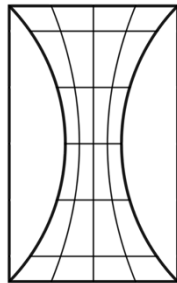


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

23 March 1124

Winter had finally ended. The gloomy grey skies became regularly interspersed with patches of blue and Holford's mood noticeably lifted as the temperature increased. Spring came into full bloom. As the flowers and trees began to blossom, so too did the project seeds that Matilda had sowed across the village to fill the long winter nights.

Matilda was busy from dawn to dusk and the relaxing days of waiting for her ankle to heal became a distant memory. Matilda lived permanently at her mill, waking at the crack of dawn only to be pulled across Holford from person to person until the sun disappeared from the sky. Even then her work continued. In the absence of stock to fill her warehouse, Matilda created a tracing floor which she used to scrawl new designs for the following day's activities by the light of her torch. Matilda remained exhausted each morning but the tangible progress towards her revised mission spurred her to work even harder.

Teaching Matthew to make bulk basics like screws or bolts had wowed Holford's craftspeople but it was Matilda's more complex designs left the entire village speechless. People came from all over to try her rudimentary bicycle and Matilda had used the previous evening's Spring celebration to unveil her bizarre musical instrument.

Holford had gathered to celebrate the end of a particularly miserable winter. Ever the businessmen, Martin Brewer ordered Rachel's husband to roll out barrels of beer and cider to sell to the assembled crowd. Rachel begrudgingly helped with the sales but her surly expression betrayed her preference to be drinking with the revellers.

With the whole village in attendance and the Brewer's products flowing, it wasn't long before the springtime air was alive with traditional folksongs and rowdy drinking ballads. Matilda mingled with the villagers who eventually insisted that their out-of-town visitor share her own local tunes. William had pre-warned Matilda that this might happen so she had fashioned a makeshift instrument over the preceding evenings, aiming for her old guitar but achieving something more akin to a ukulele.

Matilda entranced the crowd with classic songs from her past and the crowd quickly grasped the strange lyrics and sang along. Matilda smiled at the memory of Elizabeth falling from her stool while drunkenly belting out Hallelujah and the joyful tears streaming down the Carpenter's face while singing Over the Rainbow. Matilda's Institute teachers had never truly appreciated the weight of these little gifts from the future.

The Brewer's concoctions were surprisingly strong and everyone eventually retreated to their beds. Almost everyone.

As she returned to her mill, Matilda had discovered Edric stumbling towards the mine, catatonic from his brother's brews and barely able to stand.

Matilda was devastated. Only days earlier, as she had installed his new pump, he'd shared that he felt like a new man. How the mine had brought renewed purpose to his life and that he would never drink a drop again. Matilda had been thrilled by his revelation, having spent the previous week cannibalising her old parachute to make hoses for the hand-cranked pump that Matthew had prioritised over their other projects.

The man's weakness made her angry but Matilda helped her fallen colleague back to his hut, lifting him each time he fell and waiting as he stopped to throw up.

"Why Edric?" she asked, unable to hold her tongue. "You were doing so well."

"The flamin' pump's busted again," he lamented. "A great split down the pipe. Everythin's fillin' up with water."

Matilda struggled to calm the Miner, reassuring him that they could patch the hoses and promising to develop a more sustainable design.

"So sorry, Ma'tilda", he hiccupped as they reached the hut. "A miner lapse. Ha. It won't happen again."

"I hope not, Edric," Matilda replied soberly. "Think of the Boy. He's starting to look up to you. What if he'd found you..?"

Edric stopped in his tracks. "Ya right. He's a good lad."

Matilda helped the man inside and watched him collapse into his cot. When she was convinced that he was asleep, she combed every inch of his hut for illicit stashes as the Miner's snores reverberated off the walls. She poured her findings behind the smelting furnace before finally heading back to her own bed.

