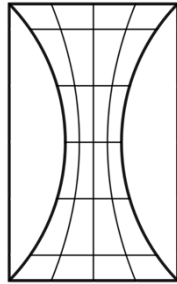


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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Can Matilda avert the solar calamity?

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CHAPTER FOUR

14 October 1123

Matilda thoroughly enjoyed owning her own schedule for the first time in her life. Postponing her journey to London while her ankle recovered had done wonders for her mental state. Preparing to travel back in time had been more stressful than she'd realised and Matilda felt her tension ease with each passing day.

She'd established a comfortable routine in the weeks since her arrival. She woke around sunrise each morning and hobbled around the hills near her cave, determined to exercise her foot and explore the new world. Matilda loved watching as it came alive. Birds sang their morning songs, animals grazed in the meadows and the warmth of the rising sun removed the bite from the crisp autumn air. It was pristine. Untouched.

Matilda gathered wild plants for a basic breakfast and a warm tisane. Her food situation was neither comfortable nor dire. The limited rations from the future were only intended to last several short days before she embarked on her mission to London. The Institute planners hadn't accounted for Matilda's clumsiness and her rations had been quickly exhausted.

Although her ankle caused great difficulty, Matilda had succeeded in hunting a small doe but only managed to consume or preserve half of it before the meat had perished. Matilda felt guilty at the memory of dragging the rotting corpse away from her camp and strategically dumping it in the hope that scavengers might salvage one last meal. She'd vowed to kill no more of the elegant creatures and her meals became much less decadent, though she occasionally treated herself with a strip of dried venison.

Her leisure activities started after breakfast. Leaning against a tree, Matilda read her Institute bible for the thousandth time and pondered obscure philosophy or physics. She missed the banter with her classmates and found herself longing for human interaction as the days passed.

When the afternoon sun had removed the bite from the autumn air, Matilda limped to a nearby stream to swim. The icy water numbed her swollen ankle and she relished the freedom of floating on her back as the dappled sunlight shone through the canopy above.

More than anything, Matilda's favourite activity was making her cave feel homely. She'd explored the cave with her little brother when it was almost a thousand years older, a special getaway for the siblings to bond during her rare weekends away from the Institute. The cave was already full of memories but, missing her family, Matilda sought to recreate a feeling of home.

She cleared away the larger rocks and swept the bare dirt floor with a hastily crafted broom. Matilda had always enjoyed making things but lessons at the Institute had focussed on framing a house, plumbing sinks or wiring a light fitting. She suddenly found herself free to create for aesthetics rather than just utility or learning. She started with simple practical items, crafting a door and a stone wall to stem the flow of bats that visited the

cave each evening. Homely items came next, first a cot so she didn't need to sleep on the floor and then a shelf to hold her most precious belongings.

With her leg almost fully mended, Matilda promised herself one last project before departing for London and started on a table and chair to introduce some civility to her cave dwelling. She took particular care in crafting the chair and her attempts at carving leaves and flowers made it a truly luxurious item. Crude but a rare work of art nonetheless.

Matilda was excited to be around people again and longed to see Twelfth Century civilisation firsthand. She was surprised at how few signs of humanity she'd seen since her arrival. She'd deliberately avoided roads and dwellings but had spotted the occasional person working in a distant field. After years of studying the period through books and paintings, it felt like being in a zoo where the animals refused to play.

Though she hadn't seen any people up close, Matilda began to suspect that the area surrounding her cave wasn't completely abandoned. She frequently had the unnerving feeling of being watched and she'd discovered a rudimentary sling while returning from the stream. It was still supple and hadn't been hardened by the elements, suggesting it was only recently discarded.

The feeling of being watched increased after discovering the sling and Matilda started to find her belongings in odd places when she returned from trips away from the cave. She initially attributed this to absentmindedness but was convinced that something strange was afoot when her utility knife went missing altogether. Matilda vowed to solve the mystery and planned an ambush to catch her unwanted visitor the following day.

She left for her afternoon swim as normal but upon reaching the stream, quickly looped back to her cave to lie in wait for the intruder. She crouched behind a bush near the gully entrance, peering through its branches.

It wasn't long before Matilda saw signs of movement and a lanky, shaggy-haired adolescent dashed into the gully, peering around to ensure he'd not been seen. Matilda was intrigued when the Boy filled one of her pots with water and placed it over the still-warm embers of her fire.

Showing no interest in waiting for it to boil, the Boy strode to the cave and expertly shimmied the latch that kept the door closed. It was clear he'd visited the cave before. Matilda had hidden her most important belongings and wasn't overly concerned by the Boy's intrusion but felt slightly violated by the invasion of privacy nonetheless.

The Boy eventually emerged from the cave carrying Matilda's dismantled recurve bow and a handful of her carbon fibre arrows. He inspected the arrows before tinkering with the bow, assembling it through trial and error. Matilda was impressed by the care he applied to the task, carefully bending the arms with his body rather than risking the whole contraption exploding in his face.

With the bow constructed, the Boy tested its draw and propped a piece of firewood on the opposite side of the gully to use as a target. Matilda quickly learned that he knew his way around a bow and three of her arrows

plunged deep into the wood in quick succession. The Boy seemed equally impressed with the performance of the otherworldly bow. He retrieved the arrows and repeated the process several more times.

