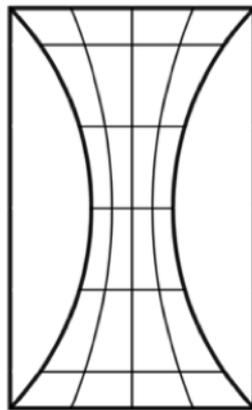


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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DEDICATION

For my grandparents

You instilled in me a love for reading and history, technology and learning.

You kindled a thirst to improve and a yearning to create.

For these gifts, I will be forever thankful.

TRIGGER WARNING

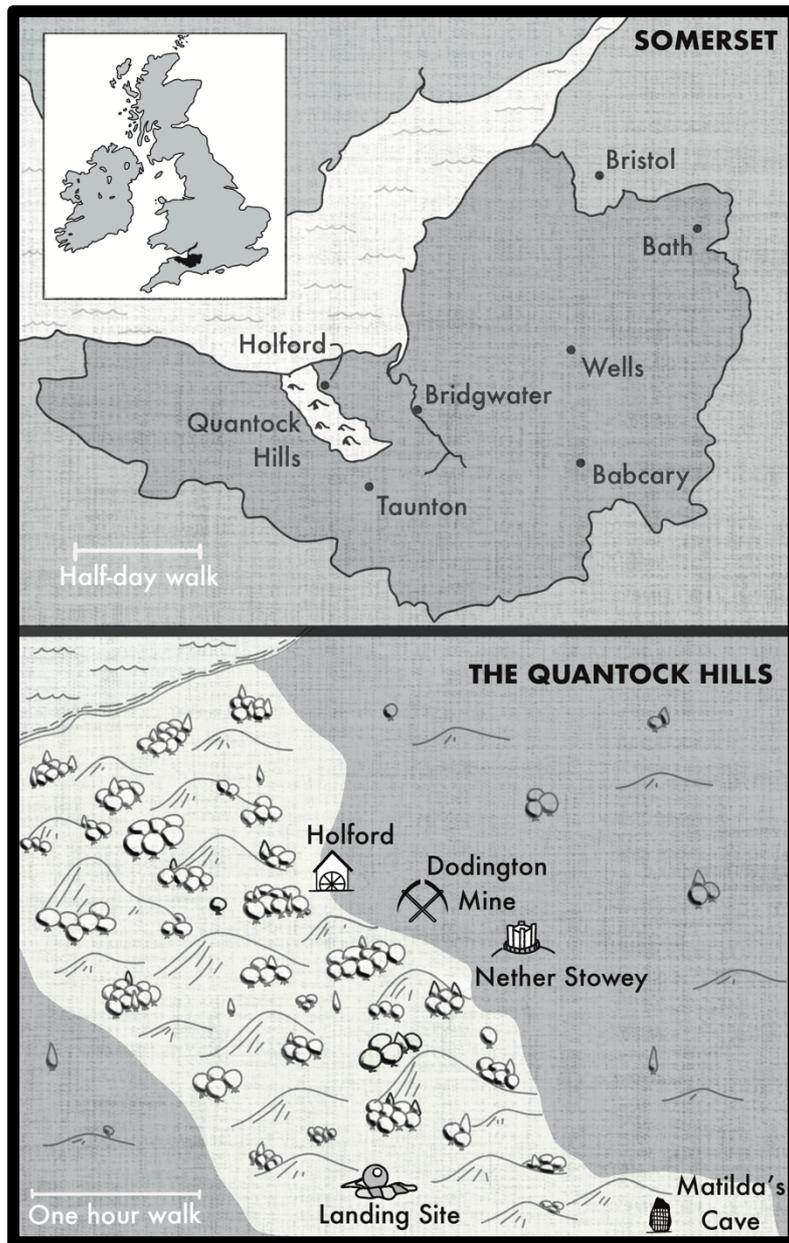
This book explores the realities of a journey back in time.

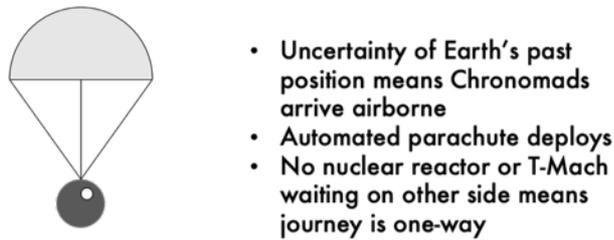
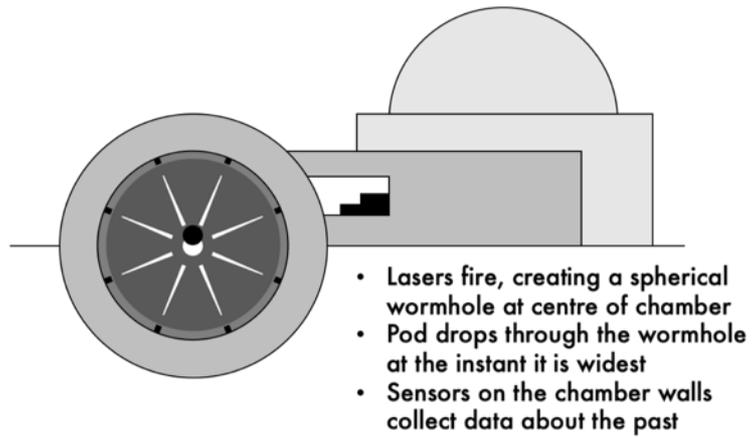
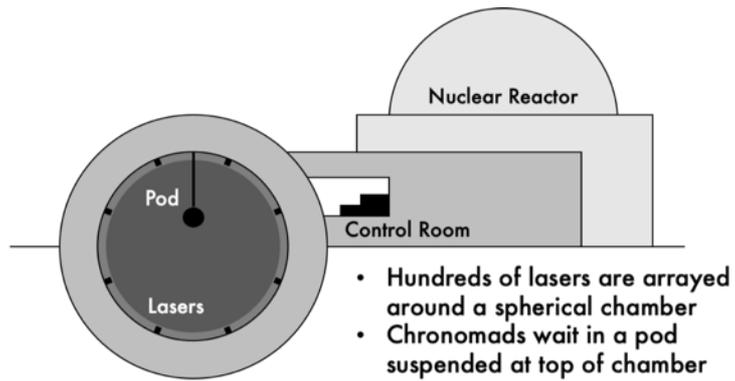
We live in an age where issues of gender, race and sexuality are increasingly understood but there is always room to improve.

Please be aware that this book contains scenes that may be distressing for some readers, including sexual assault and domestic violence.

These scenes show that the lessons we could teach the past go far beyond fancy technology or advanced medicine.

We have come a long way as a society too.





PROLOGUE

3 July 2025

The Sun blazed bright against the black emptiness of space.

Charged particles raged deep beneath its surface to fuel the celestial furnace, just as they had for millennia. But something unnatural disrupted their age-old procession and the particles felt the tug of an outside force. It was slight, but enough to disturb paths that had been predetermined for aeons. Ever obedient to Nature's laws, the particles surged along their new trajectory and began a long journey.