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Matilda awoke even groggier than normal and had little doubt that most of Holford would feel the same, buying some precious time to finish her sketches. She scrawled away furiously, channelling her annoyance from the evening's unwanted discovery. Edric had been doing so well, a walking embodiment of the improvements she sought to achieve for the village. She cursed the vile Brewer for enabling his brother's addiction.

Matilda eventually looked up from her sketch, finally happy. Time had become a precious resource and Matilda needed a way to schedule her many appointments around Holford. She would've loved to build a working clock but ironically lacked the time. So sundials would have to do. Her sketch would allow Matthew to mass produce the stylised iron shapes which she could scatter around the village. They lacked precision but people could at least guess the rough time. She took a mental image of the design and set off to find William.

The sun burst over the treetops as Matilda left the warehouse and she paused to soak in the view of her progress. The charred trees nearest to the mill had sprouted new leaves up the entire length of their trunks, giving them an alien appearance. Much like the charred forest, there were signs of growth on the building itself. The Carpenter and his team had already installed new rafters across the millhouse and Timothy had almost finished making ceramic roof tiles.

There was other new growth in the area around the mill. Holford's various craftsmen had built a small village of shacks to store their tools closer to their work. Each reflected its maker. Timothy's had a neat tiled roof. Walt's was simple but sturdy. Matthew's was open to the world.

The once boggy yard was dry and Elizabeth had used Matilda's box of seeds to convert most of it into a well-stocked garden. William's sister tirelessly toiled to transplant her seedlings and cuttings. Any excuse to escape Ma's increasingly smothering attention.

Many of Elizabeth's plants had never been seen in Holford and her excitement grew as they did. A diverse crop of leeks, rhubarb and cauliflower was already taking shape and her bamboo was visibly growing each day. She sketched each variety in her hand-bound notebook. Her apple core miraculously managed to survive the fire and the happy memory of her excited squeal upon discovering its tiny green tendril still echoed around the clearing.

With a smile, Matilda tore her gaze away from her mill and headed into Holford to meet William. The village was just beginning to stir when Matilda arrived. There were few signs of life at the cottage.

"Hello?" she called when she reached the door.

Ma emerged with a basket of dirty dishes under arm, her face grim.

"They're just tidying up inside. You're taking him away *again*?"

"Just for a bit," Matilda replied with her sunniest voice. "He's been such a help around the village. We all missed you last night."

"Didn't feel up to it," Ma shrugged before nudging past Matilda to empty the food scraps behind the house.

Matilda stepped through the open door and into the cottage. The change of energy was jarring.

"Morning!" William called, earning a grunt of disapproval from Elizabeth.

"Please, shut the door," she begged Matilda, though she too managed a weak but welcoming smile.

"Still recovering from your big night?" Matilda asked with a cheeky grin before quietly closing the door and sitting at the table. "Ma still seems out of sorts."

"She still misses Margery," Pa agreed mournfully. "And it doesn't help that Rachel barely speaks to us anymore."

"She's just being dramatic, that was all months ago" William said matter-of-factly. "They'll both be back. Unfortunately."

"We didn't see you last night either," Matilda told Pa.

"Didn't want to leave Em by herself. And I was weary from the jury trip to Stowey yesterday. Finalising the exile of Arnold's labourer," Pa added. "Which reminds me, Sir Phillip said the Baron wants to see your mill again. You've made some powerful friends."

"I don't know if I'd call Walter a friend but thanks for the warning. Come on Will, enough lazing about. Time to start the day."

They were just leaving when Rachel barged through the front gate. Tears streamed down her face but with a special fury reserved for Matilda, Rachel wiped them away and pushed past her. Despite their animosity, Matilda was concerned. The tears looked genuine.

“Ma’s out the back,” William told Rachel’s back. “Hey Ma! Rachel’s here!”

Matilda heard Ma drop her basket and run around the cottage to give Rachel a big hug. She was finally smiling.

