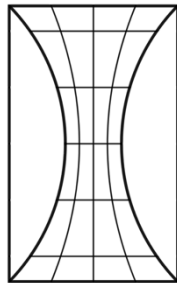


# THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



**THE WORLD THAT WAS**

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

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*25 December 1123*

“He’s gone, Father. Again.”

Godfrey groaned but insisted on finishing his letter back to the mainland. He dotted the page with a flourish and lay down his quill before scowling at his assistant.

“How the hell did he get away this time, someone was supposed to be watching him! When was he last seen? Where?”

“In the library, Your Eminence,” Godfrey’s assistant replied cautiously. “The monks saw him before their mid-morning prayer but he’d left when they returned. They thought he might’ve gone for breakfast but he wasn’t in the kitchen when they eventually sent someone to check.”

“Daft monks. Too wrapped up in their prayers to worry about the real world. What of the Book? Don’t tell me he took that too?”

“No Father., it was left lying on his writing table. Unaccompanied. Along with all of your notes.”

“For the love of all that’s holy, I don’t have time for this!” Godfrey swore. “I want him found! I’ll come see him after the Christmas mass.”

“Yes Bishop,” Peter replied. “I’ll dispatch riders now and get some others to search the town. He can’t have gone too far.”

“No! Less people, the absolute minimum! We don’t want rumours that we’re holding the boy against his will.”

“Yes Father. I’ll only use our most trustworthy men. The boy shouldn’t be too hard to find, it’ll be difficult to hide the injury from his last escape.”

“I don’t know how I would manage without you Peter. And please, this constant ‘Father’ just makes me feel old.”

Peter left the room and Godfrey leaned back in his chair, applying pressure to his temples. He was weary. They had finally finished the parish tour and returned to his palace in Bath. The Bishop was excited to settle back into his regular routine and regain his creature comforts. His library and servants. Access to letters from the region’s elite.

Most of all, he was excited to bid farewell to his infernal carriage. His buttocks still ached from the bumpy dilapidated roads and Godfrey maintained his new habit of carrying a cushion with him wherever he went. A small concession for his advancing age.

Unfortunately Godfrey had been thrust into planning the Christmas Mass, his first major service within the shell of the Bath cathedral.

The cathedral was the brainchild of Godfrey's predecessor who had spent his final years of obsessed with its construction. Yet he had only managed to complete a partial shell surrounding the altar by the time he died, leaving Godfrey with an unfinished church, an expectant congregation and ever-growing debt.

Godfrey loathed the cathedral. He had only visited it once, when he was first appointed bishop. It had initially attracted him to the post and his excitement had grown as he journeyed to England and observed the new style of European churches under construction. What bishop didn't dream of creating such a physical manifestation of the Church's status and power.

But upon seeing the construction site, Godfrey knew that he would never see the cathedral finished during his lifetime. He lacked the blind commitment of his predecessor and resented the old man for committing Godfrey to such a large project, one that would only distract him from worldlier endeavours at the King's court. Or his work with the Novice to translate the Heretic's Book.

John was a wilful boy. Stubborn and fiery. Nothing like the timid child Godfrey had met on that first stormy night at his parent's pathetic castle. He had proven to be a handful since joining the Bishop and his attempts to escape started on their very first night.

Godfrey had excused John's early attempts at freedom, blaming them on the rashness of youth. However, weeks passed but the attempts to flee did not. Even a broken arm from one of Godfrey's overzealous guards wasn't enough to quash his spirit. John had looked at Godfrey with pure hatred when the Bishop set the boy's arm for him.

*No appreciation at all.*

Godfrey eventually shared the Heretic's Book in the hopes that curiosity might tame the wild boy. The Bishop further segregated John from the palace's population to conceal any knowledge of the Book and its otherworldly contents. Isolation hadn't dampened the boy's desire for freedom but when he eventually tired of failed escapes and focussed his mind on the Book, he was brilliant.

