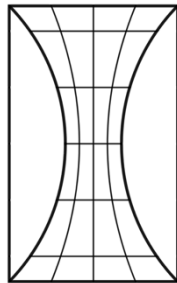


THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



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CHAPTER NINE

4 December 1123

William happily helped his family work in the fields, mindlessly slashing wheat with a scythe while his mind was occupied pondering deeper questions. It had been months since William first discovered Matilda at her cave yet he remained obsessed with the mysterious woman. Her visit had awoken something within him. Not the desire to understand things, that had already been there. Instead, she had shown that answers to his questions actually existed. It was only a matter of finding them.

Long days helping in the fields no longer felt tedious as William distracted himself by asking questions about the world around him and trying to intuit sensible answers. Matilda had explained how a bird could soar without flapping its wings, the answer simple and yet so complex. William found similar riddles everywhere he looked. A duck floating in a pond or ash flying up the chimney. The sheer number of puzzles might've been overwhelming and driven others to simply give up. William found them enthralling.

Each question prompted at least a handful more, just as it had when he'd met Matilda. William's family rapidly tired of his constant wondering and deflected his constant barrage of questions with replies of "so what" and "who cares". They sent him to cut the fields alone, claiming it was one of his increased responsibilities since turning sixteen but really just seeking a few moments of respite.

As always, Elizabeth was most sympathetic and often humoured William. Although she too had limits, some of William's questions – usually those related to plants – struck a chord and she also suffered bouts of staring into distant nothingness. Pa was similarly tolerant of William's incessant questioning. It seemed that merely spending time with the Redhead was enough to awaken the mind.

William was yet to revisit Matilda's cave, despite his inflamed curiosity and his promise that he would do so. He worried that returning to the cave would prove underwhelming. Or worse, remind him of yet another adventure he couldn't join.

Instead, William spent his rare free time to build experiments. He worked all day in the fields, using the time to concoct new ideas and consider the results from previous experiments. When the day was over, he raced home to start new projects, using Matilda's knife to cut or carve and burning things over a small fire behind the cottage. Ma's untrained eye only saw mess and his noisy work often prompted bellowed warnings from his weary family. But despite constant exhaustion, William knew he was learning.

Looking up from his scythe, William saw that the family had stopped work and gathered under the giant oak, their heads already bowed in prayer ahead of their midday meal. Losing his train of thought, he threw the scythe over his shoulder and traipsed over to join them.

The family had already started eating when he arrived. He sat down and Rachel tossed his food at him as he washed his hands. The bread roll bounced off his shoulder and onto the grass. Too tired to retaliate, William just picked up the bread and half-heartedly brushed it on his tunic.

“Stop that,” Ma scolded Rachel, seeing the fatigue in her son’s eyes. “You look exhausted Will. Why don’t you take the afternoon off? Go find Ralph and explore the woods.”

William’s mind was elsewhere and he barely registered what Ma had said. “Um, yeah? Ok. That’d be nice.”

“Good. But no more experiments. You need a break.” Ma gave him a concerned smile before helping the rest of the family pack up and return to the fields.

William watched them leave and finished his food before heading to find Ralph. He was shocked to see that Ralph’s family were weeks of ahead with their harvest and already ploughing for their winter crop. Ralph yelled at William from the other side of the field. His voice barely carried across the distance but Ralph’s wild arm movements screamed “go away”.

With strict orders to relax but no one to accompany him, William decided to stroll through the woods alone. He visited some favourite childhood landmarks but found that they no longer sparked the same level of excitement. William knew he was procrastinating, avoiding the one place in the forest he truly wanted to visit. He changed course and headed towards Matilda’s cave.

William enjoyed the pleasant trek through the woods. It was mid-afternoon when he arrived at the gully and casually strolled towards the cave entrance. He felt uneasy before he could pinpoint exactly why and stopped to look around. Something wasn’t right.

The camp was different. Untidy. Matilda’s stack of dry firewood by the door was gone, replaced by chaotic jumble of damp sticks. The neat circle of rocks around the firepit were scattered and carcasses of small rodents had been haphazardly discarded and left to rot. The door to the cave hung ajar from a single strap.

William felt sick to his stomach. He cursed himself for failing Matilda and allowing someone to invade the place she had tasked him to protect. William had little doubt that her precious possessions would be damaged. Or stolen.