William and Matilda left them to their embrace and started their routine circuit of the village. Holford had looked to Matilda for leadership and guidance ever since the Miller’s expulsion and many had welcomed her ideas and improvements, be that designing a new mechanism for the Smith or teaching a child how to tie a knot.

With William’s help, most of Holford’s youngsters had been rallied to assist with different projects. Even the girls. A handful of the older children refused to help out of principle but most welcomed a distraction from the winter monotony. Matilda feared encouraging child-labour but figured that temporary apprenticeships had to suffice until her school was established. The young workers had enthusiastically set about their tasks, guided by craftsmen to learn trades and assist with increased workloads.

Many of the youngsters had gone to help Walt with his carpentry, having been exposed to woodwork basics through their families’ day-to-day existence or during their own adventures in the forest. The Carpenter tasked the children with splitting logs or shaping timbers and had breezed through Matilda’s tasks with the extra help.

Walt had always boycotted the Brewer’s concoctions so his rough voice already rang across his worksite when Matilda and William arrived. It was uncharacteristically gentle as he taught his newest apprentices how to work the timbers safely.

“Careful lad, I just sharpened that chisel so it’ll take your finger if you let it.”

He brandished a hand at the boy to show off his missing digit before giving a welcoming wave.

“Didn’t think I’d see you two up and about any time decent.”

“Your lot are up early too,” Matilda noted. “There’s too much work to stay in bed feeling sorry for myself. How’re things coming along?”

“Always straight to business,” Walt said with a shake of his head. “Your new waterwheel is taking shape. It took awhile to get our heads around your complicated design but I’m beginning to see how it’ll come together. The lads are just finishing the shafts for the mechanisms so are you sure you don’t want me to make the gears? They’ve been made of wood at every mill I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m sure Walt. Wood burns. I’ve got Matt Smith working on metal designs which should be much more durable. Save your time for things of beauty. I need furnishings for inside. Tables, chairs, shutters.”

Walt disapproved of Matilda’s continued insistence to break from convention but perked up at her suggestion of beautiful wooden furnishings.

“Speaking of things of beauty, last night’s music was breathtaking. Never heard anything like it. Yet performed with such a crude instrument.”

Matilda explained her ukulele and described other instruments she had seen from the future. Walt was enthralled by the possibility of even more beautiful music and promised to carve a fiddle based on Matilda’s descriptions.

“Only after the new tables,” Matilda insisted as she and William set off to their next visit. He begrudgingly agreed.

They’d barely rounded the corner when William burst into laughter.

“*Speaking of beauty*,” William mocked. “I think he fancies you!”

Matilda agreed. “I don’t think his wife would like that. Besides, I got the feeling last night that there’s others I should be more concerned about.”

Matilda had attracted quite a lot of attention from Holford’s male population. She wasn’t sure if it was her height, her accent or just her general foreignness but it only became clearer as the Brewer’s drinks continued to flow and the men became less subtle. Matilda didn’t know when they expected her to find the time for romance and the scars of her encounter with the Bishop meant the thought still made her stomach churn. Fortunately it wasn’t something she needed to worry about with their next visit.

Timothy Potter sat outside his home. He skilfully wrestled a large ball of clay and specks were stuck in his bushy white beard. A gaggle of young helpers darted around the yard behind him, laying fresh rooftiles out to dry or unstacking freshly fired ones from the kiln. There were hundreds of them.

“Almost done, little missy,” he told her jollily. He gave the clay a wet slap. “Three more lumps like this and your roof will be done. The crew pretty much navigate themselves now. They’ll start on floor tiles for your warehouse next. Can we finally start your next lesson?”

Whoever said you can’t teach an old dog new tricks had never met Timothy. Matilda thought that teaching the basics of glass making would keep him busy but the elderly man threw himself into the task with unrestrained enthusiasm. After surprisingly few failed attempts, he was well on the way to mastering the skill. He’d already blown small glass bottles for Matilda’s other projects and she’d vowed to next teach how to make flat panes for windows.