John deciphered more in days than Godfrey had managed in weeks. The broken arm had slowed his efforts but John confirmed that the Book was indeed written in a form of English, though many words were different to any dialect either had heard before.

Like Godfrey, John's efforts also petered out, though this was more due to content than the language used. The Book talked about stars and anatomy, religion and philosophy. Topics that no boy of seventeen could dream to comprehend. But in an attempt to build rapport, Godfrey had decided to expand the boy's intelligence and granted access to his personal library as promised. Godfrey shared his precious time with John to impart personal insights, though this too was met with a complete lack of appreciation.

And even then, the boy's attempts to escape showed no sign of stopping.

Still unsure how to break the boy's spirit, the Bishop sighed to himself and began preparations for the Christmas Mass. His attendants entered and dressed him in ceremonial attire before he departed for the cathedral. The incomplete building jutted from the ground like the exposed skeleton of some ancient leviathan.

The congregation were gathered along an invisible aisle down the guts of the imaginary beast and Godfrey walked among them before stopping at the altar beneath the centre of the beast's ribcage.

The Bishop found himself surprisingly bored by the service, even amid the embryonic cathedral and celebrations of Christ's birth, one of the grandest ceremonies on the Church calendar. As the congregation busied themselves with another hymn, he wondered when he had lost his passion for preaching.

Being stuck amongst the uninspired peasants of the Isles didn't help, he reasoned, and guiding the simpletons was of little interest compared to court politics. He had been personally tasked by the College of Cardinals to settle a longstanding dispute between the priests and the monks of the region when he received his appointment. And contribute information for the rebellion in Normandy. Mass was much less important.

It wasn't until after the service, as Godfrey was halfway through the local's petitioning, that Peter finally entered the construction site at a brisk pace. Godfrey excused himself from a tiresome conversation about wheat yields and moved to intercept.

"We found him," the Assistant whispered. "He was at the stables on the southern edge of town trying to convince the owner to lend him a horse."

"Industrious, I'll grant him that. I hope they didn't rough him up too much this time."

"No Fath...Your Eminence. They were under strict instructions to bring him back without fuss and even had the wits to slip the stablemaster some coin to keep his mouth shut."

"Good, we're learning. Bring John to the library and have him resume work on the Book. I'll meet him there when I'm finished with this lot."

Peter nodded, his silence hinting at an unspoken jealousy. The Assistant knew almost nothing of the Book, only that John assisted in some capacity and that the ruined tome occupied most of Godfrey's spare thoughts.

The Bishop eventually returned to his chambers and had his attendants remove the impractical ecclesiastical robes. He was amused by their reverence during the mundane exercise, reminding him of a pair of well-trained squires removing their knight's chainmail. His squires took his clothing from the room and returned with a simple afternoon meal of cheese, salted meat and freshly baked bread. It was much better than the basic fare he'd endured during his parish tour and Godfrey was further surprised to be served a full-bodied goblet of wine rather than the ale or mead he had grown accustomed to. *It was good to be off the road.*

Godfrey savoured the meal before leaving for the cathedral's small library to check on John. A single guard slouched by the door but bolted upright when he saw the Bishop approach.

"The boy's in there?" Godfrey asked.

"Yessir. Haven't heard a peep."

"Very good. Try not to be tardy," Godfrey reminded.

The Bishop slipped into the room and carefully closed the door behind him. The library was empty but for John, a small shelf of books and a monk working at a far desk. The boy was supposed to be isolated but Godfrey decided to ignore the monk.

“You made it further this time,” Godfrey said, keeping his voice casual but injecting little warmth. “Almost good enough. I would appreciate if you did not try running again. My patience is wearing thin.”

The Novice continued to write his notes in silence, his jaw set. Godfrey placed a small wrapped package on the table which finally prompted John to put down his quill.

“What’s this?” he asked, his voice sullen.

*A bribe to keep you in place, you wretched scoundrel,* Godfrey thought before answering.

“A small gift to celebrate the birth of our Saviour. Something to help with your research.”

John struggled to tear open the package with his one good hand but eventually exposed a small leather-bound book.