He was just about to run into the cave to check when another thought stopped him in his tracks.

Who was using the cave? Were they still in there?

William had been cautious about outlaws only weeks earlier yet was suddenly prepared to barge into the cave without a second thought. He’d been fortunate that Matilda was the original inhabitant but it was unlikely that the new residents would be so friendly.

Nevertheless, William’s guilt compelled him into the cave. Plucking up all of his courage, he drew his knife and peered inside through a gap in the door.

William’s eyes adjusted to the dark. There were no signs of life but inside was chaos. The intruders had looted the entire chamber and Matilda’s furniture was strewn in pieces across the floor.

William headed inside but the smell of rotten food and human waste made his eyes water. William gathered what he could and piled anything salvageable at the foot of Matilda’s cot. He eventually discovered Matilda’s magical torch amongst her possessions which made the tidying process much quicker. William was on edge the entire time, listening for the smallest sound that might hint at the vandal’s return.

He had just leaned Matilda's shovel against the cave wall when he heard shuffling sounds coming from deeper within the cave. He froze and listened for the noise. Everything was silent. Then he heard the shuffle again.

"Hello?" William called out delicately, casting the torch around the cavern and illuminating a cloaked figure crouched in the far corner. The figure shuffled again in the torchlight. Its blanket dropped and a matted curl of red hair fell out.

Matilda!

William flooded with excitement, his mind instantly racing with the questions he had most wanted to ask her. But as the reality of her ragged appearance sunk in, those thoughts were quickly replaced with concern.

"Matilda? Why are you here? Aren't you supposed to be in London with the King?"

Matilda brushed her hair back into the blanket. She ignored William's question, refusing to look him in the eye.

William considered the sight before him. The hunched figure was a shell of the brilliant woman he had met only weeks before.

"Are you alright?" he asked, his voice full of empathy. "Of course not, what am I thinking. Oh Matilda, what happened?"

She finally stared up at him with hollow eyes. Tears rolled down her cheek but still she remained silent.

"You should have come back. To my family," William continued. "We could've helped."

His final comment prompted a response, though not one William had hoped for.

Matilda glared at him with unbridled hatred before surging to her feet and storming from the cave. Still without a word.

William heard the door wrenched open and was left standing alone in the dark cave. He took a moment to compose himself and wondered what could've happened to Matilda. He was hurt by her sudden animosity. He'd only been trying to help.

Unsure what to do, he returned to the front of the cave and finished cleaning Matilda's mess. He organised the pile at the end of her bed and then swept out most of the accumulated filth. William left the cave door open as he departed, judging that the risk posed by the filthy air was worse than the chance of a wild animal getting in. With that, he made the long and lonely journey back to Holford. Confused as ever.

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William repeatedly replayed his encounter with Matilda over the following weeks. Analysing the interaction became more important than his thought experiments. William longed to tell his family about the Stranger's return but, feeling the news would only stir trouble, kept it to himself.

William returned to the cave several times over the following week, resuming his childlike habit of shirking family duties whenever possible. The weather had taken an early turn for the worst and the family urgently fought to save their crop. But William somehow felt the Stranger could help. He knew it.

William began eating only half of his meals and saved the rest for Matilda, determined to lift her from her malaise. His stomach always rumbled as he returned from the cave but he was sustained by the righteousness of the deed.

Matilda tried to avoid William at first. She quickly learned his schedule and was rarely at the cave when he arrived, though he sometimes spied her darting into the undergrowth like a startled deer. Undeterred, he left his small packages of food by the cave entrance and hoped that Matilda would return before it was snatched by some other forest inhabitant.

William felt dejected after each visit but stubbornly insisted on returning until he knew why Matilda wasn't in London with the King. He was driven by Ma's favourite saying, that even the hardest cliff will be eroded by a gentle but relentless tide.

William gradually observed positive signs. The camp became tidier, firewood stacked more neatly and animal carcasses piled together rather than scattered around the fire. The door had been hung back on both hinges.

Matilda stopped running and they eventually reached an unspoken agreement that William could talk while Matilda ate. He shared his observations and the results of his experiments. Although Matilda remained silent, her interest in each given topic told William if he was onto something.