Towards Earth.

Few knew that anything was awry until their phones stopped working. Freed from technology's tight grip, people looked up from their devices and craned their necks to marvel as ribbons of light streamed across the sky.

The Sun had spewed large flares before but this one was on another scale. And cast directly into Earth's orbit. It far surpassed the Carrington Event, an 1859 solar flare so strong that disconnected telegraph lines powered up and goldminers resumed their toil in the middle of the night, thinking it was morning.

What came to be known as the Long Day was just as intense, but longer. Auroras streaked across the sky for fourteen hours. Night became day and nowhere on the planet was untouched.

Although initially alluring, the solar flare devastated the delicate web of silicon chips around which humanity had built its civilisation. Cars and phones. Power grids and pacemakers. In mere hours, the entire intricate web was fried by electrical currents induced by the storm raging in the magnetosphere above.

An unnerving silence descended across the planet.

The full impact only became apparent when the auroras faded. Families tried in vain to contact their loved ones and immobilised vehicles clogged arterial roads, obstructing the endless stream of food required to feed cities' bulging populations.

Anarchy erupted as overwhelmed governments struggled to coordinate relief efforts, battling against others who sought to leverage the calamity for their own selfish ends. Food and medicines ran out in days. Within weeks, all was chaos.

Hundreds of millions died across the globe.

Yet it was at the start of this period of pandemonium that a lone physicist – working with pencil and paper during a cross-country journey back home – made the biggest scientific breakthrough of all time.

Time travel.

CHAPTER ONE

10 April 2037

“This is it! Today we’ll make history. By remaking it!”

The control room burst into a flurry of crisp white lab coats and military uniforms as Institute scientists enthusiastically broke from the huddle around their dear leader and rushed to finish preparations for their historic undertaking. The air was electric, buzzing with the business-like babble of engineers and the hum of charging capacitors.

It was all too much for David, a simple history teacher in a sea of brilliant technical minds. He extracted himself from the fray and slunk into the comfort of the background.

He was drawn to the yellow-tinted window at the front of the control room and stared down into the Time Machine’s enormous spherical cavern, watching as a crane lowered a large steel ball into position.

The final precious piece.

A pair of David’s students sat cramped within the reinforced pod. Harry and Matilda. Teaching them had been the highlight of David’s career and each was wise beyond their twenty-two years. They were the bravest people David had ever met, for they were about to leave. Forever.

They were Chronomad One and Two. Humanity’s first time-travellers.

History’s greatest scientific achievement – a technologically plausible theory of time travel – had been discovered in the ashes of its most devastating calamity.

The Long Day.

Memories of the carnage flashed through David’s mind. Brilliantly colourful auroras streaming across the sky. Blank phone screens. Empty plates. Long forgotten illnesses. Violent gangs roaming the suddenly lawless land. The death toll was catastrophic, easily orders of magnitude greater than any famine or plague.

But a decade later, civilisation was mostly restored. And if his students’ journey to the past succeeded, some parallel version of humanity would never need to experience its greatest tragedy.

David recognised a distinct voice amongst the control room chaos and turned to watch his childhood friend, the most brilliant physicist of the age, darting around to confirm that everything remained in place. The Institute’s tireless leader caught David’s gaze and angled towards the yellow window.

“The capacitors are almost charged and the vacuum is nearly ready,” Sam updated upon arrival. “Let’s see if this was all worth it.”

“You’re sure you got your calculations right?” David jibed.

Sam elbowed David in the ribs. “Of course they’re correct! The military wouldn’t fund all this if everything wasn’t up to scratch. I just wish they’d given us a little more time. Ironic really. But for the real question, are you certain these two are the right ones for my inaugural Drop?”

Sam’s playful riposte hit a nerve. David had grappled with the question for years.

Matilda and Harry were just one team from an entire cohort of budding time travellers. Chronomads as Sam had taken to calling them.

As headmaster of the Institute for Temporal Relocation, David had identified fertile periods of history – times of social or scientific growth that preceded great upheaval – and trained his students in everything they might need to journey back to their allocated period. Science and medicine. Economics and politics. Even ancient languages and music.

The Chronomads became Jacks and Jills of all trades and each was tasked with imparting their knowledge on the past to kickstart an early Renaissance in their new timeline. With technological understanding growing exponentially, the early introduction of modern scientific concepts meant that a future civilisation could be much better equipped when the Long Day’s solar storm inevitably struck.

Chronomads were initially planned to be sent into the past alone as the fledgling wormhole technology meant space was the key limitation for each mission. However, by limiting their possessions and reducing safety margins, David had eventually succeeded in postponing the departures until two-person teams could be sent.

The Institute’s military sponsors hadn’t been happy with the delay – some unnamed bogeyman state was perpetually ‘just about to catch up’ – but they begrudgingly agreed when David pointed out that pairs of Chronomads would provide redundancy and greatly increase the chance of success.

The Chronomad candidates were hastily reorganised into pairs that best matched in period and region. Matilda and Harry established an amicable partnership and appeared to have avoided the...romantic entanglements that had plagued other pairs. But while Harry remained the Chronomad program’s posterchild, equal parts charismatic and knowledgeable, Matilda’s brilliance had paled in comparison and she wilted in his shadow.

Even so, they were David’s leading pair and the Institute scientists had lobbied for Matilda and Harry to be Chronomads One and Two, arguing that the relative spatial and temporal

proximity of their planned destination – medieval England – would be the simplest to tune with their fledgling Time Machine.

The machine was still in development and could only open a small portal. For a split second. Just long enough to send Matilda and Harry back to the past. And without another enormous Time Machine and its accompanying nuclear reactor waiting for them in the past, there could be no contact when the portal close. Return was impossible.

David had performed the ethical gymnastics required to justify exiling someone from existence but still had his reservations. The Institute scientists told him that they couldn't send multiple teams back to the same destination, something about space-time ripples jeopardising an already successful Drop. So he had campaigned to postpone again, until Sam's wormhole technology matured enough to send larger teams to the same location, but a Headmaster's authority wasn't enough. His concerns had been overruled and the scientists got their way.

"They'll do just fine," David eventually replied to Sam, also reassuring himself. "Harry's my most accomplished student and they've both beaten all of our tests. Matilda's brilliant, in her own way. Provided she's got her textbook."

Sam shrugged. "Give me nuts and bolts any day. There's a right and wrong answer with this technical stuff. It's black and white. There are just too many shades of grey when you throw in the human element. It's impossible to predict. You can keep that."

The control room's productive atmosphere shattered as the door burst open and the Institute's flamboyant spokesman entered, inanelly nattering away. Harry's gruff father and Matilda's distraught family trailed behind him, fresh from their final farewell. Matilda's mother clasped her young son's hand, her eyes red and puffy.

"This man is an utter idiot," David hissed to Sam as he left to intercept the spokesman. "No tact at all. These people are about to lose their children!"

