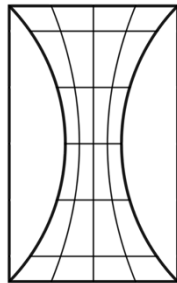


# THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



**THE WORLD THAT WAS**

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

21 September 1124

John sat amongst his fellow novices in the choir of the Bishop's half-built cathedral. Although still early into his training, he'd already committed all of the songs to memory and the monotonous routine of clergy life made him want to scream.. It didn't help that his superiors were all daft, regularly contradicting each other or talking in circles during their lessons.

The remainder of Bath's population stood on the opposite side of the altar in the cathedral's nave. The more fervent parishioners sang along with the clergy but most were engaged in other business. Mass provided a venue where social run-ins were guaranteed, perfect for cornering slimy debtors or jilted lovers.

John longed to be among the crowd and watched them with envy, though his view was increasingly impeded as construction on the cathedral progressed. While being a member of the clergy meant he never needed to worry where his next meal would come from, at least every day in their world was different. Not just an endless repetition of the same boring mass.

The hymn finished and John sat back on his pew. The parishioners remained standing, their dealings uninterrupted but slightly more hushed. Broken by endless beatings, John had learned to conform. Obedience continued to rile the rebellious part of him that remained deep within. It pined for freedom as he peered through the cathedral's incomplete walls and out into the streets of Bath. *No, those thoughts only led to more pain.*

Instead, John tried to focus on the morning sermon, which was delivered by ancient Brother Cuthbert rather than the Bishop. Even Godfrey's assistant was absent, despite scolding the novices only moments before the service began. Their absence piqued John's interest. Something different. Other priests had also noticed and highlighted the irregularity using their subtle system of coughs and shuffles in the pews.

The priests' restlessness reached its barely audible fever pitch when they spotted Godfrey's assistant striding down the side of the cathedral towards the choir. Peter ignored the sermon and rudely strode straight past the altar. Even the parish noticed something strange about that.

John was still pondering the possible reason for Peter's unorthodox interruption when the Assistant strode directly to John's pew and quickly sat beside him. Peter had the decency to allow the crowd to refocus on the sermon before talking to John in a hushed voice.

"His Excellency requires you in his chambers. Now."

John was surprised. Godfrey had unceremoniously dismissed him months ago, without a word of explanation. "But, the mass?" was all John managed.

"Godfrey's chambers," Peter repeated firmly. "Right now."

He stood abruptly and waited by the end of the pew. John dragged himself up, already missing the boring monotony of moments before. He felt the eyes of the entire congregation upon him as he followed Peter towards the cathedral's incomplete entrance. Even the businesspeople and socialites paused as John passed.

John's stomach churned as he wondered why he had been summoned so urgently. Would he be punished? He wracked his brain trying to think what he might've done. He shot questions at the Assistant as soon as they emerged from the skeletal cathedral.

"What does Godfrey want? Did I do something wrong? I've done everything asked of me, I swear. Is it about the Book?"

Peter ignored him and marched towards the Bishop's palace, though John's final question caused him to break stride.

*So it was something to do with the Book. That was a start.*

The pair rounded the final corner to the Bishop's palace and John was surprised to see a small herd of horses gathered out front. An army of attendants were saddling them while another exchanged a peasant's shabby pony for a fresh mount. The beast had been ridden hard.

Peter and John were climbing the steps when Godfrey emerged. He beamed upon seeing John.

"John my boy!" the Bishop cried out excitedly, bundling John into a tight embrace as though they were dear friends. "We've found her!"

John was dumbfounded by the Bishop's sudden camaraderie.

"The girl," Godfrey continued. "Matilda. The author of our Book! She lives!"

"I've sent riders ahead of us to organise a raiding party," Peter said. "They'll be waiting when we arrive."

The horses suddenly made a lot more sense.

Godfrey thanked Peter and led John to a horse near the ragged peasant.

"As you can see, we're going to catch her before she can disappear again. And more importantly, before she desecrates the corpse of a fellow Christian."

John was only further puzzled but Godfrey introduced the peasant.

