howled. “To even consider her story would be heresy.”

Cries of assent rippled around the hall but the Earl raised a hand.

Matilda’s hopes rose.

“This woman could be a valuable gift to the Kingdom, if you are indeed what you claim. The King’s very life may depend on you.” The Earl looked at Matilda pensively. “Very well. You may show us your secrets, though priests will supervise you at all times to ensure you try nothing untoward or ungodly. I am a busy man and cannot be traipsing to some country hamlet for a week. You shall have three days to prove yourself. Here in Bristol.

“Do so and I will personally take your case to my father. Fail and I’ll have no qualms in submitting you to the Bishop’s justice. Bishop Godfrey, can you agree to these terms? It means only a three-day delay.”

The Bishop trembled with fury before storming from the hall without a word. Matilda knew she wouldn’t get any better offer and gave a humble bow.

“You will stay here,” Earl Robert announced to the hall. “Locked in a cell until you prove your innocence. Guards, take her away!”

The Earl stood and strode from the hall, a train of guards and servants in tow. The hall burst into frantic discussion, the other nobles’ own petitions completely forgotten.

Walter and William walked over to Matilda.

“I thought I told you to...” Walter started angrily.

“I wasn’t leaving my life to your bumbling!” Matilda snapped.

Walter paused and looked sheepish.

Matilda turned to William. “I need you to get back to Holford. Fast. Get everything you can from the mill, from Matthew. The wire, the books. Some lights. Bring it all here so I can show off some of our actual work.”

“I can help you here!” William protested.

Matilda gave a gentle smile.

“I appreciate the offer but I’m afraid this is up to me now. Run along, you might make it in time if you’re quick. Oh, and let me know what damage was done to the mill!”

William nodded and ran from the hall. Sir Phillip followed, promising to find him a good horse.

The Earl’s guards came to take Matilda and Walter made them wait.

“I’ll make sure you’re properly cared for,” he said. “And I’ll see what I can arrange from out here.”

The guards warily took Matilda by the arms and led her from the hall through an inconspicuous door and down a dusty spiral staircase.

Matilda’s anxiety rose with each step that she descended, reaching its crescendo as the iron latch to her cell slammed shut.

*No*, she told herself. *She had planning to do.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

*25 September 1124*

John was eager to see what the Redhead planned to reveal. She was just as magnificent as he'd imagined the author of the Book to be, poised and prideful. He was still astounded that the author was a woman. He had never met a female scholar. The memory of her glib smile, as she had stood up to the nobles, taunted John late into the night. He regretted his priestly vows.

He and Peter had been accommodated at a local monastery, though Godfrey's peevisish assistant had quickly disappeared to keep watch over the woman which left John to endure a morning of probing questions from the annoyingly insistent monks.

"Is she truly wicked?"

"How did she come to Somerset?"

"What efforts has our blessed Bishop taken to purge her corruption?"

John couldn't leave soon enough.

Bristol was abuzz when he finally departed for the castle. Crowds thronged along the tall streets towards the monolithic castle walls. The scale of both the town and the castle amazed him, all so much larger than the insignificant backwater where he'd been raised. With a pang of loss and amusement, John wondered what his family would make of his involvement in the current predicament.

John enjoyed stretching his legs after days cramped in the wagon but the crowd made him uncomfortable. News of the peculiar events at the castle had spread like wildfire, fanned by a handful of zealous priests who roamed the streets decrying Matilda's depravity and declaring her either a sorceress or devil worshiper. John was promptly recognised as a member of the previous day's procession and unwanted interrogation quickly resumed as he walked to the castle.

Complete strangers nipped at his heels, yapping their endless questions despite his refusal to answer. The crowd grew denser as he neared the castle wall and people stood shoulder to shoulder at the castle gates.

John elbowed his way to the front of the crowd, his most insistent questioners following in his wake. Their tenaciousness finally proved valuable when their jabbered queries drew the attention of the guards. A captain recalled that John had ridden in Matilda's cart and let him through, prompting cries of protest from the restless crowd.

Their cries faded as John crossed the castle lawn. He reached the keep and re-entered the Earl's vaulted hall. The room bubbled with excitement and it too was packed to capacity. None of Bristol's elite dared to miss the unique proceedings.

The Earl and his wife were already seated at the front dais, with the Bishop and Baron waiting impatiently on either side. Godfrey and Peter stood with their heads together, scheming potential strategies for the days ahead.