There was a sudden hiss and a cloud of steam as the Boy's pot of water boiled over. Admiring his inventiveness, Matilda realised it was a makeshift alarm clock. He calmly finished his remaining shot before collecting the arrows, restacking the firewood and emptying the boiling water. He methodically dismantled the bow and returned it to the cave. Wisps of steam from the emptied water was the only sign that he'd ever visited.

Matilda decided she was ready for some human interaction. It was time to introduce herself. She darted into the gully and sat on a log by the fire, legs crossed. She donned her most bored expression, hoping that casualness might unnerve the Boy.

He emerged from the cave much quicker than before, looking content with his successful expedition. Then he noticed Matilda, startled and stopped in his tracks. His satisfied expression evaporated, replaced in an instant by one of sheer terror.

"What are you doing in my camp?" Matilda asked nonchalantly, picking at her fingernails.

The Boy's eyes darted over Matilda's shoulder as his fight or flight reflex kicked in. Determining that the path out of the gully was blocked, his hand hovered towards a familiar knife hanging from his belt.

"I wouldn't do that," Matilda suggested firmly. "Nice knife, where'd you get it?"

The Boy paused again, confused by Matilda's lack of threat. "Your accent is strange," he answered defiantly.

Matilda laughed in spite of herself, shattering the tension. "You're spirited, kid. Don't get cocky, I'm not here for a fight. Come, take a seat. And give me back my knife." Her last point was dead serious.

The Boy didn't seem to fully understand but begrudgingly occupied a log opposite Matilda, tossing the knife irreverently at her feet.

"What's your name?" Matilda asked.

"William. Who are you?"

Matilda ignored his question. "And what are you doing in my camp William?"

The Boy stared at her, weighing his options.

"I was curious," William replied defensively. "You're not what I expected of an outlaw."

"Outlaw!?" Matilda asked with feigned outrage. "What gave you that idea?"

"You. Living alone, in the Baron's woods. Your weapons! I've never seen a bow like yours before."

"You're quite a good shot," Matilda conceded, making William look uneasy. "Yes, I watched the whole time. You're not the only one who can spy from the bushes."

"Oh." William said stupidly. A silence fell over the camp.

“Who taught you to shoot?” Matilda asked.

“My Pa,” William answered. “He was an archer. Served the King and won our family’s plot of land.”

“He taught you well. How long have you been visiting my camp?”

“A couple of weeks perhaps? I saw the deer in the tree.”

Yes, Matilda thought, that lined up with the feeling of being watched.

“You shouldn’t do that you know,” William berated. “Killing the Baron’s deer. He’s hanged people for less.”

Matilda gave an appreciative nod. “I’ll remember that. Not that I’ll be killing any more, I need to depart soon.”

“Already?” William asked, his curiosity returning. “You can’t have been here long, your cave is so empty. Where are you going?”

Matilda weighed whether she should say but saw no harm. “I’m heading to London, to visit the King.”

The Boy blinked at her, unimpressed. “Why would he want to see you?”

The bluntness of his question made Matilda stumble.

“You’ve been snooping through my stuff,” Matilda replied defensively. “What do you think?”

William pondered her question. “If you’re not an outlaw...I’d guess you are some sort of tinker. But you don’t have much to sell.”

“Sometimes it’s more about the quality of what you’re trading than the sheer amount of merchandise. Plus,” Matilda said patting her satchel, “I don’t leave my best items where just any rabble might find them.”

William stared greedily at her bag. “What’s in there?”

Matilda considered the Boy. He’d had many chances to steal her things and she couldn’t blame him for succumbing to the temptation of her knife. Judging it was safe to show him, she withdrew some of the satchel’s contents. He was very impressed with her bible but was disappointed when Matilda refused to let him hold it. Next she withdrew the discarded sling. “This wouldn’t be yours by any chance?”

William nodded and she tossed the sling back to its owner.

Matilda continued to show him her possessions, enjoying the company and answering his questions about what each was for. He gawped – a little too hungrily – when Matilda showed him her spools of gold, silver and tungsten wire. As a distraction, she quickly withdrew her torch and showed him how to use it.

“What is this sorcery?” William exclaimed as he flicked the light on and off. “Ok, perhaps the King would want to meet you. Forget tinker, are you some kind of witch?”

“It’s not me,” Matilda replied, “you’re the one turning on and off.”

William put down the torch and stared at Matilda seriously. “Where do you come from? What place can create such treasures?”

“That’ll do, for today” Matilda interrupted abruptly, realising that she’d probably shown too much. “I’ve got much to prepare and can’t afford interruptions. So please, run along. And stay away from my things.”

William looked crestfallen, his curiosity unsated. “Can I at least keep the knife? You’ve got others, surely you don’t need them all?”

Matilda couldn’t believe his nerve but found it endearing. “You’re an unusual boy, young William. Wilful, yes, but curious. And brave. I like that.”

The Boy waited impatiently for an answer to his request.

“I can’t just give you a knife,” Matilda said. “That’s bad luck. You’d could buy it from me, I’m supposedly a tinker after all. And it’s a fine piece, so the price will be high.”

William was frozen in place, stuck deep in thought.

“Run along William. I feel that we’ll meet again, though tell anyone else I’m here and today will be the last you see of me. Understand?”

He nodded.

“Goodbye William,” she said firmly. “I’m Matilda, by the way.”