Matilda promised Timothy another lesson, provided he first make a prototype of Matilda’s flushable toilet. Recalling the stench of Holford’s outhouses, she couldn’t over-emphasise how valuable it would be. Timothy needed some convincing and then insisted on showcasing his entire inventory of tiles before Matilda and William could finally move on to their next visit.

Things were quieter at the blacksmith. Matthew had only taken on one apprentice, William’s friend Ralph.

“Quality over quantity,” Matthew had said when Matilda had offered more. “There’s too much to teach, plus smithing is dangerous. One will do, for now.”

As always, Matthew had pushed the boundaries and argued again that William should be his apprentice but Matilda wouldn't hear it. William was much too important to her broader plans but she suggested Ralph instead, arguing that he had the bulk to throw into the heavy smithing work. Matilda was amazed how quickly Ralph's puppy fat had converted into muscle.

"We're ready to cast these gears you're so excited about," Matthew reported. "Edric already dropped by and said he'll deliver his first load of ore within the week. He's recruiting *more* newcomers for the mine, sounds like they're practically eating through the rock. But when can we get started on Walt's saw blades?"

Matilda sighed. She'd promised to teach him how to make stronger steels for giant blades that would allow the Carpenter to rapidly saw beams. Matthew understood the benefits of the stronger material but unlike Timothy wasn't quite up to the task.

"Patience Matthew, one thing at a time. Perfect these gears first and then we'll get started on the blade."

Matthew wasn't happy at the need to delay but he lapped up Matilda's praise for his other projects. He'd mastered extruding molten metal to make wires and screws, even modifying Matilda's design to make it more efficient. He was back to his usual overly charming self by the time they left.

Matilda and William continued their visits for the rest of the day, checking that Joshua was still managing at the mill, waving at Pa and Luke ploughing the fallow fields, and visiting Edric. Looking bashful, the Miner said nothing of the previous evening and they managed to repair Matilda's makeshift hose, which was sucking water from the mine again when Matilda and William finally left.

It had started getting dark and they were both weary by the time they reached the cottage for a long overdue meal.

"Surely there's a better way to do this?" William asked.

"I was thinking the same thing," Matilda said. "All this running around is time we could spend actually working and everyone's *almost* doing everything themselves. They just need coordination. Perhaps we could establish a council?"

"Huh?"

"You know, a gathering of the key townfolk to discuss our progre.."

"I know what a council is. I mean what's that? Listen."

They stopped walking and Matilda strained her ears. Then she heard it. Yelling. Tears. They'd just passed the Brewer's house near the centre of the village and the commotion was coming from the building next door. Rachel's house.

The pair stood rooted in place, unsure what to do. The yelling continued, occasionally punctuated as thrown pottery crashed against the wall. There was one last thunderous yell before the door was thrown open and the Brewer's son stormed outside. Even in the darkness, they saw that Alan's face was warped with fury.

Silence fell over Holford once more, broken only by the loud sobs of William's sister alone in her new house. Matilda instinctively wanted to console Rachel but knew that her presence was likely to only make things worse. She gave William a look, asking what they should do.

“It's late,” he said. “Let's get home.”

The pair trudged home in silence, unsure what to make of what they'd just witnessed. They pushed solemnly through the front gate, only for Ma to open the door and greet them with a broad grin before dashing back inside to prepare their food.

Matilda was glad to see Ma in better spirits.

“Have you heard the exciting news?” she called over her shoulder. “Rachel is pregnant!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

27 March 1124

Godfrey fidgeted as his carriage trundled back to the palace after another long morning of menial tasks. His head thundered but he was relieved that the day's obligations were behind him. It had been months since his consecration and life had settled into a comfortable but dull routine. The monks and clergy had reached a tentative truce, he had negotiated agreeable terms with the Jewish lenders, and cathedral construction required minimal intervention. The Bishop's only failure had been his efforts to extract value from the ruined Book.