David marched over to the families and gave a consoling smile. "Welcome, everyone. I trust that Harry and Matilda appreciated your company as they loaded the pod?"

Harry's father grunted and Matilda's mother wiped her eyes. David had longed to say his own final farewell but respected the need for privacy in those precious final minutes.

He brusquely dismissed the spokesman, noting the families' visible relief as the man left to prepare for the post-Drop press conference.

An engineer announced that the capacitors were fully charged.

Not long now.

David withdrew an analogue radio from his pocket, a rare piece of technology since the Long Day. “We’ve got enough time for one final farewell.”

Phone conversations always felt impersonal, never as good as the real thing, but Matilda’s mother beamed with unbridled excitement as David switched on the radio.

“Hello? Are you there? It’s David. Can you hear us?”

The line went to static before the first distorted words crackled through the speaker.

“David?” came Matilda’s distorted voice. “Can you hear me?”

“We sure can,” David replied with a grin as Matilda’s family lit up with joy. “I’ve got your families here and they’d love to speak with you both. Who wants to go first?”

There was a brief silence before Harry’s voice chimed. “This isn’t really a time for ladies first, is it? Dad and I should go first so Til can have the last goodbye.”

“So chivalrous,” Matilda said with a choked laugh. “Looks like you’re ready for medieval life. Sounds good.”

Harry’s father took the radio from David and slouched over to a private corner, leaving Matilda’s family looking forlorn.

Hoping to provide a distraction, David crouched to the level of Matilda’s younger brother.

“Hi Richie. Have they shown you how this all works?”

The boy nodded.

“Tell me,” David nudged, gesturing at the giant machine.

The boy led David to the viewing pane and pointed out the Time Machine’s key features, leaving Matilda’s parents to their mournful embrace.

“Tilly’s going back to help the King,” Richie said matter-of-factly, “to teach him medicine. And science. Those lasers in the walls will make a door to the past, right there in the middle. But after it closes, it can’t open again.”

Richie continued, impressing David with the level of technical detail he understood about the process. Only eight or nine, he was well advanced for his age. Just like his sister.

“And that ball just above the centre is...where Tilly is,” Richie said finally with an involuntary sob.

David gave the boy’s shoulder a consoling pat and returned him to his mother.

Harry was just finishing up. “...love you Faj.”

“Love you too son. I never said it enough. Your mum was always better at that, bless her. You take care now.”

Harry’s father handed the radio to David and briskly left the room.

Making a mental note to send someone to collect him before the Drop, David handed the radio to Matilda’s mother and showed her how to use the archaic device.

“Tilly? Tilly? How are you doing in there? How are you feeling?”

Static.

“I’m alright Mum. I didn’t know if David’s surprise would work.”

Matilda’s mother fought to hold back tears and savoured her daughter’s final words.

Sensing her mother’s mood, Matilda continued. “It’s so surreal. I’m torn between excitement at doing the thing we’ve worked so hard for and the impossible sadness of saying goodbye to all of you. It feels like only yesterday that I was bouncing around home in my Institute uniform, begging to leave for the new school.”

Matilda’s mother nodded furiously but silently broke down and handed the receiver to her husband.

“Always the excited one, Til. I’ve never seen a twelve-year-old so eager for homework. Channel that enthusiasm when you reach the other side. You’ve put in a decade of hard work and we’re all so proud. Words can’t describe how much we’ll all miss you but it’s reassuring to know you’ll be out there saving the world. I’m still hoping your colleagues might work some of their sciencey magic to find you again.”

Matilda started to reply but gave a sob, followed by a long static. David sometimes forgot, with all Matilda’s brilliance, that she was still just a young girl forced to say farewell to her family forever.

“Thanks Dad,” she eventually croaked. “I love you all so much! And hey, the Institute has some really clever people so who knows? Perhaps Richie could figure it out, he’s smarter than me by far.”

Little Richie’s chest swelled at his sister’s words and he snatched the radio from his father. “I’ll do it for you Tilly! Maybe if I can get the photoms to travel faster...?”

Static, as Richie dropped the receiver in his excitement.

Matilda’s strained laugh carried through the radio. “Faster photons would definitely do it. We’ll be talking again in no time.”

Short static.

“Hey Richie?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you promise to look after Mum and Dad for me? You’re the only fun one still at home so make sure they don’t get too boring. And try to eat all your vegetables. But mostly just look after Mum and Dad.”

“I promise Tilly,” Richie replied solemnly. “Even the mushrooms.”

An engineer at the back of the room announced that ideal vacuum had been achieved. It was time.

“Sorry,” David interjected as gently as possible. “We need to start the final stage of the process. Can you please say your goodbyes?”

David stepped away to give the family some semblance of privacy for their final moments, holding back until Sam shot a particularly stern look. He moved in to take the receiver offered by Matilda’s grateful but distraught father.

“Hey, Matilda? Harry? It’s David.”

“Hi David,” they replied in unison, understandably flat.

“I know you’re both tired of hearing it but we really are so proud of you. You’re doing something truly amazing today. You’ll be in every history book and spoken of in every household. I promise.”

“I’ll totally hold you to that,” Matilda replied sarcastically, prompting an amused scoff from Harry.

Static.

“You both go and change the world,” David said. “We’ll all be thinking of you.”

Static.

“David?” Matilda added. “I know it’s not your job. But. Could you please look after my family for me? You know, just check in on them every now and then?”

David smiled. “That was always a given Matilda. You have my word.”

“Thanks, so much,” Matilda choked. “For everything. You’ve been so much more than a teacher. For all of us.”

“It’s been an honour.” David paused. “Matilda, we really have to say goodbye now. The vein on Sam’s head is about to burst.”

“Ok. Thanks again David.”

“Goodbye Matilda. Good luck.”

There was a final click as David turned off the radio. He gave the all clear but Sam was already barking orders. There was a final flurry of activity and then, all of a sudden, the room was silent. Tense.

David heard his heartbeat in his ears.

An engineer started the countdown. “Portal in 30.”

David ran outside to collect Harry’s father before hurrying back towards the yellow-tinted viewing pane.

“Ten.”

A red light began to flash in the control room.

“Nine.”

Matilda’s mother wept silently into her husband’s shoulder.

“Eight.”

The cavern lights went out. A single spotlight illuminated the Chronomads’ pod.

“Seven.”

Sam joined David by the window.

“Six.”

David looked out at the pod, hoping that Matilda and Harry could see them all watching.

“Five.”

A photographer’s camera let off a flash, recording the historic moment.

“Four.”

Richie’s head bumped against the glass.

“Three.”

David’s stomach churned.

“Two. Avert gaze!”

Everyone looked away from the centre of the chamber.

“One.”

The room froze.

Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of light.

David managed to look back just in time to glimpse a small sphere of bright blue sky in the centre of the cavern and the shiny pod falling into it. The sphere of sunlight vanished, leaving the Time Machine a dark and empty shell once more.

It worked!