William rose without a word and left. Matilda sat back by the fire and picked up her carving, craning her neck to watch the Boy scamper out of the gully.

What an intriguing young man.

CHAPTER FIVE

19 October 1123

William could make the return journey to the cave in half a day, if he marched. His treasure burned in his hand as he headed along the now-familiar path.

Surely Matilda would accept his trade this time.

He'd returned to the Stranger's camp several times since their first meeting but she had rejected each of his previous offers for the knife. An assortment of vegetables swiped from Ma's garden. A handful of Pa's best arrowheads. His grandmother's precious silk. William had even tried sneaking an iron ingot from the blacksmith, only to be chased through the village square. Yet still his offers were rejected.

It was frustrating but William welcomed the chance to continue seeing Matilda and used the opportunities to ingratiate himself. Their conversations became easier as he taught her proper words and corrected her pronunciation, though she still often used her strange new language. She was undoubtedly odd but her eccentricities intrigued William, compelling him to keep his discovery to himself.

He still knew so little about her. She had slowly opened up to him, even letting him look at the remarkably lifelike pictures within her Book. Yet she remained coy about her past and their conversations remained one way exchanges where William bombarded her with questions only to receive answers for one in ten. He'd tried to learn more by watching from a distance as in the early days but Matilda quickly detected his presence.

She was cooking when William arrived.

"Come down from there William. If you must watch, do it where I can see you."

The Boy scurried out from his bush and took his regular log by the fire. Matilda fished some meat from the boiling pot and carved him off a piece.

"You don't seem to have any qualms eating the Baron's deer," she mused in her bizarre accent as he savoured the meaty treat.

"The beast is already dead," William replied matter-of-factly. "It'd be a bigger crime to let it go to waste. I rarely get to eat venison."

Matilda smiled and the pair chewed the tough meat in a companionable silence until William judged she was sufficiently relaxed for him to begin his questions. How was the meat still fresh? How long did it take to prepare? How did she know he was up there?

She was in a pleasant mood and humoured him with some scattered answers before asking a question of her own.

"What's clutched in that hand of yours?"

“Payment, for your knife,” William replied simply, handing it over. Matilda’s face lit up immediately.

“William, this is incredible! It’s...Roman! Where’d you get it?” she asked.

William beamed. Ma’s father had found the lucky coin years ago, while building an extension for his granary. Mama kept it squirreled away with the rest of her dead husband’s belongings, saying it was too painful to look at. William doubted she would notice it missing.

“Pa says Holford was originally a Roman settlement,” William replied with disinterest.

“Is that your village?” Matilda asked absentmindedly, still entranced by the coin in her palm. “Holford?”

“Yeah, it’s not far from here. Where are you from?” William asked opportunistically, not really expecting an answer.

Matilda went silent, considering William and then the coin.

“Having an independent confirmation of my arrival *could* prove useful,” she whispered, as if to the coin. “And I’ll be long gone before any blabbing could cause trouble.” She looked at William with a twinkle in her eye. “Very well. I’m from the future.”

“The future?” William asked, confused. “What does that even mean?”

“Another time,” Matilda said, as though he was simple. “Like tomorrow or next week, but much further away. You are as old to me as this coin is to you.”

William considered this new information. “How?”

“I fell from the sky in a metal egg.”

“Now you’re just poking fun,” William complained.

“I’m not!” Matilda said earnestly. “I can show you.”

William weighed the risks of venturing into the woods with a potential witch. “Only if you give me the knife. To keep.”

Matilda judged him once again before handing over both the knife and coin. “This treasure belongs with your family. Put it back where you found it. And promise to take care of my knife.”

William excitedly strapped the knife back onto his belt and the pair set off into the forest. Their path seemed random but Matilda walked with purpose, her limp all but gone. He was puzzled when she stopped at a mass of dead branches piled at the base of a random tree but excitement swelled as Matilda removed branches to reveal a giant metallic egg.

“You weren’t lying!” William cried. “You really are from the future!”

Matilda simply smiled as William clambered over the branches to inspect the egg. He ran his hands along its smooth surface and yelped when he discovered how to open it. He quickly manoeuvred it upright and clambered inside before thrusting his head out of the opening. “So you’re *really* from the future?”

“I’m afraid so. The year 2037.”

William sat back in the pod as he considered the absurdity of her claim. *And yet it seemed to make sense.*

“Good lord! You really are going to see the King!”

“Yep. I’ll teach him everything from my Book and make gadgets much more exciting than the torch or my bow.”

“But how? You can’t just stroll into London and demand to see the King.”

Matilda shrugged. “True. I haven’t worked out the specifics but I’ll make my way to London and then find a way into his court. I’d hoped to meet a baron on my way and request a letter of recommendation.”

“Pa has to go to the castle to deliver our taxes this week!” William interjected excitedly. “And our new bishop was in town only a couple days back. There was a special Mass and everything. He’s a foreigner too, Pa said he travelled to England with the new Queen. Surely he could help you meet the King.”

“That makes sense. Bishop John would’ve died what, last year? His successor would probably tour the parishes.” Matilda pondered William’s proposal. “An introduction from a bishop *could* be even better than a baron,” she whispered to herself before giving a big sigh. “I guess my chair carving will have to wait.”