"John, this is Warren. He hails from just outside Bath but has been reporting on Matilda's activities for some months now. He saw the earth swallow his fellow workers as they strove to meet Matilda's unquenchable thirst for metal. Like me, he witnessed the woman's barbaric attempts at *medicine*."

Godfrey's spy nodded eagerly, "Chopped 'em right up, she did. To be fair, a couple survived but others weren't so lucky."

"Bah, disgusting!" Godfrey spat. "Warren tells me that she is now teaching her barbarism to others, by carving up her deceased neighbour no less. Sacrilege! I won't stand for it, she must be stopped! And you're coming with us."

John blanched but stood rooted in place.

“Me, Your Excellence? Why me?”

Godfrey looked at John impatiently.

“I considered Adelard but I don’t trust the self-righteous monk. Warren here has also reported all manner of bizarre developments in the village, some nothing short of magic.” Godfrey dropped his voice “The sort of thing only found in a very rare Book. You will identify any useful knowledge or equipment that might reinvigorate our own investigations. I’ll be busy securing the woman so I want a complete update when we return. Go on then, up you get.”

Godfrey shepherded John onto a horse before vaulting atop his own. John was still trying to find a comfortable position in the saddle when they set off at a quick pace. Godfrey and Peter rode ahead with the Spy while John rode behind, flanked by a pair of Godfrey’s guards.

The Bishop continued to interrogate the Spy as they rode. They made an incredibly odd pair, the Spy wearing his ragged travel-stained cloak and talking coarsely while the Bishop rode a fine steed and wore the magnificent robes of his Office.

They travelled hard throughout the day and reached a secluded camp in the woods at sunset. Peter’s contact waited for them with a dozen mercenaries gathered around a wagon, all armed with spears and clubs. Peter greeted them with a pouch of coins and the group quickly planned their raid. The Spy told them of Matilda’s hideout, a ruined mill she’d rebuilt after a deliberate fire. He told them of the villagers, estimating how many would attend the dissection and which were likely to resist the Bishop’s ambush.

With a plan agreed, the party set off into the twilight on foot. They left Peter and two of the mercenaries behind to guard the horses and the wagon. Godfrey ordered them to be ready for a quick escape.

The Spy looped them around the village, eager to avoid any prior warning of the impending raid. They completed the last of their journey by moonlight, traipsing through the forested hills that surrounded the woman’s mill. The group stumbled through the undergrowth before coming to a stop at the clearing surrounding the mill.

It was much grander than Godfrey’s spy had described. John had imagined a fire-damaged building with some patchy repairs but instead, the mill looked practically new. Even in the moonlight John saw new tiles mounted on the roof and fresh plaster applied to the building’s exterior. The smell of sawdust filled the air and the echo of water rushing over the waterwheel filled the clearing.

But most shocking of all was the light. Night had long since fallen but sunlight streamed from the building’s windows, bathing the entire clearing in an otherworldly glow. It had the same warmth as sunlight but its unsettling pulse suggested something supernatural. The men whispered amongst themselves, unsettled by the unnatural sight.

The Bishop took in the spectacle before signalling for the group to advance towards the building. As they drew closer, John marvelled at the wealth displayed by the building and its surroundings. Each glass window had external shutters and heavy curtains hung inside. The party passed through the perfectly manicured garden

that surrounded the building, carelessly trampling over strange-smelling herbs. The group divided to stand on either side of the building's tall glazed windows.

The first mercenary to peer inside let out a sound of disgust, earning sharp rebukes from his companions. The reason became clear as they each reached their window.

John threw himself against the wall and peered into the room. His eyes were first drawn up to the ceiling where a multitude of glowing spheres radiated warm light down upon the unphased crowd. John's jaw dropped in disbelief.

Villagers were crowded in the hall, seated on long wooden benches that made the gathering look like a church service. Many wrote in paper notebooks, each worth a small fortune back at the seminary. John was amazed that so many people could write but also saw some sketching surprisingly lifelike forms.

It was as his gaze shifted to the front of the room that John's blood ran cold. A woman stood before the crowd on a raised platform, her vibrant red hair tied back into a bushy ponytail. She stood at a long table, upon which lay the naked body of an elderly man. As if that wasn't perverse enough, the man had been sliced open from throat to stomach and the red-haired woman had her entire arm inside the poor man's chest.