“A rare translation of Euclid’s Elements,” Godfrey informed. “I discovered it on my journey to England. What are you working on?”

The Novice ignored his question and flipped excitedly through the book. Godfrey interrogated his notes instead.

The pair had developed a basic understanding of the topics covered in their half of the Book. Some of the anatomical images were vulgar in the details they depicted and Godfrey wondered how the author had managed to learn so much about the human body.

The majority of the text continued to elude the pair but they had each begun deeper investigations of specific topics of interest. In addition to anatomy, Godfrey had taken particular interest in the tome’s military-related aspects while John focussed on a section about folk tales.

Godfrey’s recent obsession was an image of five soldiers, each wearing increasingly sophisticated armour. The first two images showed familiar leather jerkins and chainmail, while the third image showed a collection of heavy-looking metallic plates. The fourth image regressed, showing a soldier wearing less of the plate armour over frilly clothing, while the fifth image was a complete mystery, appearing to be little more than rigid cloth. Godfrey guessed that the plate armour was the technological pinnacle and had commissioned a local blacksmith to develop a suit for him.

Flipping through John’s notes, Godfrey observed that scribblings about mythology had been increasingly replaced with the bizarre mathematical symbols from the Book.

“It looks like you’ve had a change in interest. No more folk tales?”

John gestured to the monk in the corner.

“He had a look and gave some suggestions about what they mean. It’s started to make some sense.”

Godfrey was intrigued but also furious. The Novice knew that the Book was not to be shared.

“Monk, get over here,” Godfrey commanded.

Without a word, the monk steadily finished his writing, blotted his paper and cleaned his quill before calmly walking over to John’s desk. A middle-aged man with hair starting to grey at the temples, the Monk exuded control as he strode over to the Bishop and his young translator. Godfrey watched intently for any sign of insubordination but received only a pleasant smile.

“Yes Your Eminence?” the Monk asked sweetly.

“You were able to help John. You know these symbols?”

The Monk leaned down and looked at the page again.

“Not those symbols exactly. But I saw a similar formalism during my travels to the Holy Land. The Arabs use something similar to express numbers. Like roman numerals but much more efficient.”

The Bishop scoffed – *as if that were possible* – but then grew suspicious.

“Who are you?” he asked warily.

“Adelard, my Bishop,” he replied with another smile.

Realisation struck like a thunderclap. This was Adelard, the eccentric monk who was said to have travelled the entire world. Who was so favoured by Godfrey’s predecessor. Opinion was split around Bath, half believing him to be brain-addled while others were convinced he was a genius.

“Oh!” Adelard exclaimed, seeing the new book in John’s hands. “It’s one of mine!”

“I beg your pardon,” Godfrey asked incredulously.

“The boy’s copy of Euclid, it’s one of mine. I worked on the translation after my journey to Iberia. Wrote three of them, in this very room would you believe. I thought someone might’ve copied it but you’ve managed to find an original.”

“Yes, well. I’m quite fond of books.” Godfrey felt angry at both gifting such a treasure and paying a small fortune for a book that originated from a monk within his own diocese.

“You must be indeed. This ruined book you’ve found is a most remarkable treasure. Or part of one at least,” Adelard added, stroking the torn spine. “I’ve travelled far in search of knowledge to explain God’s miracles but I’ve never seen anything like this, in form or content. From the little that young John has shown me, this is advanced beyond measure.”

“Is that so? And what can you tell us of its provenance, from the little you have seen?” Godfrey asked cagily.

“As I’ve said Father, it is well beyond anything I’ve come across. I don’t know of any race sufficiently advanced to create such a work. As for the content, it appears to become increasingly advanced as the Book progresses. I’d truly love to see the first half, which might be slightly more accessible. Do you know anything of its whereabouts?”



Godfrey sat with an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He'd thought the same thing since he first flipped through the ruined Book as his carriage trundled away from the Heretic. He needed that other half of the Book. To think he had thrown it in the mud.