John didn't have to wait long before a small door opened behind the dais and the Prisoner was led into the hall by a pair of guards. Pockets of the crowd met her arrival with angry jeers and Godfrey sneered triumphantly as she was escorted before the Earl. The Redhead looked exhausted. Her hair was dishevelled and eyes bloodshot, as though she hadn't slept a wink the previous night.

The Earl agreed.

"You look weary," he said as she stood before him. The crowd became deathly quiet. "I confess that I feel much the same. My wife and I debated your preposterous claim late into the night. Coming from the future, ha! How could such a thing be true? And yet, if not, how can you speak with such conviction about events yet to come?"

"My apologies for disrupting your sleep Earl Robert," Matilda replied reverently. "I hope to enlighten you over the coming days, first to prove that I am from the future and then that my actions were for humanity's benefit rather than an affront to God. I spent the evening planning..."

"I think not!" Godfrey objected. "Robert, the accused cannot dictate her own trial."

The Bishop had a point and John heard that many in the crowd agreed.

The Earl called for silence with a raised hand and looked at Matilda thoughtfully. "I would normally agree Godfrey, but this is no trial. I am not qualified to judge her innocence, you have made clear that is a matter for the Church. I merely seek to understand the validity of the various claims and to determine whether this needs consideration by higher authorities. And as such, we will hear her proposal."

The Redhead made to start but was interrupted by the steward.

"My lord, before you begin. The guards are reporting scuffles outside the walls and property is being destroyed. The crowd is baying for swift justice. It might be wise to send men beyond the walls to disperse them."

The Earl considered the news with concern but Matilda spoke up.

"Earl Robert, if I may? They're here because of me. The gossip that inevitably leaks from this hall will only further inflame their passions. Perhaps you could let them watch firsthand? I'm sure the entertainment provided by Godfrey's interrogations will distract from further destruction."

The Earl raised an eyebrow at the Bishop who merely shrugged. There was no denying that a frenzied crowd would support his case.

"Very well," Earl Robert announced. "Everyone outside!"

John raced from the hall and nestled himself amongst Bristol's elites as a makeshift stage was hastily constructed in the shadow of the keep. The Earl's throne was placed in the centre with a short bench on

either side. Several ranks of guards took position around the platform before the gates were opened to a loud cheer and the rowdy commoners flooded in.

A hush fell over the crowd when the keep doors opened and a procession of nobles made their way onto the stage. The Bishop, the Baron and their most trusted advisors settled onto the benches while the Earl's wife claimed her throne. Earl Robert stepped forward and addressed the crowd.

"My dear subjects, you have been permitted here today to witness a truly unusual event. Word reached me some days past of a quarrel. But this was no ordinary squabble, it was between a bishop and a baron. The cause of their debate was a singularly strange woman. One who reportedly creates sunlight in the depths of night and claims to come from the future."

A wave of concern swept through the crowd.

"I agree," the Earl declared with a nervous laugh. "I too was shaken by the talk of her powers. But we have men of God with us and they have assured me that the Lord will protect us."

John noticed a few nearby people glance toward him and his priestly attire. Some even shuffled closer.

"Bishop Godfrey, have you anything to say?"

"Just get this farce over with," Godfrey snarled.

The Earl gestured for the Redhead to be brought onto the stage. The crowd burst to life as soon as she emerged from the keep, arms bound and flanked by a pair of guards on either side. Some expressed shock at the mere sight of the woman while others hurled abuse. Godfrey seemed to feed upon their spite.

She let their anger flow past her like a stone in a stream. John admired her composure.

"Despite the Bishop's claims," Earl Robert continued, "this woman has provided innovations that stand to benefit Bristol, the Kingdom and perhaps all of Christendom. To squander such potential talents without proper consideration would be a sin. As such, I have granted her a chance to explain herself. So, please tell us who you are and where you come from."

The Earl took his seat and Matilda walked to the centre of the stage, guards in tow.

"My name is Matilda," she told the crowd, "and as Earl Robert has told, I come from the future."

There was a confused rumble from the crowd.

"I grew up in these lands," Matilda continued, "on the outskirts of Bridgwater. Though things there were very different many years in the future."

Godfrey scoffed but the Earl stared intently. "How so?" he asked. "How is it different?"

"There are many more people. Many more dwellings. Cities sprawl for miles and buildings tower up into the sky. Almost every road is paved and they are dominated by horseless carts which transport heavy loads over great distances. One can wake in Bristol and be in London well before midday."

John's mind reeled at her description, trying to fathom how such things could be. The crowd also grew animated, chattering away to one another. Some unruly pockets hurled abuse and called Matilda a liar.