David was struck by a conflicting mix of elation and loss.

The tense silence of the control room evaporated and there was a frenzy of activity as scientists and engineers ran their various diagnostics. Machines emitted alarms and scientists yelled out numbers.

Matilda's poor family crouched by the window in a tight huddle. An island of grief, weeping at the loss of their child and sister. Harry's father was already gone.

The cries of the scientists continued.

"O₂ and atmosphere normal."

"Capacitor temperature well within safe margins."

"Unexpected debris on the cavern floor!"

"Wormhole stability greater than anticipated."

And then Sam called out.

"Lat-long confirmed! Quantock forest. Somerset, England. Elevation two hundred and twenty-four meters."

There was a cheer from the control room.

Silence descended again before another scientist bellowed out the information they were all waiting for.

"Pulsar triangulation complete. Date confirmed. September 24, 1123."

CHAPTER TWO

24 September 1123

“Goodbye Matilda. Good luck.”

Matilda switched off the radio as the finality of David’s words echoed around the pod. Ever the gentleman, Harry gave a consoling smile and patted her knee. He looked ridiculous crammed into their tiny spherical pod, his head at an awkward angle against a curved strut. Wiping away tears, Matilda forced a smile and tightened her harness before staring through the pod’s porthole to savour her family’s silhouettes. One last time.

A light started to flash in the control room, signalling their imminent departure. Already thundering, Matilda’s heart leapt into overdrive. Her sweaty palms clutched the radio to her chest. Stilling herself, she took a deep breath and waited.

Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of light.

And then they were falling.

There was a strange feeling of being squeezed all over and a slight change in trajectory as the pod dropped through the wormhole but within several rapid heartbeats the dark interior of the time machine swapped to a sunny blue sky. Matilda looked through the porthole and glimpsed a pristine vista of golden fields and verdant mountains.

She jolted as the pod’s automatic parachute deployed...only to watch on in dismay as the gravity-defying fabric tangled up an instant later, flailing uselessly behind the pod.

Harry peered out the porthole then shot Matilda a panicked look. “Too fast! Come on secondary!”

The earth loomed as they continued to plummet but the pod finally lurched again as the backup parachute took hold. The floor surged upwards as they decelerated.

Matilda’s stomach had only just settled back into place when the crashes started, small at first but quickly growing in intensity as the pod pinballed through the branches of a large tree. The Chronomads and their carefully packed belongings were flung around the cramped metallic ball. Matilda heard something snap.

The pod glanced off the tree’s roots with a final jarring impact, sending a searing flash of pain from Matilda’s left ankle. They rolled a short distance downhill before coming to a surprisingly gentle stop. Matilda felt jostled and disoriented, hanging upside down at an awkward angle. Even through the pain of her ankle, the strange feeling of compression from the wormhole lingered.

Matilda clutched at her boot but took a moment to just hang in sheer disbelief as her heart-rate finally settled.

“We did it Harry! We made it!”

Harry didn’t reply. He never would again.

Unblinking eyes stared up at Matilda from a head bent at an impossible angle.

A wave of icy terror washed over Matilda and settled in the pit of her stomach.

“Harry!?” Matilda screeched.

She clawed at her harness and pried her way free, dropping amongst their jumbled belongings and rushing towards her partner.

Harry’s unfocused eyes stared upward, unmoving. Matilda checked his pulse. No sign of life.

“No,” Matilda muttered in disbelief. “No way!”

She clambered over to the pod’s hatch, inconveniently angled towards the ground, and wrestled it open.

Matilda emerged from the pod with all the grace of a new-born bird, a tangle of long limbs and curly red hair. She crawled awkwardly from the obstructed opening and out into Twelfth Century England, scrambling on her stomach through the mess of parachute cords.

Not wasting a second, she fought the pod into a more workable position before diving inside to clear space around Harry. Ignoring the pain from her ankle, Matilda tossed their precious possessions out onto the leafy forest floor.

When the pod was mostly empty, she leapt back inside and performed a proper medical examination.

C vertebrae fracture, probable severed phrenic nerve. He was gone.

Matilda sobbed as she closed Harry’s lifeless eyes. A thought struck her a heartbeat later.

She was alone.

A fresh wave of terror hit and Matilda threw up.

She was alone. Stuck in the Past with no way to get back.

Matilda tried to gather herself but hopelessness eroded her resolve. Harry and Matilda had trained together for years, like partners in a buddy cop movie. Him the charming lead, her the scrappy problem solver. They’d prepared for scenarios where they got separated or hurt. Even situations where one of them died.

But never so soon.

Matilda allowed herself a moment to grieve, crying into Harry's chest.

It wasn't fair. He never experienced the world they'd fought so hard to visit. He never even left the pod.

The world outside the pod didn't exist. Inside, with Harry, Matilda was safe. She lay with her dead partner in mournful silence, curled up amongst their possessions until her universe stopped spinning. One final farewell embrace.

Wiping her eyes, Matilda backed outside and, as gently as possible, began to extract Harry's limp corpse. His muscular frame was heavy, easily double her weight. Each heave felt disrespectful. Excessively rough.

Harry's head lolled freely as Matilda lay him down upon a bed of decaying leaves. She stepped back and looked down at his peaceful form, almost expecting him to wake up, rub his eyes and crack some clever joke.

Matilda felt a tide of hopelessness rising once again so set about keeping busy. In a daze, she set off in search for the shovel amongst the scattered possessions. But with her first solid step, a flash of pain burst from her busted ankle.

Matilda screamed in frustration and hobbled away. From Harry's lifeless body. From the pod. From everything.

The dense forest quickly obscured the landing site and Matilda dropped to the ground. Her mind raced with implications and anxieties but it was sheer pain that eventually cut through her turmoil. With difficulty, she carefully removed her boot and examined the ankle with an expert eye. It didn't look broken but was definitely sprained.

Her loud expletive prompted several nearby birds to flee from their perches.

A solitary tear of pain and frustration rolled down Matilda's cheek as she calculated the consequences.

Harry was gone, there was nothing she could do to change that. Her ankle was injured. But their mission could still succeed.

She'd worked with Institute planners to craft a meticulous schedule for the journey to see King Henry in London, including a little extra time for potential setbacks. But Matilda couldn't travel to London with a busted ankle. It would be dangerous embarking out into the strange new world without the most basic means of escape. Without her partner. Yet waiting to recover would consume her entire buffer.

Matilda's mind was lost amidst a fog of despair. She was absentmindedly brushing herself off when suddenly, she heard it.

Nothing. Absolute silence. Complete stillness.

There had always been some form of commotion in Matilda's busy life. Her mother crashing around the kitchen, a roommate snoring, engineers arguing or teachers droning. Construction works on the T-Mach – Sam's precious Time Machine.

But now there was just silence.

Matilda strained her ears and slowly started to make out the sounds of birds and other creatures rustling in the undergrowth. The forest teemed with life.