“John, I grant my permission to show the Book to Brother Adelard here. Work with him on your translations. Monk, I trust you understand that not a word about this Book is to be shared with a single soul outside this room.”

The Monk nodded his agreement and Godfrey marched from the room, leaving them to a discussion about the strange numbers.

The Bishop sped past the slouching guard and down the corridor to find Peter. He was desperate to dispatch his fastest messenger to the sleepy little ambush town.

He needed the other half of that Book!

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*30 December 1123*

William wanted to be angry, so badly. But he couldn't.

Matilda was back! The original Matilda, not the depressed mess from the cave. The lively woman who'd ambushed him by the campfire. The intelligent woman with an answer to every question. And she was just in time. At his family's darkest hour, there was suddenly hope.

The family's situation had miraculously turned around since Matilda's unexpected arrival on that miserable rainy day.

A part of William had been thrilled from the moment he first saw her sitting in the rain. He'd not forgotten her initial refusal to help the family but Matilda's helpfulness and renewed sunny attitude eroded his lingering resentment away day by day. William spied occasional remnants of her depression but just knowing that she was trying so hard made it infectious. William didn't know what had caused Matilda's sudden shift in mood but it didn't matter. She was back.

Matilda had completely abandoned her journey to London and now spent all of her time helping the family instead. Villagers refused to accept a stranger's medicine so she taught Elizabeth and Astrid how to make concoctions to ease symptoms and threw herself into helping with the harvest while they distributed doses.

She claimed to have never farmed before and asked endless questions about the most basic tasks, yet it wasn't long before she became a fully effective member of the harvest team. Matilda was uncoordinated and awkward when she began each new task but, channelling her determined enthusiasm, managed to match the family's performance in a remarkably short period of time.

With another set of hands to help and some novel new ideas, the family raced through the last of the harvest and lost much less of the crop than William had anticipated.

Despite being new to the work, Matilda asked pointed questions about the family's wheat yield, how much seed they had planted and the rate of crop rot before offering potential solutions. The family didn't take kindly to a novice trying to improve generations-old methods but Matilda's tactful demonstrations eventually convinced the family that her improvements made sense. William's family were bewildered at how she could know so much and regularly quizzed Matilda about her past.

"I'm just a quick learner I guess," she'd replied to their prying, suppressing a knowing smile as she looked over at William.

He'd kept her time-travelling secret, not that anyone would've believed him if he'd blabbed. William still questioned it himself before remembering all of the futuristic trinkets back at the cave that he'd seen with his own eyes.

When the harvest was complete and their bags of grain delivered to the Miller to be ground into flour, the family leapt straight into plans to plough the fields and sow their winter crop. They had long since forfeited their position in the queue to use Holford's sole plough-team – a pair of oxen that pulled the communal plough. They faced a long wait while the other villagers ploughed their fields and sowed their own winter crops. The plough-team had faced its own illness-related setbacks so the wait was even longer than normal.

While Matilda and William transported the last bags of grain to the Miller, the women of the family began futile attempts to turn the fields by hand. They shared a single wooden hoe between them so progress was excruciatingly slow but there appeared to be no other option. Nonetheless, they were all happy to finally work on anything other than their harvest chores and even minor progress was better than a completely untouched field.

Back at home, Pa's fever had broken within days of Matilda's arrival and he started to regain his strength. He eventually overcame Ma's protests and re-joined the family in the field. Their compromise was that he remained under the oak tree, providing guidance from afar and helping with menial tasks. Pa took great issue with being out-of-action – like some pregnant woman, he said – but the fresh air and human interaction further accelerated his recovery.

In complete contrast, Mama's condition had only worsened. She still suffered from the same nasty cough and had become fully delirious. She spoke to her dead husband, Holford's former miller, who Pa quietly told William had been even grumpier than Mama. She reminisced about the good old days, when people were God-fearing and had morals. A time before the young had ruined everything.

In Mama's few lucid moments, she praised Rachel as the sole beacon of hope for the future generation. Rachel still stayed behind each day to tend to her grandmother, wiping Mama's brow with her precious silk handkerchief and scolding anyone who made even the slightest noise.