William’s mind raced. He’d prayed for more excitement in his dull life but never dreamed that something so amazing could happen. To him! He was so full of questions that he struggled not to blurt them all out at once.

“So you’ll come back to my home and Pa can take you to see the Bishop?” he asked with absolute restraint.

Matilda thought again before responding. “Ok,” she agreed. “I’d better pack my things.”

Matilda turned back to her cave, not even bothering to cover her egg with branches. *Doesn’t she know how valuable that much metal is?*

“Wait!” William called out. “What about the egg?”

Matilda looked around with an impatient look. “What about it? I can come back for it later, if I ever need it.”

William was baffled. “Surely you jest?”

Matilda shrugged, her mind no doubt already planning her trip. But William refused to abandon such an amazing object to the forest. Holford’s blacksmith would pay a fortune for it, provided he didn’t attack William first. He grabbed the open rim and started dragging to test its weight.

“Can I have it?” he asked sheepishly.

Matilda looked surprised but nodded.

William hooted in triumph. It was surprisingly easy to move once it was rolling. William struggled to push it up a hill but hollered with glee when the ball rolled away down the other side, bouncing off trees before coming to a rest in the valley below. Matilda smiled as he bounded down after it and even helped push it up the last few hills. The pair made a more controlled descent into the gully and left the egg by the cave door. Matilda headed inside while William piled rocks around the base.

When it was secure, he walked freely into the cave, noting how strange it was to be invited and not need to sneak in. Matilda sat cross legged on the dirt floor, surrounded by a pile of her belongings which she sorted for her journey to London.

“There’s too much,” she moaned, shuffling piles back and forward. She muttered to herself before throwing her hands up in defeat. “Forget it! Can I trust you to make sure no one *else* breaks in while I am away?” Her emphasis on the word *else* cut like a knife.

William nodded guiltily.

“Good.” Matilda said. “It’ll be much easier to travel without all of this. And it will be nice to know that someone is looking after it for me.”

She bundled some clothes into a sack and added some extra items to her satchel before piling her remaining belongings on the bed and gently shooing William out of the cave. She fastened the latch behind her, taking time to ensure that it was extra secure.

“Come on William. Let the journey begin.”

William trotted after Matilda as she marched out of the gully and guided her to the familiar trail back to Holford. Matilda spent much of the trip lost deep in thought but William couldn’t hold his tongue.

“What is it like, in the future?” he asked as casually as possible. “Do the Norman’s rule the world or did us English manage to break free?”

Matilda was jolted back to the present but laughed. “Oh no, the English broke free. We actually ended up colonising much of the globe at one stage, unfortunately. It’s no fluke that we’re speaking English.”

William still found her language puzzling. He didn’t know what a globe was but she definitely spoke English. Something close to it anyway.

“There’s a lot more freedom in England’s future. Many people own their own land and even commoners can buy whatever food they want. We’ve cured many illnesses and use machines to swim underwater like fish or fly like birds.”

Questions came to William faster than he could mentally register them. He blurted out the first one that solidified into a complete thought.

“Fly!? Up in the sky? How? How high!?”

Matilda laughed again. “As high as you can imagine! We’ve flown to the moon, the sun, to other planets.”

William was mesmerised. He stared through the canopy and up at the sky where the sunset created brilliant shades of purple and red. A crescent moon was shining and the first stars had come into view. *People could go there? Surely not.* William was so enthralled that he failed to notice an exposed root and went tumbling to the ground.

“Careful!” Matilda dashed forward and helped him up. William’s ego was battered more than his knees.

“Tell me about your family,” she said gently.

“Well, there’s Pa. His family have always farmed for the Baron but he got his own plot of land after serving the King. He’s on the town jury now too. Ma runs our home, always juggling at least three things at once and making sure us children do our share. And then there’s Mama, Ma’s Ma. She’s ancient and grumpy, always yelling and saying us children are in the way.”

“So you have siblings?”

“Three sisters, all older than me. Rachel’s the oldest. She’s...difficult.” William paused, trying to think what to say without sounding too whiny. “We don’t really get along. She’s never really liked me.”

“That’s disappointing,” Matilda said, her tone understanding.

William shrugged. “She spends most of her time with her friends or Mama. There’s also Margery. She keeps to herself most of the time but helps Ma run the house. And then there’s Elizabeth. She’s my favourite. She’s only a little older than me and sometimes joins me in the woods, collecting flowers or singing with the birds.”

“She sounds nice,” Matilda replied with a warm smile.

“What about you?” William asked. “Do you have a family?”

“Yeah, I do...I did.” Sadness fell across Matilda’s face. “My Dad was a doctor. Helped heal sick people. And Mum was a librarian. She looked after a building full of books.”

Matilda’s Book had been the first William had ever touched. He struggled to imagine more than two books in one place at once, let alone an entire building full of them.

“Then there was my little brother Richie,” Matilda continued. “He was much younger than me. Younger than you even. But it was fun having a younger brother.”

She sounded sad. William gave her a consoling smile but let her walk on in silence.

The pair eventually reached the familiar fields at the outskirts of Holford. People had long since retired for the evening and William only crossed paths with a handful of villagers as they walked to his family's cottage.

Each person they passed looked intrigued by the Stranger's mass of red hair and unusual clothes. They eyed her up and down before throwing William either reproachful or bemused expressions. It was only then that William realised the rashness of his decision to invite a complete stranger to stay with his family overnight. A strange *woman* no less.