This still irked Godfrey. He had been sure that the Book contained precious secrets but after months of effort it had proven to be little more than a drain of both time and money. Despite great personal investment, he finally conceded that nothing more could be done. The Book sat gathering dust amongst more valuable tomes on his bookshelf, its tattered spine the only reminder that it was even there.

Godfrey had finally succeeded in breaking John's spirit after the last escape attempt and moved him back into the seminary to fully focus on his training. The Bishop occasionally felt pangs of guilt at tearing the Novice away from his family. But then he remembered all the trouble the boy had caused and that John's usefulness had proven underwhelming. Seminary training was more than he deserved.

Godfrey was relieved when the carriage finally reined in at his palace. He marched into the grand building and made for the solitude of his study, not even breaking stride as he informed the servants that he would take his lunch there and should be otherwise undisturbed.

He was dismayed to find a sealed envelope waiting on his sitting table. He sat down heavily and opened it. Another message from the Cardinals bearing bad news about the rebellion. The Bastard Earl had won several victories after the winter hiatus and Godfrey's technical assistance remained unappreciated. The Bishop leant back in his chair and applied pressure to his temples. His headache raged from the busy morning and required several goblets of wine to take the edge off.

Godfrey was on his fourth cup when the servants finally arrived to deliver his midday meal. He silently smouldered as they clumsily set his table, banging dishes and clattering cutlery. The Bishop was pleased when they finally left him in peace. Godfrey's mouth watered at the smell of the rich feast and he was carving a particularly plump mutton shank when there was a knock on the door.

Peter warily stuck his head into the study.

"I said no interruptions!" Godfrey scolded before his assistant could utter a word.

Peter looked reproachful but continued to enter nonetheless.

"Apologies Father, it's just that..."

"I swear, if it's that damned boy again, so help me God..."

"It's not about John, Father. It's something you'll definitely want to hear for yourself."

Godfrey looked at him quizzically. Peter was intelligent enough to know that the mere disruption was enough to risk the Bishop's wrath. And yet he stood his ground.

The Bishop stuffed a chunk of mutton into his mouth and lay down his fork. After some drawn out chews, he took a swig of wine for good measure.

"This had better be good," Godfrey warned. "Spit it out!"

Peter flinched but continued timidly. "You'd best come and see Your Eminence."

Godfrey's blood boiled. "I finally have time to enjoy some *basic* sustenance and you tear me away? Dammit man, what is so important that it cannot wait?"

Godfrey watched the Assistant weigh his options.

"We have a visitor, Father. An elderly priest from a distant, inconsequential hamlet. He's deaf, incredibly frail and shaking like a leaf. But he walked all the way from his tiny chapel as fast as he was able. He has a message for you. Only you. Concerning a red-haired woman. With a book."

Godfrey's interest was instantly piqued but he refused to let himself get over excited. He had already received two enterprising visitors since putting out the call for information about the Book. Both had suffered his wrath.

"Very well," he said with a measured tone. "I will speak with this priest. Have the servants bring my meal down to the garden courtyard. Tell them to bring more food, the priest has travelled far. And more wine."

Feeling wobbly from his drink, Godfrey made his way downstairs and waited impatiently as his servants re-laid the generous platter of food. He sampled each item to take the edge off his appetite before calling for the priest to be let in.

The man was ancient. Peter didn't jest about his frailty. A solid gust of wind would send him flying.

"Welcome brother," Godfrey greeted in his most regal voice. "You have travelled far. Please, join me for a bite to eat."

The Elderly Priest required a nudge from Peter but he shuffled into the room and gingerly took the seat Godfrey had gestured to.

"Some wine?" Godfrey asked, offering the decanter.

"No, thank you," the priest said, a little too loud. "Much too rich for me, it would upset my stomach. Just water will be fine."

The man sounded like an old tree. Gnarled and ancient. Painfully slow.

"My assistant tells me you've news from afar."

"Yes Your Eminence. Though would you prefer that we discussed it in private?"

The old man gestured at Peter with a gentle nod of his head.

"Not to worry, brother. Peter has my trust."