*Add some wrinkles and white hair, William thought, and Mama would have a duplicate.*

Rachel and Matilda were never in the same place at the same time. William had believed that he and Rachel had a strained relationship but it was nothing compared to the thinly veiled hatred between the two women. Rachel tended to Mama during the day while Matilda joined the family in the fields but the moment they returned home, Rachel would finish her task and run away to spend the evening with the Brewers, her betrothed's family. She often failed to return before the family fell asleep, something that would've caused major scandal before Matilda's arrival. But Rachel's absence reduced conflict and the family didn't need to supply food for an extra mouth so no one really complained.

Matilda repeated her ritual of leaving for her cave every evening but the family wouldn't hear it. With the exception of Rachel – and Mama, who was too delirious – the family loved having Matilda around. She became a part of the family and had even joined them at Holford's Christmas Mass. While her singing voice attracted some intrigued glances, Father Daniel treated her as just another of his flock.

No evening with Matilda was boring. She taught the family her bizarre songs and she told the most marvellous stories, the latest about a little man who had to destroy an evil king's enchanted ring.

"And then an apple hit flew out of nowhere and hit his head!" Matilda regaled.

Elizabeth and Margery fell into a giggling fit, so common around Matilda, which prompted a hacking cough from Mama and a disapproving groan from Ma. Matilda got up and helped Ma with the final preparations for their supper as everyone gathered around the table.

"Family," Matilda declared once everyone had started eating. "I've been considering the problems with the plough-team. I think I have a solution."

The family's interest was torn between the food on the table and what Matilda had to say.

"There are still four families ahead of you in the queue..." she continued.

Pa nodded, his mouth full of bread.

"...which will take at least four weeks, by which time our field will be a sloppy mess and practically unworkable."

"Mhmm," came their collective agreement.

"And you said we're not allowed to build an extra plough."

"Only if the Baron is happy to pay the King more taxes," William laughed.

"And there's no spare beasts to pull one even if we could," Margery added.

"So we're stuck waiting," Matilda continued. "Unless we can get the other families to work quicker."

"They're not going to do that," Pa said as he wiped his bowl clean with the last of his bread. "They're as worried about food as we are. They won't risk a tardy job just to help their neighbours, even if it's the proper Christian thing to do."

"That's so disappointing," Ma chimed. "Even after Matilda helped everyone with their sick."

"Well," Matilda said, "I have an idea for a heavier plough, something I've seen during my travels. One that would cut through the soil easier and allow the other families to finish sooner."

"Ha," Pa exclaimed, slapping the table. "Another one of your ideas! Look girl, you've been right helpful but we do things our particular way for a reason. And like you just said, we can't just build an extra plough without risking trouble with the Baron."

"Hear me out," Matilda reassured. "The Baron owes me a favour from my journey to Stowey..."

William's ears pricked up. Matilda never said anything about Stowey.

"...and we could bend the rules, just a little, and only destroy the old plough if my new one works. If not, we destroy the new plough and no-one would ever need to know of the little experiment."

Pa's furrowed brow revealed his disapproval of the planned deceit but Matilda either was oblivious or ignored it.

“Is there a blacksmith in the village?” she asked.

“There is,” Pa relinquished, “but he’s a shrewd man. Fair, but his work doesn’t come cheap. And he demands proof of payment upfront. He charges me an absolute fortune for arrowheads.”

Matilda paused to think and the family could see that she intended to see through her idea no matter what.

“I’ll visit him tomorrow,” she said adamantly.

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The family returned to the fields the next morning to resume their attempts to plough by hand. Wishing them luck, William took Matilda into the village square to introduce her to the blacksmith.

The pair walked in companionable silence, the frostiness of their relationship almost fully thawed. William caught glimpses of Matilda from the corner of his eye as they walked and savoured the feeling of having his friend back.

“But really,” he asked cautiously, “were you born able to talk? How are you so intelligent?”