“A most fanciful account,” Godfrey interrupted. “She’s deluded but I grant that she has quite an imagination.”

There were scattered laughs from the crowd.

“The entire claim is absurd,” he continued. “I can get to tomorrow. A short nap and there I am. I can get to next week or next year, albeit with a few more grey hairs. But I cannot return to yesterday, no matter how much I try. And one can’t know what will happen next week, yet alone years from now. This is merely an elaborate lie to distract from your sins.”

The crowd erupted in laughter at the Bishop’s words. Matilda ignored their taunts.

“Well, Bishop. I’d wager that the improvements you witnessed in Holford were unlike anything these lands have ever seen before. So perhaps there is more that you don’t yet know. And I can in fact prove that I come from the future. But to understand the future, it helps to understand what can be known about the past.”

She paused to ensure she had the crowd’s attention. John saw little reason to worry.

“The Bishop is right. Yesterday has been. Last week was longer ago and last year even further again. I came to you from about *one thousand* years in the future. It was almost as far for me to see you here today as it would be for you to see Jesus Christ. So, I’ll start with a question. If he was so far in the past, how do we know that Jesus truly existed?”

“Heresy!” Godfrey cried, prompting cries of outrage from the most devout pockets of the crowd. John felt the commoners surge toward the stage and saw the guards strain to keep them back.

“Order!” the Earl cried, before turning to Matilda with a stern warning. “You be careful now.”

“It is but a question,” Matilda appealed. “There is much evidence, beyond just the Bishop’s word.”

The crowd calmed. Godfrey pouted but kept silent.

“The Bible!” came a sudden cry from the masses.

“Yes,” Matilda chimed. “Textual evidence tells us stories of his deeds. But there are also texts concerning dragons and pagan gods. So how do we know this period actually existed?”

The crowd was silent.

“Relics!” came another cry.

“Now you’re getting closer. Actual objects from the time. Evidence we can hold. But how can we be sure that they are from the time in question and not planted by some malicious fraud? How do we know that the relics are what people claim them to be?”

The crowd was entranced, rooted in thought. Godfrey was seething.

“Let’s try something different,” Matilda suggested. “What evidence proves that the Roman’s ever existed?”

The crowd was more comfortable with that.

“The aqueducts!”

“Baths!”

“Roads!”

“Coins!” came another cry.

“Very good!” Matilda exclaimed. “All examples of things, tangible things, that the Romans left behind which prove that they existed. And coins are a particularly interesting example, as they bear unique markings that show precisely when they were made. I trust you’ve seen a Roman coin, Earl Robert?”

“Indeed, in the royal treasury,” the Earl responded.

“Very good, so you’ll know some of their unique features? Inclusion of the emperor’s head for instance.”

The Earl nodded.

“Well, I propose that we unearth a hoard of previously undiscovered Roman coins to undeniably demonstrate my knowledge from the future. They were discovered in my time, after lying undisturbed for almost two thousand years.”

“That proves nothing!” Godfrey protested. “You could get lucky. Or have them planted in anticipation of such a test!”

“I thought you might say that,” Matilda grumbled at him before addressing her broader audience. “If Holford’s townsfolk were here they could testify that I’ve not left the region since I arrived last year. Unfortunately, they are not here. So, those of you present yesterday heard from the Bishop’s own mouth that he has sought news of my movements since we first met at Baron Walter’s castle almost a year ago. Would it be fair to assume that he would’ve heard of a strange red-haired woman moving around his own town?”

The crowd murmured their unconvinced agreement.

“Do you think that the Bishop would’ve heard word of this red-haired stranger digging holes in a public place at the centre of his town?”

There was stronger agreement from the crowd.

Matilda turned to the Earl.

“My lord. I know you are a busy man and don’t wish to traipse all over the countryside. As your prisoner I have poor grounds to ask, but might you consider undertaking a short expedition to the town of Bath to unearth a vast haul of Roman silver? Over seventeen thousand coins. You can keep whatever we find,” she added cheekily.

The Earl considered the proposal, looking thoughtfully to Godfrey before the spirit of adventure overcame him and he beamed like a child.

“Prepare the horses!” he commanded.

The castle courtyard burst into a flurry of activity as attendees raced to prepare for Matilda’s treasure hunt and the crowd excitedly vacated the castle. Some enterprising townsfolk departed immediately in the direction of Bath, keen to get a head start on the other treasure hunters.

“But Robert,” Godfrey feebly protested amongst the commotion, “this really won’t do. There is nowhere to adequately imprison the girl. And. There aren’t sufficient sleeping quarters for a man of your nobility.”