Despite everything, Matilda took in a deep breath of the fresh forest air and soaked in the unspoilt Twelfth Century landscape around her. Undulating hills sloped down to a riverbed and trees were yellowing in the autumn sun. A tapestry of yellows, reds and greens. Dappled morning sunlight filtered through the canopy and a slight breeze made the scene shimmer.

It was glorious.

Matilda wiped her eyes and set her resolve. The Institute's psychologists had warned that the transition would be the most emotionally charged period of her journey – *little had they known* – but they'd prepared her for it.

Time to save the world...

The Chronomad picked herself up and hobbled back towards the pod. She needed a shovel.

Coming up to her waist, the giant metallic sphere was much easier to move when mostly empty. A scent of bile emanated from within.

Matilda reached inside and removed the final contents, carefully inspecting each item before arraying them on the forest floor for a final inventory. Her ankle flared with each step but she soldiered on, carefully retrieving the belongings she had tossed outside and adding them to the collection.

Harry's motionless frame loomed in the corner of her vision but the purposeful task calmed her mind.

When she was finished, Matilda's entire eclectic collection of worldly possessions was sprawled out before her. The final remnants of a now-lost world.

There was a jumble of cooking equipment, a tent, a comprehensive first aid kit, the radio, her bow and some arrows. The shovel. A change of clothes, a flint, a box of plant seeds, a hatchet. A pair of magnets, Harry's spare knife and torch, a telescope, some warm blankets, a small pack of rations, winter cloaks and a case of bottled chemicals. A cracked bottle of acetone leaked an

acid chemical scent but Matilda was relieved that the spill was mostly contained within the case and fortunately hadn't mingled with any of the more reactive reagents.

Most prized of all was Matilda's satchel, a simple leather bag stuffed with her most valuable items. Precious metals and spices, but also several sentimental personal objects. A small bottle of champagne from David. One of Richie's poorly painted toy soldiers. Her grandmother's engagement ring and a family photo.

It also contained her most priceless possession, a well-worn copy of the Institute's standard-issue Chronomad textbook. Rebound with her own embossed leather cover and filled with a decade of annotations, Matilda called it her bible. The Chronomads had been required to learn its contents by heart but its physical presence evoked a strong feeling of safety. It was rarely out of her sight.

Matilda had worked with Institute planners for months to plan and procure everything she and Harry might need for their mission and yet she remained baffled at how much could fit within the metallic sphere.

Notably absent among their possessions was a firearm. Institute planners had wanted them to bring one for self-defence but Harry had strongly declined, insisting that he and Matilda hoped to create a timeline that skipped combustible technologies wherever possible. It was only after Harry highlighted the difficulties of producing additional ammunition and Matilda demonstrated her proficiency with a bow that their Institute supervisors finally surrendered.

Matilda smiled at the memory. David had often joked about what a wilful young woman she had become, so different to the meek twelve-year-old that arrived at the Institute a decade earlier. He'd asked, only semi-rhetorically, where his teachings had gone wrong.

Matilda also had the clothes on her back. She had worked with local historians for months to design Harry and her attire, struggling to strike an appropriate balance between the tighter fitting finery that would convey status in King Henry's court and more conservative rural clothes that would draw less unwanted attention as they trekked to London. Each piece had been expertly crafted by the Institute's busy seamstress, from the warm fur-lined cloak down to her wonderfully supple calf-length leather boots.

Her fancy clothes hid an additional treasure, one that even the King would lust after. The Institute's parting gift was a vest of titanium chainmail, 3D-printed to her exact measurements using a remarkably fine mesh. Sam promised that it was sufficiently strong to stop an arrow while still remaining light enough to wear every day. It was an extra security in an unfamiliar world and Matilda had no intention of ever taking it off.

The thought jerked her back to the present, reminding her of the morbid task yet to be done.

Delicately shuffling amongst her possessions, Matilda collected the small shovel and pondered where to bury her companion. The enormous oak that had broken their fall was majestic but burying Harry beneath the tree that killed him would be a cruel irony.

Matilda instead spied a thicket of blackberries nestled amongst a distinctive outcrop of mossy rocks. She hobbled over to it and sunk her shovel into the decaying forest floor.

Matilda worked tirelessly, determined to create a suitable resting place for Harry. Her ankle throbbed and sweat dripped from her brow despite the frigid autumn morning. Each thrust of her shovel was an act of prayer for the partner she had lost. Her companion and confidant. Never anything more.

Hours later, the sun started to fall but Matilda pushed on through rocks and roots, refusing to stop until she had carved out a hole as deep as she was high. She hauled herself from the earthy trench and solemnly approached Harry's corpse.

The body had its own strange gravity, bending the dappled light of the landing site such that it was the only object in focus. Matilda savoured the view of Harry's peaceful form one last time. Then, with a sigh, she bent down to move him.

Matilda dragged the body as reverently as possible, lowering it down the narrow steps she had carved into the grave. She held back tears as she arranged the corpse into its final resting pose. Even amongst the bare earth, Harry looked as mighty as ever. Externally unscathed.

A fog of grief hung over Matilda as she clambered up to the landing site to gather items to adorn Harry's burial site. She placed the radio in his hands and, in lieu of a coffin, used his winter cloak as a shroud. The radio had been fried by the Drop's electromagnetic pulse but it would forever show that Harry was of another time. That he'd had things to say and people to talk to.

Matilda climbed back out and looked down into her partner's grave.

"You didn't deserve this," she choked. "You were always the best of us. Stronger, more diplomatic. But I won't fail you. Our mission will succeed. I promise."

Matilda couldn't watch as she threw the first shovels of soil into the grave. She sang Harry's favourite song as she toiled and the hole gradually filled, each shovelful smothering the reality of his demise.

Matilda's arms burned and sweat rolled down her back, making her tunic cling to her chainmail. The grave was already half full when she recalled Harry's own armoured vest,

prompting another loud profanity. The chainmail was worth a fortune but she lacked both the physical and mental energy required to exhume her partner.

Images flashed through her mind. Carefully digging to avoid damaging his corpse. Delicately scraping the soil from his shroud before revealing a face already stiff with rigor mortis. Avoiding his closed eyes as she undressed him. Pulling the mail over his broken neck.

It was all too much.

After some final soul-searching, Matilda elected to leave the chainmail with Harry. The titanium vest wouldn't rust so could always be extracted later, if *truly* needed. The luxury made Harry's burial worthy of a king.

Exactly as he deserved.

Matilda worked until only a neat mound of dirt remained to give any indication of Harry's final resting place. Matilda vowed to someday erect a headstone but forced her mind onto her next task – finding out exactly when and where she had landed.

She couldn't calculate the precise date until the stars emerged but the nearby hill would provide a vantage point to survey the surrounding lands. Matilda knew that keeping busy would stop her mind from dwelling on the enormity of the past hours.

She looked back at the landing site and considered the safety of her belongings but laughed at the absurdity. The forest was pristine, entirely untouched by humans. Excluding the grave, the giant metal sphere and the broken branches hanging from a nearby tree, of course. Matilda judged it was safe to leave her belongings scattered across the forest floor. It was unlikely that anyone would stumble across them in the short time she was gone and forest critters would find them an unsatisfying snack.