"We're almost here," William told Matilda whose spirits lifted as Holford came in view. "It's not much, but it's home," William added, feeling a need to defend his simple village to someone who had travelled through time.

"Not at all," Matilda replied enthusiastically. "This is one of the most amazing places I've ever seen."

William didn't believe it but she sounded surprisingly genuine. Matilda commented on mundane things like the thatched roofs or the glow of rush lights cutting through the twilight haze.

The silhouette of the family's cottage came into view. Light flickered through gaps under the shutters and door, promising a warm fire within.

William and Matilda passed through the vegetable garden and stopped at the door. William didn't know how he would explain the Stranger to his family, with her bizarre accent and unusual clothes. Bringing unannounced company after dark was rude. A stranger even more so, no one trusted outlanders. A female stranger was even ruder again, and one as unconventional as Matilda...William knew he'd be hearing about it for a while.

Matilda gave him a quizzical look, wondering why they had stopped. With a big sigh, William pushed the door open.

The family were scattered around the cottage's single room, eating their evening meal by the light of the central fire pit while Elizabeth's cats begged for scraps. Their conversations continued uninterrupted when William entered but abruptly stopped as a second figure ducked under the doorway after him.

Ma's back was turned to the door and she called out joyfully as she ladled a scoop of stew into a bowl, "Look who's finally back, late as usual. Honestly Willy, how often must I ask that you at least return before dark? Oh..."

Pa gave a cough and Ma froze when she saw Matilda, William's meal still held outstretched in her hand. She was momentarily speechless and William's sisters stared at Matilda disapprovingly. Even Pa shot William a raised eyebrow.

William grabbed his food and tried to make light of the situation. "Thanks Ma, I'm starving. Family, this is Matilda. She's a, uh, foreigner. She's travelling to London and thought she would try catching the Bishop in Stowey town. Can you take her with you tomorrow Pa?"

William knew it was a stretch. The family had endured many of his eccentric appeals for assistance, most recently with an injured hare that eventually ended up in their stew. But requesting assistance for an unknown woman was probably a plea too far.

Never one to miss a jab, Mama leapt in with a snide remark. "You'd have to be foreign to dress like that! Where'd you come from?"

Matilda glanced down at her clothes but ignored Mama's rudeness and replied politely. "From Exeter, dear lady. I was seeking word about rare herbs from a local apothecary."

"Not more herb nonse..." Mama began but Pa interrupted.

"So you're a herbalist? A useful skill, very practical. Our Elizabeth loves plants, don't you Beth? You should show *our guest* your garden in the morning."

Elizabeth gave a meek nod, uncomfortable at being dragged into the tense conversation.

Ma also sought to defuse the situation, though her own disapproval was thinly masked. "I'm sure she's much too busy for that. And you'll need to depart early if you've any hope of avoiding additional penalties from the Baron." She swatted Pa before turning to Matilda. "So you're just passing through Holford on your way to London?" Ma's inflection made it clear she wasn't really asking a question.

William was impressed by his parent's quick composure. He'd never seen them act as such a fluid but synchronised team.

"I hope you're planning to change into something modest before you see the Bishop," Rachel squawked from her perch on the bench next to Mama.

"Be nice Rachel," Pa said. "I'm sure the Bishop would be more interested in her herb lore than her clothing."

Mama grew further agitated. "I don't care what she knows about weeds! What is this whore doing in our house?"

"Come now Agnes," Pa interjected firmly, shocking Mama into silence. "That's no way to talk to a guest, no matter how they might be dressed. It is our Christian duty to provide hospitality to a traveller, and perhaps some gentle encouragement should we find their morals...lacking."

Mama huffed and abruptly crossed her arms but remained silent.

"Now, Matilda was it? Please join us for a meal. Emma, another serving please." Pa passed Ma his own bowl to fill and stood from his stool. "I'll happily accompany you to the town in the morning, though my dear wife is correct as ever. We'll need to leave early to deliver our family's tithe on time." Vacating his seat, Pa left the hut to collect firewood.

William sat at his normal place at the hearth and Matilda accepted the bowl from Ma before sitting on Pa's stool, oblivious to the blatant violation of the family's normal hierarchy. The family watched in silence as the

pair ate, their own food abandoned. Mama and Rachel seethed quietly in the corner, Elizabeth fed her cats and Ma wondered what exactly had just happened. The sound of Pa chopping firewood echoed from outside.

Ma collected the family's empty dishes, taking William's before he had even finished. He mentally thanked Matilda for their venison lunch.

Pa returned with an armful of wood and threw some larger pieces on the fire. "Time for sleep. It'll be an early morning for Matilda and I, and I need you all working in the field while I'm away if we're ever going to finish the harvest."

The family didn't need to be told twice and no one complained at the unprecedented omission of their bedtime bible tale. There was a rush of activity as everyone prepared for sleep. William settled into his regular corner while Ma set Matilda up next to his sisters on the opposite side of the room.

Everyone said their goodnights, though their breathing betrayed that all remained awake and on edge. Mama and Rachel whispered rapidly to each other, matching the sounds of Ma and Pa's own back and forth. True to form, Margery was the first asleep and her snores reverberated around the small room. One by one, the others eventually drifted off as well.