John watched the scene for several heartbeats before throwing up violently at his feet. He leaned against the wall, hands shaking. Some of the mercenaries had similarly visceral reactions but the Bishop was unfazed as he stared into the room, barely blinking as he took in the woman's every movement.

Godfrey stood transfixed until one of the men gave a muffled cough that jerked the Bishop back to the present.

"Ok men," he called out in a whisper. "We're too late to prevent this abomination but let's end this heresy before her corruption can spread any further. Break in at my signal."

The mercenaries gathered and lit the torches they'd carried from the wagon. It was too bright inside for the villagers to notice. Godfrey ordered four men to the windows on either side of the building and led the rest to the entrance at the far end of the hall. John and the Spy cautiously followed.

Godfrey paused at the door to give the men time to loop around the building and then tested to see that it was open. He took a deep breath.

With a sudden burst of energy he threw the doors open and marched into the hall with his chest thrust out.

"Stop!" Godfrey cried. "Cease this heresy immediately!"

The crowds' heads whipped around and the woman stopped what she was doing, entrails still in her hand.

"This is the work of Satan," Godfrey boomed. "How dare you desecrate the body of your fellow man? By the power of the Church, I order you to stop!"

At the sound of the Bishop's voice, the mercenaries started to break the glass windows and tossed their burning torches into the heavy curtains before leaping in themselves.

The reaction from the crowd was instant. Seeing the armed men breaking into the mill, they leapt from their seats and fled, streaming past the corpse and out the one remaining door.

“You escaped me once, hag,” the Bishop called as he casually strolled towards the front of the room. “But not this time.”

“Bishop Godfrey!? No!” the Redhead cried out in horror as she recognised Godfrey and placed down the entrails.

“Yes!” he cried greedily. “Seize her!”

His men swept forward, driving the straggling villagers out of the room. The room filled with smoke as the curtains caught alight but a handful of villagers gathered around the woman and prepared to fight back with improvised weapons.

The mercenaries leapt into action, working together to beat back their poorly armed opposition. John marvelled at the villagers’ tenacity. Despite being outnumbered and outmatched, they fought like demons to protect the Redhead. John saw a large man go down as a spear pierced his leg. Another fled clutching a gash in his arm while a boy, about John’s age, went down as a spear shaft glanced off his head.

“Stop!” the woman screamed.

Such was the power of her voice that everyone in the room obeyed, some of them in mid-swing. Even Godfrey stopped in his tracks.

“I yield. No more death. End this madness.”

The villagers reluctantly backed away and the mercenaries advanced on the woman. Godfrey marched toward her, his eyes blazing with victory.

“There will be no more of your filth,” he gloated. “Take her away!”

One of the mercenaries struck the woman over the head with his spear and she collapsed to the floor. Another man crouched over her limp body and bound her before tossing her over his shoulder. The Bishop’s party rushed from the burning building without a backward glance.

Outside, villagers milled around unsure what to do. Several aided injured fighters while others were already coordinating efforts to extinguish the fires. None dared to approach the raiding party who ignored them altogether and followed the Spy straight through the village, no longer bothering with stealth.

As the party disappeared into the darkness, John realised with a bolt of dread that he’d forgotten to collect any artefacts of interest in the excitement of the ambush. He cringed at the thought of Godfrey’s reaction when he found out but feared that the unconscious woman’s fate would be even worse.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

*21 September 1124*

William woke to screams and smoke. Someone was shaking him.

“Get up boy, the mill’s on fire! They took Matilda!”

The last statement cut through his grogginess and Walt helped him to his feet. His head pounded and his vision was blurred but he staggered out from the burning building. The Carpenter urged him to help put out the fire but William knew others would take care of that. Someone needed to help Matilda.

William pushed past the tide of people rushing inside to fight the fire and broke out into the courtyard. The cool evening air helped clear his head and the yard came into focus. Elizabeth crouched by the millhouse, tending to a nasty gash in Matthew’s leg.

“Matthew!” William cried. “You alright?”