Godfrey's assurances put the Elderly Priest at ease and Peter joined them at the dining table.

“Very well. Where to begin? My parish doesn’t get many visitors. It’s a backwater. Like a flea bite on the arse end of a mangy hound.”

“Very...colourful,” Godfrey said irritably. “It’s a poor village, I understand. Go on.”

“A family arrived four nights ago. It was already getting dark and I was setting the altar for the evening prayer. They startled me half to death, barging into my little church without knocking. But Saint Peter says we should offer hospitality without grumbling and they looked desperate. So I let them stay.”

“Naturally,” Godfrey said impatiently.

“They were an uncouth bunch,” the Elderly Priest continued, “using the chapel purely for its roof. The adults exuded an air of entitlement, though they displayed little reason to deserve any status. Their clothes were filthy and tattered, as though they’d been on the road for months. None of them showed the slightest respect and they promptly fell asleep after gorging on their meagre supplies. Except for the girl.”

Godfrey leaned forward excitedly. “The red-headed foreigner!?”

“Oh no. Nothing that exotic.”

Godfrey slumped back into his chair and gnawed on a chicken leg. Peter started fidgeting with a spare fork.

“Just a regular peasant girl. More grounded than her companions, comfortable in her well-travelled clothes. It was clear that she wasn’t part of the family.”

The priest paused and shakily sipped his water.

“I only noticed her because she so differed from her brutish companions. She alone bowed her head in prayer before sleep. My hope in humanity lifted, temporarily. Because then she walked up to my bible at the lectern and started reading out loud.”

“What?” Godfrey spluttered, tossing down his chicken. His interest reawakened.

“You have a bible?” Peter asked inquisitively.

“My thoughts precisely,” the Elderly Priest answered Godfrey, ignoring Peter. “Where does a peasant learn to read? And a young woman, at that. I confess that I was initially bewildered and watched closely to be sure that my age wasn’t playing tricks. But there she was, sounding out words from somewhere in Psalms. Rather clunkily, but they were definitely the right words. She celebrated with a dainty little dance each time she recognised a new one.

“I’ll tell you, I wasn’t pleased that this young peasant woman had her filthy paws on my most precious possession. A gift from my years in London. It was just unnatural, a woman reading. I immediately sought to distract her, when I finally realised what was happening.”

“Was she ashamed at being caught?” Peter asked.

“She was, like a teen caught singing when they think they’re alone. I ignored the reading altogether and steered the conversation back to proper Christian behaviour, asking instead what she had been praying about. That was when it got really interesting.”

Peter stopped fidgeting. Godfrey was on the edge of his chair.

“She admitted that she didn’t belong with the family. That she’d made a horrible mistake. She had joined the family in exile, feeling partly to blame for their predicament. I pried for her to explain but she simply replied that she mocked her little brother too much.”

“What older sister doesn’t?” Peter asked, his voice oddly raw.

“I said the same thing. She confessed that she and her sister taunted the boy, driving him to spend time in the woods, away from them. It meant more work for the girls but it was rare to get time alone to discuss inane things like attractive boys without their brother’s constant eye rolls. All had been fine, until the boy came home one evening with a stranger, around the feast of All Hallows.”

“Who was the stranger?” Godfrey begged. “What did she say?”

“She was a foreigner,” the Elderly Priest started, a twinkle in his eye. “With curly red hair.”

“Yes!” the Bishop cried, bolting upright and knocking his chair back. Peter and the Elderly Priest stared at him, aghast at such behaviour unbecoming of senior clergy. Godfrey sheepishly sat down, clearing his throat and gesturing for the visitor to continue.

“I’d hoped you’d be interested. Well, the Foreigner’s arrival sent a shock through the girl’s small and respectable family. There would’ve been scandal if word escaped that her brother had come home with an unmarried woman. Let alone one that dressed inappropriately and spoke so strangely. The peasant girl was relieved when her father escorted the stranger away the next day. He took her to a town called Stowey under the pretences of delivering taxes but in reality he was under strict instructions from his wife to ensure that no ill would befall the family.