But not William. After all the excitement, his mind could finally process the day's incredible experiences. A beautiful woman from the future lay in his family's simple hut. A woman about to meet the King! William hoped that Matilda would remember him and his family. That they'd been the first people she met before journeying to London.

William tossed and turned late into the night, stressed that he would sleep through Matilda and Pa's departure and miss his final opportunity to make an impression before she departed. When sleep eventually claimed William, he dreams were filled with futuristic visions of magnificent birds that flew beyond the moon to lay their giant metallic eggs.

CHAPTER SIX

20 October 1123

Matilda woke before the sun had risen but lay completely still, not wanting to wake the family. The frostiness of the previous night's reception still hung over the single-room hut and she berated herself for thinking that William's family might be as welcoming as the Boy. She should've known that a strange woman accompanying their son, at night, would be confronting in a conservative medieval community. Her clothes had been the final straw, too different for villagers more accustomed to frumpy tunics and loose leggings.

On the plus side, her journey had finally started for real and she would soon be headed to London. With just a little more momentum, there would be no stopping the message she brought from the future. William's suggestion to meet the bishop was an unexpected win and could save Matilda weeks of climbing the rungs of London's social ladder.

Matilda was impressed with the Boy. She'd been taught that medieval rural peasantry would be mostly devoid of intellect and hadn't expected to find anyone with William's open-mindedness. He gave her hope for the mission. David had always said that an Institute student's ability to test and accept new ideas mattered much more than how much they knew when they arrived at the Institute gate.

The brilliant boy woke and shuffled towards the door. He wearily rubbed his eyes, another person suffering from a poor night's sleep. Matilda heard him relieve himself outside but he didn't return indoors. She pushed herself up and self-consciously wrapped her cloak over her shoulders to show some attempt at modesty.

Matilda left the hut and stepped out into the cool morning air. William sat on the dry-stone wall at the front of his parent's property, whittling a stick with his new knife. Matilda dropped her bags at the base of the wall and boosted herself up to sit beside him.

"You made it look easy back at the cave," William complained. "Those leaves on your chair looked real."

"Give it some practice," Matilda reassured. "I'd been making things for years before I attempted anything that intricate. Be patient, the best results come with time."

William resumed his whittling, a little slower and more deliberate. Matilda enjoyed the silence and just watched as the sun rose over the village. It looked completely different in the light of day. More spread out. Alive. She soaked in a scene that she had dreamt of for years. Simple mud-walled homes with thatched roofs were haphazardly scattered around the valley, each with their own vegetable garden and livestock tethered nearby. Goats bleated and roosters crowed. The smell of manure mingled with smoke. Books had told Matilda what she would see but hadn't prepared her for the smells and sounds. It was magical.

"Your village is wonderful!" Matilda gushed. "What did you say it was called?"

"Holford," William replied, not looking up from his whittling. "It's home but it's small and boring. Just wait until you get to the town. There's so much more to do. They have stores. And a market. And a castle! I long to live someplace more exciting like that."

“No way William, your family is here. You crave the excitement now but you’d yearn for the peace of the country life before long. To be back in the forest.”

“Of course you’d say that! You don’t need excitement, you’re from another time! Any more excitement in your life and you would probably explode.”

Matilda laughed. “I can’t argue with that.”

William stopped his carving and looked up at Matilda seriously. “Please don’t forget us, when you’re surrounded by all the excitement of London. When you’re meeting the King. Remember that it was boring little Holford that first welcomed you into our world.”

“Never, William.” Matilda was genuinely touched. “How could I forget that it was a boy from Holford...” She touched a hand to her heart. “...who broke into my cave and messed with all my stuff!”

Matilda playfully nudged the Boy’s shoulder, pushing him off balance. Still holding his knife and stick, William’s arms windmilled comically before he finally tipped backwards and fell off the wall. William quickly picked himself up and the pair burst out laughing.

Their commotion prompted movement within the hut and a bleary-eyed Pa emerged. He was a blur of activity and within minutes had three large sacks stacked by the door. The noise of his preparations woke the other family members and they too emerged from the hut. Elizabeth showed Matilda her vegetables while Ma toasted the previous evening’s bread. Pa returned inside to herd out Rachel and Mama who begrudgingly joined the family for a morning meal.

“What’s the plan for today?” Ma asked her husband as she handed around the toast.

“Matilda and I will deliver the tithe at the market. I’ll collect some things from town then meet you all in the field. It’ll be nice to have an extra pair of hands, it means Will can stay here and help you get started on the lower half. We’re racing against winter so anything we harvest now will mean more plentiful days when the weather turns.”

“Plentiful?” Rachel scoffed, earning a look of approval from Mama.

“Pa!” William protested. “I wanted to come with you to Stowey. To see the market. To bid farewell to Matilda.”

Pa considered his son’s request before shaking his head. “Not today Will, we need you on the scythe so that we don’t lose more time. It’s that or go hungry. We’re weeks behind.”

Rachel muttered under her breath to Mama. “We wouldn’t be late if his royal highness didn’t run off every other day.” William threw his crust at her.

“Stop it you two.” Ma scolded. “Willy, you can follow them as far as the old mill but I need you by the time we’ve set up. It’s going to be stormy today.”

Ma was right. The blue sky from the previous day was rapidly disappearing and the grey clouds were gathering.