“The Bishop’s men got him pretty bad,” Elizabeth reported as Matthew bellowed obscenities.

“Where’d they go?” William asked urgently. “They had Matilda?”

“They ran towards Holford. Nobody stopped them, they were too well armed. One of the bigger men had Matilda slung over his shoulder.”

“Shit.” William paused for a moment and then sprinted away. “I’ll try to keep up with them. Send help, I’ll leave a trail.”

“But Will,” Elizabeth protested. “Your head’s bleeding!”

“Never mind,” he called over his shoulder. “Get word to the Baron!”

William raced back to Holford, an unexpected energy pumping through his veins. Small clusters of people were gathered in the village square discussing the ambush.

“William!” Father Daniel called out. “They’ve got Matilda.”

“That’s justice for you,” Martin Brewer sneered.

“Which way?” William asked, ignoring Martin.

“East. About ten of them, maybe more. I’d say they’re headed to Stowey or Bridgwater. Moving pretty quick. Boy, your head’s bleeding.”

“Thanks Father,” William cried back. “I’ll be right. Tell someone to send help!”

He raced out of the village and into the fields which were illuminated by an almost full moon. The vast emptiness emphasised that he was alone, chasing a group of armed men. He was hit by a wave a doubt but stubbornly pushed on.

The shadow of the distant mine teased potential reinforcements, though the miners had little love for William and Matilda since the accident. Not sure what else to do, he used stones to craft a crude arrow in the middle of the road before continuing his run.

Unsure how far ahead the Bishop might be, William climbed a hill for a better vantage point and scoured the landscape. The moonlit fields aided his search and he eventually spotted a shadowy mass moving in the distance. He was relieved that they travelled at a reasonably gentle pace, slowed by a few stragglers and their precious cargo. William's chest burned from the run and his head pounded but spotting the group gave him another burst of energy and he resumed his pursuit.

Concerned that he might be seen, William kept the group just in sight while trailing them for miles through the fields. The Bishop skirted around the edges of Stowey town and headed towards a small thicket of trees.

The silhouette of Stowey castle stood tantalisingly close. William wracked his brain for a way to signal the Baron for help but the Bishop's men disappeared within the thicket, forcing William to resume his chase. He crafted another arrow in the middle of the path using some fallen sticks and prayed that the Baron might find it.

William entered the thicket, thankful for the cover of the trees. He recalled his childish games of ambush with Ralph as he darted from tree to tree, using the dense foliage as cover as he searched for the raiders.

Loud celebrations betrayed their position and William soon spotted the light of a campfire. He snuck towards it and peeked through the undergrowth. The raiders were gathered around a fire, gnawing on tough trail bread and recounting their exploits while the Bishop angrily interrogated a younger priest. William gasped when he spotted Warren's familiar face among them. *Traitor!*

William was surprised at how established the camp was. A tent had been erected for the Bishop and a handful of horses were unsaddled and tethered beside a large wagon, revealing the raiders intention to stay put. Weapons were propped against the wagon and inside lay a lumpy form with a mass of matted red hair. William's stomach flipped.

He held his breath as he watched Matilda, willing her to show any sign of life. It was an eternity before she finally began to stir. Unable to move with her hands and legs bound behind her, she threw up and was forced to rest her head near the pile of vomit. William felt indignant on her behalf but was relieved that she was alive.

William longed to free Matilda but the situation looked dire. He was vastly outnumbered and Matilda lay in full sight of the Bishop's men, preventing William from sneaking up to check on her.

The Bishop eventually noticed that Matilda was conscious and ordered a thug to drag her to the fire. She didn't resist but looked shaky on her feet.

"It's late," the Bishop said with a yawn, "but I really must know. The lights? Can you do it here? Now?"

Matilda met his gaze but didn't speak.

"Answer me woman."

Matilda remained silent. Defiant.

“Answer me!”

When Matilda showed no sign of moving, the Bishop gestured to his brute. And then the fire.

Matilda started to resist but the man grabbed her with ease and dragged her hand above the coals.

“Tell me,” the Bishop commanded.

Matilda struggled to escape but her lips remained sealed.