Away from the mournful landing site, Matilda marvelled at the sheer beauty of the forest and its lack of human contact as she struggled uphill. Despite being almost a thousand years younger, this forest felt much older than any she'd explored during her adolescence. Thick gnarled trees stood where they had for centuries. By Matilda's time, anything that ancient had been harvested for timber or firewood.

A particularly large oak awaited Matilda at the crest of the hill. It looked perfect for climbing, if her ankle weren't busted. Still, the hill provided a decent vantage point for inspecting the surrounding landscape and Matilda circled the tree in awe. She could see for miles and marvelled at the pristine Somerset landscape. The only indications of human occupation were a patchwork of cultivated fields and wispy pillars of smoke rising from scattered villages.

The T-Mach and its giant reactor buildings were conspicuously absent as she scanned the horizon, providing the clearest evidence that she had actually travelled back in time. Matilda's father had been a doctor at the Hinkley nuclear reactor so Matilda had grown up nearby, allowing her to learn more about the region and its history than even her Institute teachers.

Matilda was relieved to recognise several landmarks from her own time: mountains, rivers and even a hint of coastline off in the distance. When she'd found her bearings, even the pillars of smoke corresponded with familiar villages.

Matilda suddenly longed to get moving. She needed somewhere more permanent to store her pod and bulkier belongings. The Institute had recommended burying them – hence the shovel – but Matilda's family had explored a nearby cave during hikes back in the future which could double as a base camp while her ankle recovered. She plotted a mental course from the landing site and hobbled back downhill, collecting wildflowers for Harry as she went.

After laying the flowers upon Harry's grave, Matilda quickly assessed which belongings she could carry to her new camp before neatly stacking the rest back into the sphere. She struggled to conceal the giant metal pod with forest debris but, realising the futility of the activity, vowed to instead collect her remaining belongings when she returned with Harry's headstone.

Matilda fashioned herself a makeshift crutch and set off towards the cave, limping along animal trails and river banks. Grief prickled at the back of her mind yet she still managed to appreciate simple joys like dipping her feet into a crystal-clear stream or stopping to watch a herd of deer grazing in a glade.

Familiar landmarks occasionally came into view, though the differences from her own time were jarring. The colony of ancient trees was boundless, rock formations showed reduced signs of weathering and wildlife was much more abundant. Matilda didn't relish the idea of hunting her own food with a damaged ankle but the forest inhabitants seemed much more appetising than the basic rations the Institute had provided for the initial nights in the past.

The sun had already started to set when Matilda finally arrived at the entrance to a familiar gully. She stared into the gentle depression into the landscape and saw the cave opening at its end, overgrown with ivy but undoubtedly the same cave she'd once explored with Richie. Matilda shambled inside and dumped her belongings on the ground before hurrying to gather firewood while there was still light.

Upon returning, Matilda hastily kindled a small fire to boil water for one of her unappetising ration packs. Her stomach rumbled and she realised that she hadn't eaten since being loaded into the pod.

Matilda felt another wave of overwhelming loss begin to rise but pushed the feelings down once more. She decided to enjoy the remaining sunlight, hoping it might make her nutritious gruel slightly more bearable. She collected her satchel, telescope and David's champagne before exiting the cave and hobbling to the crest of a nearby hill where she seated herself among the roots of yet another ancient tree.

A glorious pink sky signalled the end of Matilda's first day in the past and she devoured her food while the setting sun cast long shadows across the untouched landscape. She popped David's champagne as the stars emerged and gave a toast.

"To Harry. My family. And a momentous day."

She took a deep swig. Coming from a world where her every minute had been accounted for by others, Matilda appreciated the chance to finally enjoy things on her own time.

She got back to work when the sun had fully set, withdrawing her telescope and expertly measuring the position of several key stars. She performed familiar calculations in her notebook, working by the light of her hand-cranked torch. After some brief consultations with her bible, she drew a square around a date.

24 September 1123.

The Institute scientists had been confident that Matilda would arrive exactly when and where they had planned but she was relieved to verify it herself.

The date had been deliberately chosen to maximise the impact of Harry and Matilda's journey. England had been on the verge of a renaissance when King Henry's only heir died in a tragic shipping accident in 1120. The ensuing power struggle sparked a period of civil war known as The Anarchy, briefly teasing the possibility of female empowerment through the widespread backing of Empress Maud but ultimately extinguishing the flame of progress.

Matilda's mission was clear. She had several weeks to journey to London and meet King Henry before he departed for a year of campaigning against rebels in Normandy. She would use her knowledge and limited equipment from the future to win his trust and join his campaign, allowing her to rub shoulders with royalty and senior clergy across Europe. This would maximise the number of people exposed to the Institute's teachings, fuelling the budding renaissance and kickstarting society's progress to save this timeline from the calamity that awaited their future.

The Long Day.

Matilda shuddered at the memory. She was only ten when she'd witnessed a star's sheer power, marvelling with her parents as beautiful ribbons of light danced across the night sky. Her memories had faded but fragments of the aftermath lingered. Months without electricity. Missing

favourite foods and television shows. Her father tending to an elderly neighbour, savagely beaten for protecting his backyard orchard.

At only twelve, Matilda had volunteered to help the Institute undo the stellar carnage, understanding even then that it would require great personal sacrifice. She'd never really been ready to leave home and her father's parting words of encouragement had reminded her of what she'd lost. While she had cherished her Institute friendships, they were never quite family.

Matilda was pensive as she lay at the base of the ancient tree staring up at the night sky. The Milky Way was a beautiful band of shimmering stars, unobscured by light pollution and more beautiful than she'd seen since the aftermath of the Long Day.

So beautiful. So powerful. So dangerous.

Matilda's mission was clear and she knew what needed to be done. But her ankle throbbed, a painful reminder of her own fragility. It would need weeks to recover.

Matilda rankled at the need to stay put but a part of her breathed a sigh of relief. The final weeks of preparation for her journey had been a rollercoaster of stress, anticipation and loss. As her departure loomed, she had increasingly fretted at how much she still didn't know. She worked to the very end, struggling to cram more into either her head or jotted in the margins of her bible. Only a week earlier, her frustrated Institute classmates had even resorted to hosting her a combined farewell and birthday celebration in the Institute library.

Matilda knew she was on the verge of burnout, even before Harry's death. Taking time for her ankle to recover meant slightly less time to influence the King, but it also gave her time to grieve. Time to plan. The resulting mental clarity could prove valuable.

Her mind instantly leapt to planning crafts and activities to fill the time. But no, she needed to relax and unwind. To ease into her new life and mourn the one she'd left behind.

Convinced that her revised approach made sense, Matilda pushed back the niggling feelings of loss and loneliness once and for all. She placed down her tools and reclined against the tree, settling in to admire the starry night. A weight lifted from her shoulders, knowing as she swigged her champagne that she could just enjoy herself for the first time since childhood.