“The peasant girl was relieved to see the Foreigner gone. The Redhead was different. Too different. But she was gone, never to be seen again.”

“But?” Godfrey asked with desperation. “Please tell me there’s more.”

The Elderly Priest gave a fox-like smile. “The peasant girl couldn’t shake the feeling that that they hadn’t seen the last of the foreigner. Her elder sister was coy but said with absolute certainty that the woman had gotten what she deserved. The girl sensed there was more to the story but the Foreigner remained nowhere to be seen and life returned to endless harvesting and gossiping about boys.”

“Quit playing with me priest,” Godfrey warned. “That’s it?”

“It was, until the peasant girl’s father and grandmother took ill. It was dire. The grandmother was on her deathbed and the family stood no hope of surviving the winter without the father. Then the Foreigner reappeared.

“She was different to before. Reserved. Mournful and morose. But she did what she could to help the family. She provided remedies and joined them in the fields while the father recovered. Each day she emerged further from her shell and the family actually grew to like her, despite her eccentricities.

“The Foreigner cared nothing for convention and upturned the village’s entire life. She introduced new techniques to hasten the harvest and healed sick villagers with strange medicine. She possessed half of a book and taught women and children how to read.” The priest didn’t mask his disapproval. “It was all too much for the girl’s grandmother, a proper Christian woman, who returned to be with the Lord. It was the Foreigner who eventually raised the village in rebellion against their miller, the boorish visitor who slept in my chapel.

“The peasant girl blamed herself. If she’d only been nicer to her brother, the Foreigner might never have come. Her grandmother might still be alive and the mill still run by its rightful owner. For all of its downsides, life in their village would’ve at least been normal.”

Godfrey had heard enough and swooped in with his most burning question.

“Did the peasant girl say where she was from?”

“She did, my Bishop.”

Godfrey leaned forward hungrily.

“Do you know the Quantock mountains my lord? An outstanding example of the Lord’s natural creation to be sure, though I haven’t been there for decades.”

“I’ve heard of them,” Godfrey said impatiently. “Go on.”

“Well, in the eastern foothills there is a town called Nether Stowey. A small town but it has a modest castle with a stone keep and holds a full market once a month. The town where the peasant father took the Foreigner.”

“Get to the point priest! Stowey is where I last encountered her. She’s not there.”

“No, she wouldn’t be. Only a fool retouches a pot after being burned.”

Godfrey didn’t care for the priest’s attitude. But they were so close.

“A short walk northwest of Stowey, nestled in the Quantocks themselves, lies a tiny village. With a mill. A new miller. And a red-headed foreigner. A village called Holford.”

The room was silent as Godfrey digested the final piece of information. Holford. The name whipped around his head like a ship in a storm. Finally, a new lead. And she had the other half of the Book! The smouldering ashes of his passion project reignited into a raging inferno.

Godfrey returned to his senses.

“You’ve done well, priest. More than well. This is truly the Lord’s work and He will no doubt bestow His greatest blessings upon you. But please, name yourself a more earthly reward. A horse for your journey home? A transfer to my new cathedral to live out your days in peace and prayer? What would you like? Name it.”

The priest gave a gentle smile.

“None of that will be necessary my Bishop. I ask only that you keep our little end of the world in your prayers and do what you can to quash this Foreigner’s unseemly ways. And perhaps a new goat, ours died during the winter.”

“It will be done,” Godfrey promised with absolute sincerity, thinking the man a fool for not requesting more.

Peter escorted the Elderly Priest out of the room, leaving Godfrey to his thoughts. His mind raced. The possibilities of the complete tome were tantalising but to capture the woman and extract information directly was even better. He wondered where John was.

Peter returned to the room.

“That went well,” he said with a grin.

“Better than well,” Godfrey agreed. “I want to know what that woman is doing. Where she eats, shits and sleeps. Get one of your men there. To Holford. Now!”

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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