The Bishop nodded and his brute lowered her hand. Matilda’s cry echoed through the trees. William wanted to rush in and help but a rational part of his mind forced him to refrain.

“Stop!” the Bishop finally yelled. “Anything to say now?”

Matilda stared up at him defiantly, though she let out an involuntary whimper.

“Very well then,” Godfrey replied with disappointment. “That will do. I’ll have time to do this properly back in Bath. Until then...” he taunted as he retired to his tent.

His men returned Matilda to the wagon and posted a pair of sentries before curling up beside the fire. When everyone else was asleep, the Bishop’s younger priest visited Matilda to offer food, bathe her hand and clear away her vomit. William hated the Young Priest for his association with the loathsome raiders but was at least thankful for that.

Unable to devise a workable plan, William prayed again that Elizabeth had found reinforcements. He knew it would be almost impossible for them to find his clumsy signs in the dark and cursed himself for not laying more. He settled in to keep watch and urged himself to stay awake as relentless waves of fatigue rolled over him.

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The sun had already risen when William woke and he struggled to recall where he was. His head throbbed and his legs ached. Memories of the previous evening jolted him awake and he pushed himself to his feet, cursing his weakness.

The camp was abandoned. The fire had been doused and wagon tracks led to the east. William didn’t know the way to Bath but Bridgwater was the largest town in that direction. The wagon needed to keep to the roads so there was still a chance of finding them. William hastily crafted another arrow with charred wood and set off towards the rising sun.

William’s stomach growled as he marched along a rutted road but he pushed on, stopping only to ask farmers if they’d seen the raiders pass by. Each greeted him with bewildered looks but one eventually confirmed that he wasn’t far behind.

He picked up his pace and the wagon soon came into view, trundling along at a comfortable pace. William breathed a sigh of relief and eased the intensity of his pursuit, keeping out of sight and watching them from afar.

William's blood boiled as the Bishop intermittently rode back to admire his prize and gloat about her capture. Matilda remained stoic, letting the Bishop's petty words flow over her without getting riled up by the cantankerous old man.

The group skirted around Bridgwater and continued travelling until they happened upon a clearing as the sun reached its zenith. The raiders kindled another fire beside a babbling brook and prepared a meal, showing no concerns of being pursued. William resented both their complacency and being forced to watch as they enjoyed their food. The Young Priest shared his meal with Matilda and William found himself begrudgingly starting to like the man.

Godfrey's men had just started packing up when the sound of galloping horses echoed through the trees. A handful of heavily armoured knights thundered into the clearing on mighty warhorses, Baron Walter leading from the front and a ferocious Sir Phillip at his side. The Bishop's men quailed at the sight of Sir Phillip and William had to consciously refrain from revealing his position with whoops of excitement. The Baron looked resplendent in his shimmering chainmail and brightly coloured tabard. His face was a portrait of rage.

"Godfrey! What is the meaning of this?" the Baron demanded.

The Bishop calmly strolled towards the Baron, hands clasped behind his back. He walked right up to the Baron's horse, showing no sign of being intimidated by the beast's might nor the Baron's collective strength.

"Baron Walter, I am most surprised to see you so far from your castle. Are your men always so heavily equipped for hunting?"

"Don't be coy with me Bishop. Unhand the woman and be on your way."

The raiders held onto Matilda, eager to keep her well within reach.

"Unhand her? I think not. She has been found guilty of heresy and sacrilege. These men can vouch for that, as can many from your own village. She comes with me to face the Lord's justice."

"No," the Baron snarled. "She's mine."

"Walter! I'm not property..." Matilda objected, only to be silenced by the Baron.

"You'll be quiet," Baron Walter snapped, "if you know what's good for you!"

The Bishop also glared at her before continuing his debate with the Baron.

"Regardless of *who* she belongs to, the woman has committed grave crimes and must be punished. Do you truly crave association with a blasphemer and heretic?"

"I don't know what crimes you think she's committed but I've watched her work for months. She's introduced much good to my village. To the entire region. So no, I won't hesitate to be associated with the woman and her works."

The Bishop began to object but the Baron continued.