The Earl gave a hearty laugh. “You’ll have to do better than that Bishop. You forget that I’ve just returned from campaigning in Normandy. Months of tents and cookfires. Any English soil will surely be superior to the mud I endured on the European mainland. Plus,” he added with a wry smile, “surely a bishop has sufficient quarters to offer a man of my station?”

Godfrey smouldered.

“Your prisoner will be watched over at all times until this is over,” Robert continued. “You have my word. Now come, let us depart!”

It took time to prepare horses for the journey but eventually the group departed. The Baron and the Earl rode ahead of the convoy, merrily chatting away as if merely out on a leisurely hunt. They were followed by a steady stream of Bristol’s aristocracy, none wanting to miss out on gossip that would be talk of the town for years to come.

Godfrey ordered John to keep an eye on Matilda in the cart while he rode ahead with Peter to resume his scheming. Without complaint, John clambered into the wagon to sit opposite her. A pair of the Earl’s guards piled in behind him and they departed.

They reached Bristol’s outskirts and overtook straggling townsfolk making for Bath. John couldn’t hold his tongue any longer. “From the future?” he blurted. “Surely you’re not serious?”

Matilda glared at him. “You won’t get anything from me, priest. I won’t give Godfrey extra rope to hang me with.”

“You’re mistaken,” John replied earnestly. “The Bishop is no friend of mine. I too was abducted and he reneged on his promise of a fine education. Giving me your Book was as close as he came to delivering on that pledge and even then, I understood little. But I take your point and will press no further.”

The pair rode in silence as the countryside slipped by.

“You’ve read my bible?” Matilda eventually asked, her bizarre accent tinged with hope. “You can read modern English?”

“I speak English better than I can read. My father always said that we should use the language of our people and that talk of Norman superiority was rubbish. But yes, I’ve read your Book. Tried to at least. Several times.”

Matilda gave him an appraising look.

“I guess the Book does support your claims of being from the future,” John mused. “Even Adelard hadn’t seen some of the ideas in his many travels. But he had seen enough to know it was true.”

“Adelard? Of Bath?” Matilda noted excitedly. “The monk!? *He’s* read my Book?”

John nodded.



Matilda maintained her silence but John felt the mood in the back of the cart warm slightly. It made the rest of the journey to Bath more bearable, though he cringed when they passed the fields where Godfrey's men had thwarted his escape attempt.

The group arrived in Bath a little after midday. The Earl reined in as the town came into view and drew his horse up alongside the cart.

“Well then. Where does our alleged time traveller claim this treasure lies?”

Matilda responded to him with calm confidence.

“In a garden. Near the Roman baths in the centre of the town. We'll need a few things. Shovels, a barrel of water with a pail and some coarse brushes. I'd recommend breaking for a midday meal while you wait for them to be gathered. I can't help because Godfrey burned my hand, so you lads will need your energy. It'll be heavy work. Once we get to the cathedral, shall I show you the way?”

The Earl's men were taken aback by Matilda's frankness but Earl Robert just laughed.

“You're a plucky young woman. Very well, you lead the way.”

Hands still bound, Matilda eventually led the party to a small courtyard practically in the shadow of Godfrey's new cathedral. John enjoyed watching the Bishop squirm as they drew closer to the area he knew so well. The Bishop whispered waspishly to his assistant and Peter ran off towards Godfrey's palace.

Matilda made several more requests as food was distributed amongst the nobles.

“Could you please summon the neighbours of this property? And some of the eldest residents of the town?”

Matilda's requests slowly started to arrive, as did a crowd of Bath townsfolk intrigued to see so many nobles. John waved when he spotted Adelard in the crowd. His stablemaster nemesis was there too. Earl Robert let the food disappear before calling the assembled crowd to attention.

“Greetings to our new arrivals. For those of you that don't know, we have journeyed here today from Bristol to hunt for Roman treasure.”

There was a stir of excitement among the crowd. He motioned for Matilda to begin.

“You will all be familiar with the Roman baths that gave this town its name,” Matilda started. “But what you don't know is that on this very spot there lay another bath. A thousand years ago, around the time of Jesus,” she added, prompting another wave of excitement. “Hidden inside a secret compartment within this bath is a hoard of seventeen thousand coins, some as old as Christ himself.”

This prompted the biggest bristle from the crowd yet.

“So?” Matilda asked with a pause. “Are there any volunteers to start digging?”

There was an enthusiastic rush of willing participants but Matilda picked up the first shovel and offered it to the Earl, earning a collective gasp from the crowd.