Things were looking up, despite the worsening weather and its devastating impact on the family's harvest. Then Pa got sick.

It all happened too quickly. One day Pa was coughing in the fields and the next he couldn't get out of bed. His harvest responsibilities were all thrust upon his only son and William found it impossible to visit Matilda. Mama soon came down with the same ailment and it ripped through the village, killing one of the elderly men. Between the weather and the illness, Holford was miserable. But William had hope.

An endless drizzle had settled over the lands and the forest's once colourful leaves filled the air with the smell of rot. Rain lashed William as he trekked back to Matilda's cave.

"You're late," Matilda grumbled from her cot when William entered the cave. They were the first words she'd uttered since William rediscovered her.

William sat in his usual spot against the cave wall, water dripping from his wet clothes and pooling around him on Matilda's recently swept floor. Exhausted, he tossed her the package of food and leaned his head against the wall before closing his eyes.

They sat in silence, though William could feel Matilda's eyes on him.

"The harvest is going poorly. Pa and Mama are sick." He spoke casually, as though merely giving an update on threshing wheat. "I was wondering..." He paused, opening his eyes to look at the Stranger. "Do you know a disease that causes a rash across the chest? That wastes away even the strongest of men?"

Matilda stared back blankly, raising a chunk of cheese up to her mouth.

William ploughed on.

“I thought you might know how to fix it? Holford’s midwife doesn’t. We’re already so far behind with the harvest and really need Pa back to help. I don’t know how we’ll feed the family through winter without him.”

“Why would I help your family William?” Matilda asked mournfully. “Particularly your dear Mama, the rotten old hag. After the way she and her parrot treated me?”

William was confused. “They were unkind but their words weren’t so bad.”

“Rachel didn’t tell you?” Matilda replied. “I was attacked by your beloved Bishop, may he burn in hell. And when I returned to your family seeking refuge? Your damned sister cast me away, hurling plates and laughing as I fled into the woods.”

William sat in shock, his eyes wide with disbelief. The cave fell silent but the echo of Matilda’s revelation continued to reverberate off the walls.

“We heard word that someone had performed a miracle for the Baron,” William said to himself in little more than a whisper. “I thought it must’ve been you.”

“It was. But I can’t keep giving. I’ve given everything. My family and friends. My security. My mission. I don’t know how I’m supposed to run around this land curing all ills and saving everyone. Lord knows that they haven’t done the same for me.”

Silence descended once more and William watched the ghost of Matilda with sadness.

With a sudden realisation, William stood and strode back towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Matilda called out, a hint of desperation in her voice.

William turned back to her as he reached for the latch.

“I am truly sorry for all you have suffered. I’ve already warned that Rachel’s character is lacking but I apologise that you had to experience her wickedness firsthand. I pray that your wounds heal and your energy returns.”

He gave a big sigh and blinked back tears of his own.

“Your refusal to help hurts. You came to us for a reason. You believed in it strongly enough to give up so much. Don’t forsake us all. Don’t judge the many by the actions of the few.”

He paused again.

“This,” he said, gesturing to Matilda’s cave, “isn’t living. What’s done is done. There is no changing the past, unless you can make that egg of yours work again. Pick yourself up and plough on. It’s what I’m trying to do. But I’ve got to take care of my own family now.”

William wrenched the door open and strode from the cave. There was nothing more for him there.

CHAPTER TEN

19 December 1123

Tremendous gusts of wind buffeted Godfrey's carriage as it trundled along heavily guttered rural lanes, throwing the Bishop around uncomfortably. His attempts to accelerate the remainder of his parish tour had been riddled with fallen trees and swampy roads. Still travelling well after dark, the infernal tour showed no sign of ending.

Godfrey longed to be back in a proper town like Bath or Wells. He missed the comforts of his palace and the intrigues of court. He loathed the commoners petty concerns and longed to be free from his cramped carriage forever.

The only thing that annoyed Godfrey more than the never-ending tour was the memory of the red-haired heretic. It had been weeks since their encounter yet he still rankled at the thought that a peasant woman would dare to challenge a bishop.

Such insolence!

Godfrey never discovered exactly how his two brutes had disposed of the Heretic but their roughness behind the shack reassured him that justice would be served.