"And nor will Earl Robert. He's followed my letters about Matilda's work with interest and will no doubt oppose your ill-informed actions. I wrote him last night, as soon as I learned of your attack."

William's ears pricked up. He knew the Baron and Sir Phillip had closely followed Holford's progress but never thought that word would reach as high as the Earl. Matilda looked surprised too.

"The King's bastard?" Godfrey noted with disbelief. "I don't care what your earthly ranks might be, this is a matter for the Church. My men and I will defend that right."

William saw the Bishop's men weigh the strength of Walter's recently-arrived cavalry and eye their spears by the wagon. Their faces paled as the Bishop spoke on their behalf but their hands hung by their knife belts and the Baron's knights shifted in their saddles.

The tense silence shattered as thundering hooves echoed around the clearing once more and another horse burst into view. The horse panted from the hard ride, though the rider carried himself with poise. His livery was even finer than the Baron's.

"Baron Walter. Bishop Godfrey. How...convenient to catch you both in the same place," the rider said diplomatically. "I come bearing word from Earl Robert."

The messenger withdrew a scroll from his bag but looked unsure which noble to give it to. The Bishop reached out for the message but Walter nudged his horse forward and plucked the scroll from the messenger's hand. Still astride his saddle, he unrolled it and read silently to himself.

"Ha!" he exclaimed victoriously. He unceremoniously tossed the scroll to the seething Bishop. Walter gave him a moment to read before announcing its contents to the crowd.

"We've been summoned to the Earl's court in Bristol. Earl Robert acknowledges the right of the Church to punish religious crimes, but also insists that he be appropriately informed of high profile crimes occurring on his own lands before any punishment is given. What say you Bishop? His Majesty would no doubt agree."

The Bishop shook with silent fury but his body betrayed defeat.

"You are correct," he said through gritted teeth. "You ride ahead and inform your lord to prepare for my audience. I shall see the woman safely to Bristol."

Baron Walter seemed to consider the Bishop's proposal but William couldn't allow that.

"Nooo!" he interrupted, bursting out of the bushes and startling priests, nobles, horses and raiders alike.

"What is the meaning of this?" the Bishop cried.

"It's the witch woman's apprentice," Warren informed him.

Sir Phillip recognised William instantly and gave an impressed smile.

"William? What are you doing here? Elizabeth delivered your message, that Matilda was in trouble. I didn't think you'd still be on her trail."

William ignored him. "You can't let the Bishop take Matilda! He's been cruel and hasn't fed her or tended to her wounds. She'll be lucky to make it to the Earl at all, let alone in a condition for an audience."

“I hope this isn’t true Godfrey?” Walter said, finally noticing Matilda’s bloody hair and cradled hand. “Playing with your prey like a cat with a fieldmouse? You couldn’t hold your barbaric foreign ways in check until judgement was delivered, could you?”

“You’re getting what you want Baron, don’t anger me further.”

“Fine,” Walter conceded. “You hold her but we travel directly to Bristol. Together. My men and I will accompany you, every step of the way,” he added, looking directly at William as he spoke. He turned to the messenger. “Tell your lord that we’re coming. I give my word that we’ll make haste.”

The messenger wheeled his horse around and galloped from the clearing. William knew that he wouldn’t receive any further concessions from the Baron but was pleased with the guaranteed audience with the Earl.

“Well,” the Baron said awkwardly. “No reason to dawdle. Let’s get to Bristol and get this farce over with.”

Matilda gave William an encouraging smile as the raiders loaded her back into the wagon. They rebound her hands, in front of her this time. Not knowing where he was supposed to go, William glanced around the clearing and vaulted into the back of the wagon.

Sir Phillip barked orders to the knights, establishing an escort and sending a man to inform Stowey of the new travel plans. The Baron settled into the rear of the formation where he could personally keep watch over Matilda.

The wagon lurched forward and they started the long journey to Bristol.

Matilda gripped William with her good hand. “You little champion. You followed me all this way? What did I do to deserve a friend like you?”

William didn’t know what to say so he merely smiled, content with knowing she was safe. Feeling suddenly weary, he lay down among the spears and was asleep in a heartbeat.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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