“Would you like to lead our expedition?” Matilda asked with a cheeky grin.

“Sure,” the Earl replied, grabbing the filthy shovel and beckoning for more men to join in.

The yard was soon a frenzy of men tearing up soil as Matilda directed their efforts. The elderly owner watched on unimpressed, though he luckily had more sense than to question the Earl who had miraculously appeared at his doorstep.

Adelard strolled over to John. “You made it back! I was worried when you disappeared from the Mass. What’s all this? Who’s the Redhead?”

“The author of our Book, would you believe? The genius we so longed to meet,” John replied excitedly. “Godfrey arrested her in some tiny village. She claims to be from the future and is trying to prove it.”

“You don’t say?” Adelard noted with accepting intrigue.

The crowd continued to swell as travellers arrived from Bristol and an excited cry eventually sounded over the worksite.

“Lady! A wall!” a knight called out from a waist-deep hole.

“Very good!” Matilda encouraged. “The treasure lies along the western wall of the structure. Focus your efforts on uncovering the wall and then look for a stone chamber.”

The digging resumed in the area around the wall, though fewer men could participate due to the tight quarters. The Earl led the charge, his expensive leather boots caked in mud. John found himself longing to participate.

“Oh how it hurts to tear up such an archaeological marvel,” Matilda lamented to no one in particular.

The group had uncovered several meters of wall when cries of excitement once more erupted from the diggers.

“We found it!” the Earl cried, dropping to his knees and scraping dirt away with his hands. “Matilda! A stone casket!”

Matilda and John rushed over as the men expanded the hole around the casket and scraped off more dirt. Even Godfrey came to investigate, accompanied by a recently returned Peter who seemed more interested in the ruined courtyard.

“Careful now,” Matilda warned as she directed the men from above. “Pry the lid open but don’t let it fall on the coins.”

They levered the lid and there was a press of people trying to catch a glimpse of what lay inside. Matilda leapt into the hole herself and urged everyone to take a step back.

John saw only a muddy mass of flat stones within the pit.

“The pail and brush!” Matilda requested.

She dropped to a knee and delicately used her bound hands to lever a chunk of the mass from the hole. Someone handed her the pail of water and a brush. Using her good hand, she dunked the chunk in the water before delicately brushing away some of the grime.

The crowd held its breath until, with a flash of silver, one of the coins came loose and fell into the bucket. Quick as a fox, Matilda scooped it up and wiped it on her skirt before handing it to the Earl.

“Does this look like a Roman coin to you?” she asked with a smile.

Earl Robert was struck speechless as he rubbed the muddy coin with his fingers. When he finally spoke, it was a reverent whisper.

“It truly does.”

A crush of people surged forward to see the coin. The Earl ordered everyone back several yards before passing the coin to one of his knights to show to the assembled crowd. The knight handled the silver coin as delicately as a baby bird.

Matilda meanwhile brushed away the mud surrounding the other coins, eventually revealing a giant glimmering mass of silver.

“I’m going to need some help to get this out,” she said feebly.

She stood aside as the Earl ordered his knights to lift the valuable bulk out of the hole. It came away in large chunks as they heaved it from the casket and John saw Matilda cringe at their rough handling.

“Gently, please! These coins are worth so much more than the weight of their silver. This is a treasure so precious that it will be admired for centuries.”

The knights proceeded with greater care and Earl Robert called for a chest in which to place the newfound treasure. The crowd babbled away excitedly as more and more silver was extracted.

The crowd spread out when the knights had withdrawn the last of the silver and scraped every corner of the casket. Matilda took the opportunity to call upon the assembled villagers.

“Bishop Godfrey said back at Bristol that I had planted the coins here to prove my innocence.” She pointed at the massive hole. “You’ve seen the scale of the digging. Is this something a single woman could achieve by herself? Without being noticed?”

The crowd murmured their disapproval.

“I ask the Bath elders,” Matilda continued. “Has there ever been another building in this place?”

“Always just a garden,” an elderly man chimed. “Since I was a boy.”

“And to the neighbours, the owner and the townsfolk. Have any of you seen this land so disturbed? Ever?”

There were scattered cries of no from throughout the crowd.

Matilda looked around the crowd, pausing at Godfrey before turning to Earl Robert with a twinkle in her eye.

“So?” she asked. “Do you believe me now?”

Before the Earl could answer, John saw a flurry of movement from a building above. Matilda grunted and dropped to the ground, a feathered shaft protruding from her chest.

Screams filled the yard.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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