The knowledge made it easier to process the enormity of her achievements. In a single day she had gone from a scared young woman afraid to leave her family to the most educated person on the planet.

She was Chronomad One. The first time traveller.

CHAPTER THREE

4 October 1123

William bristled with frustration as he watched his family working in the fields. His father cleaved wide paths through the wheat with sweeping cuts of his scythe, while William's two eldest sisters followed in his wake and baled the cuttings to dry. William's mother and youngest sister sifted the dried grain in the shade of the field's giant oak. William had his own mindless role in the process, bashing bales of dried wheat with a flail. It had been the exact same routine for almost a month and William was sick of it.

Judging by the sun, Pa was still a long way off laying down his scythe and ordering the family back home to rest. William looked down at his pile of unsifted grain and guessed there would be enough to keep Ma and Elizabeth busy for the afternoon. He glanced around the field once more and saw that his family were all absorbed in their tasks. No one paid any attention to him.

A devilish thought crossed William's mind. He stole the opportunity and slunk away from the field like a sly fox, nabbing an apple from Ma's basket before dashing into the woods to find his friend.

Ralph's family farmed a nearby field that also backed onto the forest. William was pleased to find Ralph's family similarly distracted with the harvest. Ralph worked alone, stacking sacks of grain into a hand cart.

William tossed his apple core into the trees and snuck closer to the boy.

"Oi, Ralph!" William called in a hushed voice. "Get over here!"

The large boy jumped at the unexpected sound and looked up, spotting William hiding behind a boulder.

"Why are you hiding?" he asked, casually strolling towards the rock.

"Shh. Get. Over. Here. Your brothers will see you." William dragged Ralph behind the boulder. "How's your family almost finished already?"

"Father says it's going to be a bad year so we shortened the drying time so we'd finish in the fields before the rain sets in."

"Yeah, yeah," William dismissed. "All I'm hearing is you have time to get away for a bit."

Ralph started to protest but William withdrew a messy bundle from his pocket. "I made another sling. Come on, let's give it a try."

Ralph was torn, staring at the unstacked sacks next to the cart. "Mother will scold me if I leave the others to return the cart. Again."

“Not if you bring back a pair of juicy rabbits,” William said in his most enticing voice. “Quick, let’s go!”

William dashed off, trusting that his friend would follow. The boys were soon running through the woods on one of their usual adventures, imagining bandits waiting in ambush behind every tree. William used a curved stick as a pretend bow and Ralph fashioned himself a wooden broadsword.

They ventured deep into the forest to increase their chances of finding small game. Some mischievous village elders had thought it fun to bait the boys into making a sling, knowing that their strict parents wouldn’t approve. For William, the risk of getting caught by Pa – a village juror – only added to the illicit excitement.

They found a clearing and selected an unlucky tree to use as a target for their practice. The tree had little to worry about.

William was already proficient with the sling when Ralph scored his first hit.

“Good job,” William praised impatiently. “Now let’s find some real prey.”

“Not fair,” Ralph complained. “You got way more throws.”

“We’ll return home emptyhanded if we don’t go after some real animals soon. You want upset parents, again?”

Concern dawned on Ralph’s face.

“Here,” William said with his most convincing smile, “you start with the sling and I’ll herd game towards you. Ten shots and then we’ll swap.”

Ralph reluctantly agreed. “But what if the Baron’s men find us hunting his lands? Did you hear about the old man from Dodington? They cut off his hand and that was just for *having* deer antlers.”

“Pa said the codger was also underpaying his taxes,” William dismissed. “Anyway, we’d need to actually catch something before worrying about the Baron.”

The pair began their hunt, spreading out to search for prey but keeping within yelling distance. Ralph loosed his stones at a squirrel and some small birds, whooping with excitement after each attempt but managing no hits. He grudgingly handed William the sling and set off in search of game.

Armed with the sling, William felt like David as he stalked through the forest. The towering trees were an army of Goliaths.

William was so focused on the hunt that he eventually realised that he couldn't hear Ralph. He called out several times but there was no response. William grew concerned. Pa had always warned that outlaws lived in the deepest parts of the forest. He forgot about the hunt and instead scoured the undergrowth for any sign of his friend.

Hoping for a better vantage point to search for Ralph, William started to climb a hill when a clump of bushes rustled. Too big to be an animal, William applied tension to his sling.

With a sudden flurry of movement, a large form lunged out and raced across the clearing towards William. But William was quicker and loosed a projectile at his oncoming attacker.

The hardened clump of dirt hit his friend directly on the forehead, shattering upon impact.

"Ow!" Ralph complained, rubbing his head and tossing his mock sword to the ground.

William burst out laughing, impressed at his shot. "Sorry Ralph, you startled me. I'm still getting used to this sling."

Truth be told, William had exceeded his supply of stones and had just hoped for the best if it had been a real outlaw. Not that he could admit that to Ralph.

William's friend continued rubbing his head and looked up to the sun.

"We should head back Will. We've been gone long enough and I really should help bring the cart home."

William objected. "But if we cross that stream we'll be further from home than ever...!"

"No Will, my head hurts! I'm going home. Seriously, your family cuts you a lot of slack but you're almost sixteen. We need to start dealing with extra responsibility before it just gets dumped on us."

William started another rebuttal but Ralph was already returning to the fields.

"Come on Ralph!" William called. "Let's keep exploring. There's a whole lifetime of responsibility ahead of us!"

But Ralph was gone.

William kicked at a small bush and trudged down to the stream to collect more stones for his sling. He crossed the water and defiantly delved even deeper into the forest, well past any familiar landmarks. William saw many unfamiliar plants on his journey and wished his younger sister was with him. Elizabeth enjoyed gathering flowers but William knew she would never venture so far into the unknown.

Elizabeth was William's favourite sister. Only a year older than William, she was a kind soul and the least likely to berate his frequent skiving from the family's work. William's older sisters were prone to constant sniping at his poor work ethic and Ma and Pa's coddling.

Ralph was right. William's parents did give him special treatment, allowing him to run off on adventures and requiring fewer chores of him than the girls. Pa had always wanted a son and, after four girls, William was their pride and joy. He understood why his sisters felt hard done by, though it didn't stop him enjoying his time off.

William came upon another stream and stopped for a drink. Spying some stepping stones upstream, he quickly crossed the water but slipped on the rocks, soaking his foot up to the knee. His soggy shoe made walking unpleasant but William was determined not to let some minor discomfort force him back to the harvest.

William was squelching through the unfamiliar forest when he noticed a strange object hanging from the branches of a distant tree. Even from afar, he knew it was unnatural and had to be the work of a human.

But why would anyone live so deep in the forest?

William's curiosity got the better of him and he edged towards the hanging object. He pulled his most jagged stone taut in the sling.

As he drew nearer, William was mortified to see that the hanging object was a small red doe. The poor beast hung from a rope around its hind legs. Its throat had been slashed. A slow patter of blood dripped into a pool on the forest floor, raising William's tension with each drip.