“That reminds me, dear,” Ma said before running inside and returning with an armful of discoloured rags. “They’re a bit old but they’re warm and should draw less attention than your current...attire.”

Matilda graciously accepted Ma’s clothes and ran back into the hut to put them on. She left her Institute chainmail on underneath but admittedly looked less conspicuous with the new clothes. She stuffed her clothes into her bag and exited the hut to thank Ma profusely.

“Now people will think she’s a pauper rather than a whore,” Mama chimed. “A slight improvement I guess.” Rachel snickered along with her.

Matilda had tired of the horrible old woman and her minion. Looking them in the eye, she reached into her satchel withdrew a vial of sugar which she gave to Ma. It was the entirety of Matilda’s stocks and worth a small fortune but she happily parted with it just to see Mama and Rachel’s faces drop in an instant. Ma was stunned at the generous gift and tried to refuse.

“I insist Emma,” Matilda reassured her. “Consider it payment for the bed, breakfast and clothes. And for your husband guiding me to the town.” Matilda deliberately stared at Mama. “Thanks for your hospitality.”

“Ok then, let’s go,” Pa said impatiently, hoisting a sack over each shoulder and motioning for Matilda to pick up the third. She tied her hair back and struggled to lift the heavy bag. William kindly offered to carry her bag of clothes and Matilda eventually found an almost comfortable position before the trio said a final farewell and departed.

William was a ball of energy, literally walking rings around Matilda and Pa as they left Holford and talking a mile a minute. He threw an endless barrage of questions, though Matilda appreciated that he avoided any allusions to her being from the future. Pa listened without comment. His face was stony but his eyes occasionally betrayed his own intrigue. They discussed medicinal plants, techniques for building fences, how birds were able to fly. Each answer inspired another three questions. They soon reached the ivy-covered ruins of an old mill which signalled the village boundary.

“This is it Will, you’ve talked the poor girl’s ear off. Time for you to help your Ma.”

It was clear that William didn’t want to go but he swallowed his dissent and acknowledged his father’s command with a gracious nod. He unlooped Matilda’s bag and handed it back, helping Matilda with the awkward juggle to settle it into a comfortable position.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye,” William said formally.

“It is, for now,” Matilda said. She was surprisingly upset to say goodbye to her little fan, despite having only just met. “Come say hello if you ever escape and make it to London. Just ask for the eccentric redhead with the unusual accent, you shouldn’t have too much trouble finding me.”

William smiled. “You promise you won’t forget us?”

“Never,” Matilda said before dropping her voice. “Plus, you’re taking care of my belongings until I come back. I’ll feel a lot better knowing you’re keeping an eye on them. Try not to break too much during your experiments. And, avoid anything with red writing if you want to keep your fingers.”

William laughed but Matilda gave a small shake of her head to show she was serious. Only when his smile evaporated was she satisfied that he'd grasped the severity of her warning.

"Shall we?" Pa asked impatiently.

"Please, lead the way." Matilda gestured forward, smoothly transitioning the gesture into a salute to the Boy. "Farewell young William. May our paths cross again." She followed after Pa before yelling over her shoulder, "Keep asking questions!"

The trees grew thicker as the travellers entered the forest and Matilda looked over her shoulder one last time. The Boy stood by the mill's rotting waterwheel, watching until he could barely see them. Matilda gave a final wave and settled into the walk.

Pa was a much more reserved travel companion. Matilda tried to make some polite small talk, asking questions about the village and Pa's plans at the market but she only received short gruff responses. She eventually gave up and the pair walked on in a stiff silence. It was a welcome break from William's endless questions and Matilda was glad to return to the unspoiled medieval forest.

The walk would've been much nicer without the bag of grain which seemingly grew heavier as they climbed an endless hill. Matilda had always seen herself as fit but was puffing like a smoker by the time they reached the summit and her shoulders burned from the weight.

Matilda got a strange vibe from Pa as they walked. He seemed on edge, frequently staring at her when he thought she wasn't looking and quickly shifting his gaze when she spotted him. Matilda couldn't tell whether he was merely judging a newcomer with the eyes of a law enforcer, or if something more sinister was afoot.

She became very aware that she was physically exhausted and alone with an unknown man who had the home ground advantage in a desolate and unfamiliar forest. It made for an uncomfortable walk and Matilda longed for it to be over. She kept a distance and tried to pick up the pace without being obvious.

The town eventually came into view and they began their descent from the forested hills. Matilda felt safer as the trees thinned and other people came into view, a mix of practically-dressed farmers and stuffer townsfolk.

Matilda marvelled as they approached her first medieval town. The monolithic stone castle towered above the surrounding timber structures. They had only reached the outskirts of the town when Matilda decided that she much preferred Holford's earthy smells to the town's fetid streets which were strewn with stagnating muck. The smell worsened as the buildings grew denser and eventually became interconnected.

Pa finally broke his silence as they neared the centre of town.

"My apologies for the cool reception you received last night. We aren't accustomed to receiving strangers after dark. It is quite rare in our little village."

"It was rude of me to show up unannounced," Matilda conceded.

Pa gave an appreciative nod and the pair concluded their walk in a more comfortable silence. They stopped at the town's single major intersection, where a straight road led up a hill to the castle.

Matilda threw down her sack of grain at the first opportunity.