“I’m really not,” Matilda replied with a laugh. “I guess, I do know more than most. Particularly here. But learning is just about keeping an open mind. Build upon a few basic principles and you can develop an understanding of just about anything. It’s all just one little step at a time.”

William longed to know what the basic principles were but they rounded the corner and arrived at Holford’s blacksmith, an open lean-to with a giant stone furnace out the back.

Matthew Smith was already working out the front, beating a stove hook over his anvil. He was a stern man, younger than Pa and built like a mountain. William remained wary of the giant as their limited interactions had always been confrontational. Matthew hadn’t appreciated William and Ralph’s past attempts to play knights and bandits near his forge, particularly when the bandits pilfered his supplies.

The wariness was reciprocated and Matthew greeted them with a sceptical look as they approached.

“William Archer. What brings you to my forge?”

“Morning Matthew. I wanted to introduce you to Matilda, a guest from abroad. She’s been helping my family finish up the harvest and would like to commission some of your work.”

Matthew unashamedly looked Matilda up and down. His interest in the conversation grew noticeably.

“I don’t know what a pretty thing like you would want with my modest work but please, see if there’s anything you like.”

He emphasised his final point by flexing his arms as he gestured to the assortment of metallic items scattered around the workshop. William cringed at the Smith’s awkward attempts to flirt but Matilda kept a straight face. She picked up some pieces and examined them with an expert eye before turning back to the Smith.

“It’s nice, considered work. Not bad.”

Matthew dipped his head to accept the compliment.

“But I *definitely* don’t see anything I like. I want a custom piece.”

The Smith feigned disappointment and grinned sheepishly at William.

“Your guest really knows what she wants, no beating around the bush. But come now dear, what do you think I make here? Look around, I don’t do jewellery. What could you possibly want customised?”

Matilda gave a sarcastic smile before proceeding to outline the plans for her plough in meticulous detail, down to the number of nails and the calculated weight of iron that would be required. The surprise on Matthew’s face grew with each word, shifting from amusement to shock and then to absolute bewilderment.

“Right, you know your stuff! But how the hell do you intend to pay for this...contraption?”

Matilda shot him a coy grin.

“Have you ever made chainmail?” she asked.

“Woah, hold up lady,” Matthew said, motioning for her to slow down. “Look, your contraption is one thing but if you can’t pay for the plough then I’d bet my forge that you can’t pay for chainmail.”

“I’d take that bet. Just answer the question. You know how difficult mail is to make?”

“I’ve never tried it myself, that’s a job for the castle smiths. My master did show me a shirt he’d inherited when I was an apprentice. Fiddly work.”

“Good,” Matilda said, shocking both William and the Smith as she began to unfasten her top.

Matthew looked like Christmas had come all over again. William yelped to object but his warning transformed to a sound of pure awestruck amazement when he saw what was underneath.

“Mithril,” William whispered in awe, recalling Matilda’s story from the previous evening.

“Not quite,” Matilda laughed, exposing more of her chainmail shirt. “It’s a titanium alloy. Very high strength-to-weight ratio.”

Matthew stood frozen in place, his mouth hanging open in amazement.

“Here,” Matilda said, holding out the hem. “You can touch it.”

The Smith closed his mouth and delicately grasped the chainmail in both hands. William found it comical for a man so large to show such care.

“I’ve never seen anything like it! Those links are the smallest I’ve ever seen. It’s so light! And a four in one weave? With no rivets!?”

The pitch of the man’s voice increased with each sentence. He dropped the mail and looked up at her seriously.

“What sorcery was used to create this?”

Matilda refastened her top.

“No sorcery, just additive manufacturing. And it’s actually a six-to-one weave. I won’t be able to show you how to make it for quite some time. Unfortunately.”

The Smith wiped his brow and leaned back against his anvil.

“Lady, that mail is fit for a king. It’s worth a fortune.”

“You’re right. And it could be yours.”

Matthew almost fell over the anvil.