The doe's lifeless eyes stared up at him. He'd never seen a sadder sight and the memory of the majestic creature seared into his soul.

The beast had been gutted before being hung. William poked the animal and it slowly swung around, revealing the most unusual arrow he had ever seen. A perfect black rod jutted from the animal's chest, its fletching unnaturally colourful and made of an odd material that was definitely not feather.

William noticed a quiver of similar arrows propped against the base of nearby tree, beside the most bizarre bow he had ever seen. It looked to be constructed from three different parts and was barely half the size of Pa's yew longbow.

The strange weapon struck William with a terrifying thought. Someone had used it to hunt the Baron's deer. Only an outlaw would be so brazen. William found the reality of an encounter with outlaws much less exciting than it had been in his games. His mind screamed danger but he found himself frozen in place.

William tried to take stock of his surroundings. The tree stood near the entrance to a small gully, a sloping gouge in the land that ended with a cliff face and the jagged mouth of a cave. The gully was surrounded by trees and thick undergrowth but the entrance to the cave had been recently cleared. There were other signs of human activity around the cave entrance. A neat pile of firewood was stacked against the cliff wall and the remains of a small campfire lay near the entrance. Looking closer, William saw a roughly hewn door inside the cave entrance.

A noise from within the cave startled William back to his senses and he darted away from the gully to crouch behind a nearby bush.

The door opened and a strange young woman emerged from the cave. Her head was a mass of curly red hair and her clothes hugged her body. William found her very attractive.

The woman sang an otherworldly song as she worked, more erratic than parish hymns but more graceful than popular drinking songs. William didn't understand the lyrics but some words sounded familiar.

William enjoyed watching the woman move purposefully around the camp, kindling a fire and placing a pot of water to boil. She re-entered the cave and emerged with a long knife. William was wondering what she planned to do with it when she hobbled up from the gully and straight to the doe, only a stone's throw from where William crouched frozen in place.

The tall woman lowered the doe and tenderly lay it on the ground before using her knife to extract the arrow from the beast's chest. She cleaned the arrow with a handful of leaves and placed it into her quiver before starting to butcher the beast. She cut with expert precision, each slice of her blade removing a specific chunk of meat. Looking satisfied with her harvest, she hauled the carcass back up the tree and out of reach of forest scavengers. William wished he had a knife to portion a chunk for his family.

The strange woman returned to her fire and threaded the meat on a makeshift spit to hang over the flames. The aroma of roasting meat filled the gully and William's stomach grumbled at the rich smell. He'd only tried venison a handful of times but knew exactly what he was missing. The woman retrieved the meat as the outer edges began to char and bit into it, crying out as the hot juices ran down her chin. She looked to be enjoying herself and showed no signs of remorse at killing the Baron's deer.

William skirted around the gully to sit behind her, eager to learn more about the Stranger but anxious not to be caught. The woman packed away her food and started carving an ornate piece of timber. She didn't match William's expectations of an outlaw, not nearly half as deranged as Pa had described of his own outlaw encounters.

Hoping to get a better view of the campsite, William edged closer to the cliff. As he crawled, his elbow dislodged a rock which tumbled down the cliff face. William threw himself flat on the ground and felt the Stranger's gaze pass over him. Down below, he heard her set down her carving and rise from her spot next to the fire.

William didn't wait to see if she was approaching. He ran.

William skirted around the gully and dashed back across the stream. He ignored the stepping stones altogether and ploughed straight through the water. William didn't stop running until he began to notice familiar landmarks. Exhausted, he paused to listen for any sign that the Stranger had pursued him but the only sounds were the calls of distant birds and the wind rustling through the canopy. Even then, he walked cautiously.

It was twilight by the time William slouched back to his family's field, only to find that they had already packed up for the day and returned home. William trudged back to the village as darkness fell and saw Ralph chopping firewood in penance for their day's adventures. Noting the purple lump that had formed above Ralph's eye, William gave an apologetic wave. Ralph waved back and all was forgiven.

William arrived at his family's cottage and went to stash his sling in his favourite hiding place. Reaching into his pocket, he was surprised to find only a couple of smooth river rocks. The sling was nowhere to be found. He prayed that the outlaw woman wouldn't find the evidence of his visit.

William entered the cottage and sat down for the evening meal. He ignored his sister's taunts and let Ma's scolding flow over him while his mind raced over what he had seen that day. Surviving his first encounter with an outlaw filled him with confidence and William vowed to return to the cave.

Soon.

THANKS FOR READING!

If you've enjoyed the journey so far, please **tell a friend** or **leave a review online**. It would be a huge help in spreading word about the book!

More chapters are available on the website or Royal Road.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started and there are more Chronomads to come

For more information, visit

www.the-world-that-was.com

FUN FACTS

I had years of enjoyment researching and writing *The World That Was*. I climbed castle ruins and clambered down Somerset caves. I toured medieval towns and nuclear reactors. I quizzed museum curators and archaeologists. All in the hope of creating a realistic portrayal of 12th Century England.

I scattered historical tidbits throughout the novel, as well as a few pop culture and personal easter eggs. I will leave it to others to identify exactly how many improvements Matilda managed to bring back from the future but here is a list of interesting tidbits hinted at in *TWTW*.

1. The 1859 Carrington Event is the most intense recorded solar flare to have struck modern society, though it fortunately struck before humanity had become overly reliant on electrical devices. The miners referred to in the novel were working in Rokewood, Australia (mere kilometres away from my childhood home) when the Carrington flare convinced them it was time to resume work despite being the middle of the night.
2. Travelling back in time is theoretically possible under Einstein's theory of general relativity. A wormhole can be created by deforming space-time to enable the travel from one time or place to another, though in the theory it appears only possible to travel back to the time the wormhole was first created.
3. Matilda's cave is real and known as Howell Cavern. There are very few caves around the Quantock hills but I selected this one for its close proximity to other key locations. I ended up consulting with a pair of local spelunkers – thanks Nick and Peter! – who had mapped out the cave system over years of exploring. The owner of the farm where the cave is located kindly let my brother and I venture underground to explore and even joined us!
4. The disruptive succession crisis caused by King Henry I's death was called *The Anarchy*. Matilda could've been sent back earlier to prevent Henry's son from dying in the White Ship accident in 1120 but the *Anarchy* opened people's minds, albeit temporarily, to the leadership of Henry's daughter Maude (also known as Matilda). Chronomad Matilda hoped to kindle this fleeting empowerment of women to build a lasting period of gender equality.
5. King Henry really did depart the British Isles to quash a rebellion in Normandy in late 1123. His bastard son Robert, Earl of Bristol, also travelled with him.
6. William's home of Holford is a quaint village nestled in the foothills of the Quantock hills. It was originally a Roman settlement and by the time of the Domesday Book had grown to include around 35 inhabitants, three plough-teams (two belonged to the lord) and a mill. Holford eventually grew to have two mills and was well known for its pottery.