Pa pointed out the town's various landmarks. "Welcome to Nether Stowey. You should find the Bishop up at the castle and I need to go to the market down here." He hesitated. "Look. You're intelligent, judging by your discussion with Will back at the village. It was all well over my head. But please know that people around here won't take kindly to outlandish behaviour. My family's reaction to your clothing was a tame example. You'd do well to hide your eccentricities. Just fit in, it's easier."

While she disagreed with the principle of his message, Matilda sensed Pa's genuine concern for her and felt guilty at ever doubting his character.

"Thanks...Pa. I'll get myself a more appropriate wardrobe and watch my tongue. Thanks for your hospitality and for being my guide. I'm lucky to have stumbled across your family."

Pa grunted. "Feel free to visit if you're ever near Holford. I promise we'll be much more welcoming next time." With a simple nod of farewell, he scooped up the third sack of grain with ease and set off toward the market.

Matilda stood alone in the street and loosened her shoulder as she wondered what to do next. It was mid-morning and she wanted something extra to eat but remembered that she had no money and little to barter. The castle loomed on the hilltop above.

"Might as well get started," Matilda said to herself as she picked up her bags.

She made her way uphill but was underwhelmed when she reached the castle. Its outer walls were made of timber and scalable with only a running jump. The outer gate was manned by a scrawny guard who was much more interested in a hole in his sleeve than watching the entrance. Matilda crossed the dry moat and, using William's tinker story, explained that she was a merchant visiting to see the baron. The guard stared at her blankly and shrugged before waving her in. *Much easier than expected.*

Inside the castle was exactly as Matilda had imagined. A stableboy brushed a brown stallion in front of a small stable, a blacksmith hammered at his anvil and a gaggle of women chatted away as they washed clothes by the well.

The keep was much more imposing than the castle walls. Its architecture was brutally practical, a solid rectangle of stone with only a handful of narrow arrow slits dotted around the wall. A wooden walkway wound around the structure to a door halfway up. Matilda climbed the wooden stairs, only to have the entrance barred by a surly looking guard.

"No entry today," he said bluntly.

"I'm a merchant and have travelled from Exeter to see the baron."

The guard scoffed. "A merchant? In those rags? Fallen on hard times have we? I don't care who you are, the Baron is unavailable today. Possibly for the week."

Matilda swore internally and retreated, letting the guard's laughter wash over her as she returned to the castle courtyard. She'd exhausted her luck with the first guard.

Matilda was pacing around the courtyard trying to concoct an alternate plan when she heard screams echo from the upper floors of the keep. She resumed her pacing but stopped again when the screams repeated. A kind-looking old priest noticed the shock on her face.

“Something’s wrong with the Baron,” he told Matilda. “He returned early from yesterday’s hunt and has been bellowing ever since. Made for a wretched night’s sleep for the castle dwellers. Baron Walter is lucky the Bishop happens to be visiting, he studied medicine with an order of monks in Europe.”

Matilda cringed as she imagined the so-called medicine being inflicted upon the Baron. *No wonder he’s screaming* Matilda had an idea and hastily thanked the priest before dashing back up the keep stairs.

“I need to see the Baron,” she told the guard.

“I’ve already told you, he’s not available.”

“He’s in tremendous pain. I know medicine, I can help him!”

“You’re a medicine woman now? What happened to being a merchant? No! Now leave the castle before I have you thrown in the stocks.”

Matilda was about to launch another volley of her argument when a well-dressed knight limped over to them, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

“What’s the problem here?” he asked, swiping a strand of grey hair from his face.

“She’s making up all manner of excuses to see the Baron. First she claimed that she’s a merchant and now she suddenly knows medicine.”

“You know how to heal people?”

“I do, sir. I am a herbalist from abroad, returning to London after an expedition to Exeter. I’ve procured a number of rare plant extracts on my journey and came to offer my assistance to the baron as soon as I learned that he was unwell.”

“I see,” the old knight replied thoughtfully. “And you believe these plants have medicinal properties?”

“I do. I’ve spent years understanding their effects on the human body and I know without doubt that my herbs will reduce pain or fever. Some can even cure illness.”

The man looked intrigued but not convinced. Matilda took a risk.

“If I may, my lord. Your limp, is it an old battle wound?”

“Yes, though it has gotten much worse with age.”

“And you have tried willow bark to ease the pain?”

The knight nodded.

“This will sound strange,” Matilda said, “but try eating more fish.”

The knight raised an eyebrow.

“It won’t work immediately but after several moons it should lessen swelling around the joints, which will help reduce the pain.”

The knight considered Matilda with a piercing gaze.

“Stand aside Alfred. I’m going to introduce this woman to the Baron.”

“But sir...”

“No lad, that’s an order.”

“But the Bishop said...”

The knight glared and Alfred stood aside to allow Matilda through.

“Being castellan awards some privileges,” the knight said with a smile. “You seem to know what you’re talking about so I’ll give you an introduction and see what my lord says. Only an introduction, mind you. I want you straight out of there if he objects. No arguing.”

Matilda smiled in agreement and the Castellan led her into the depths of the keep. They climbed up a spiral staircase and walked along a dimly lit corridor before stopping in front of a heavy oak door.

“A word of warning. The Bishop is administering his own treatments. While they sound painful, it would be unwise to claim stronger healing powers than a man of God.”

With that, the Castellan gave Matilda an encouraging smile and knocked.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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