“You make this plough for me,” Matilda continued, “and I’ll help you sell copies to other plough-teams in the region. Provided I get a cut of the profits, of course. That should more than pay for my prototype. And if it doesn’t work, within the year, I’ll give you this chainmail.”

Matilda’s terms were the final straw and Matthew lost the ability to speak. His mouth opened and closed wordlessly like a fish.

“Do we have a deal?” Matilda asked, her hand outstretched.

Matthew nodded dumbly and shook her hand.

“Good. William, you’re our witness. Now, this is our little secret ok? I’ve heard you’re an honest man but there’ll be no trying to swindle me out of the business or the chainmail. I promise it isn’t the only protection I have at hand.”

The trio agreed on some final details before Matilda and William left poor Matthew to recover his senses and marched off to join the family in the field.

“That was fun,” Matilda said with genuine glee. “But he’s a bit of a pig.”

The exchange reopened the flood gates of William’s curiosity and he hit Matilda with a completely fresh barrage of questions as they walked. What is titanium? Did everyone in the future wear metallic clothes? How did they keep warm?

William and Matilda arrived at the field to find Pa wrapped in a blanket under the oak, fashioning a second wooden hoe. The women were still turning the same tiny patch of land but stole the opportunity for a break.

“Did you have any luck?” Pa asked as they all approached.

“Sure did,” William replied excitedly. “Matthew’s going to make the plough for us and in return Matilda will let him copy the design for plough-teams in nearby villages.”

“That’s...unorthodox,” Pa replied with a hint of disapproval.

“It’ll work out for him in the long run,” Matilda promised. “You’ll see.”

She sat down and recounted their exchange with the Smith. Matilda explained exactly how her device would cut deeper into the soil and eventually convinced them that the idea couldn’t possibly fail. It took time but eventually even Pa was sold.

“It’s often worth spending time to develop a smarter solution rather than pushing ahead with one that doesn’t work very well,” Matilda finished.

With the harvest complete and Matilda’s plough all but guaranteed, the family’s mood was jubilant. Not wanting to waste a day of work or Pa’s new hoe, they took turns using the tools to turn the soil. Matilda made it into a race and the family were in hysterics as they cheered each other on in the spontaneous relay.

For the first time that season, the family decided to pack up early and were in a joyful mood as they returned to Holford. Seeing the plough-team working slowly in their neighbour's field no longer induced a feeling of dread and they were further heartened when Matthew gave Matilda an enthusiastic wave as they passed through the village. There was a buzz of energy and excitement.

But it all evaporated in an instant when they entered the front gate and spotted Rachel weeping at the doorstep. The family stopped in their tracks and Ma rushed to console her.

"She died Ma. Mama's dead."

Ma wailed. Rachel wept into her palms. William felt conflicting emotions, sadness at the loss of his grandmother but also as if a cloud had lifted from their little cottage.

"What happened?" Matilda asked delicately. "When did she...pass?"

Rachel's head snapped up.

"What's it to you, snake!? You don't care about us!"

Rachel vaulted from the ground and threw herself at Matilda. She slapped Matilda in the face before anyone knew what was happening.

"This is your fault! All your fault! Revenge for not helping you that night."

She clawed at Matilda and pulled at her hair. It took all of Pa's effort to subdue his eldest daughter and he was exhausted by the time he separated the two.

"Be calm!" he commanded.

"No!" Rachel cried belligerently. "I won't stay another moment in the presence of this witch, with her loose morals and useless concoctions! I refuse to spend another night under the same roof as her!"

Wrestling herself free from Pa's grip, Rachel fled through the gate and ran off towards the Brewers' house.

The family were left standing in stunned silence. Ma stood alone by the cottage, mourning the loss of her mother. Pa dropped the pair of hoes gathered his wife into a tight embrace.

Matilda absentmindedly dabbed the scratches on her face. Then, as quickly as Rachel, she turned and fled through the gate. William didn't try to stop her and knew she was headed back to her cave.

William, Margery and Elizabeth stood frozen in place, wondering what had just happened.

Mama was dead.



Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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