The altercation was another reminder that Godfrey now lived in a savage land full of uncouth people. Things were more civilised back home on the European mainland. Godfrey hailed from the border regions of the Holy Roman Empire, the last bastion of the epic civilisation created by the Romans before the time of Christ. True, the Romans had murdered the Lord. But the durability of their empire, and aqueducts, was to be admired.

The Normans hadn't progressed much from the pagan tribes vanquished by the Romans yet even they had enhanced civility among the English after The Conqueror won his battle at Hastings. As far as Godfrey was concerned, the English were little better than the Nordic barbarians that raped and pillaged along the coasts of the North Sea. After his run in with the Redhead, Godfrey had promised to treat the English as the savages they were and meted out harsh punishments wherever possible to reinforce the costs of being uncivilised.

The Heretic's Book was an unexpected boon from the encounter. In his rage, Godfrey had left the ruined house still clutching the rear half and only realised when his temper cooled halfway back to the castle. The Bishop had considered discarding the heretical tome but worried that it might be picked up by a commoner. He laughed at himself for his foolishness.

As if an English commoner would know how to read.

It was during the journey to the next town that Godfrey first inspected the Book more thoroughly. Despite its blasphemy, the Book was a treasure. He first noticed the shocking realism of the Book's many illustrations, so stunningly lifelike that they appeared to be windows into another world. Godfrey held the Book at odd angles to try seeing more but the window's aperture was fixed. He was next intrigued by the Book's text, so perfectly uniform that the letters themselves were a work of art.

Godfrey was even further intrigued when he finally looked beyond the physical book and inspected its content. He discovered that the text was written in English rather than Latin. He could intuit some general topics or the occasional familiar name but this only further fuelled his interest. No words were needed to appreciate the pictures and Godfrey developed a morbid fascination with the Book's obscenely detailed anatomy sketches.

The Bishop was baffled that such an intriguing book could be written in English. The commoners' tongue. He knew of no English authors, let alone ones versed in such a broad range of topics. For weeks, Godfrey wondered how he would ever find a civilised translator to help decipher the text.

The Book quickly became Godfrey's favourite escape from the tedium of his parish tour. The more he daydreamed about it during services, the more he was convinced that it was a priceless treasure worthy of being stored in the Papal library. It might've been Godfrey's key to climbing further up the church hierarchy. If it was complete. He regretted tearing the Book in two, though he blamed the Heretic's stubborn silence for goading him into the needless act of vandalism.

And so his journey through the parishes continued. The same routine mass for the same greedy nobles with nothing to offer. Godfrey swore he would scream if he was offered one more fourth-born son to join his retinue as a trainee priest. And the commoners' requests were always the same. Heal my mother. Pray for a bountiful harvest. Deliver justice against the landlords. Godfrey did everything in his power to minimise contact with them.

Knowing exactly what he had to look forward to, Godfrey was in a foul mood when the carriage finally came to a stop. Wind nearly tore the door from its hinges as Peter leapt inside to give his regular pre-arrival brief.

"We've arrived at Babcary, Your Excellency. Another tiny village, though this one is set by a river." He called out louder, trying to be heard above the wind. "The local lord is Sir Simon and his wife is..."

Godfrey missed the next few words as the wind ripped the carriage door open again. Peter continued to talk as he heaved the door closed and fastened the latch.

"...and their youngest son is called John."

Godfrey impatiently waved his assistant along. "Peter, I don't care. Men are 'my son' and women are 'my daughter'. It's really not that difficult being a bishop. How long until we reach my estate?"

"Only a matter of days now. We'll rush through the service tomorrow and be off to the next village after lunch. Then just three more villages after that."

Peter opened the door and Godfrey followed him from the carriage, forgetting all decorum and running for the cover of the castle's tiny keep with his hand clasped tightly to his cap. The castle was fittingly small for such an insignificant village, its walls made of timber and the castle mound barely more than a molehill. The keep wasn't even made of stone and instead resembled an old English longhouse. Godfrey foresaw another dreary night.

An attendant closed the keep's heavy oak door behind them and the Bishop looked around the tiny castle's main hall. Although small, it was surprisingly homely and great care had been taken in creating the tapestries that decorated each wall. The wind continued to howl outside but a large fire roared in the hearth, its warm glow casting flickering shadows around the room.

The castle's lord stood to attention beside his wife, three sons and two daughters. Unlike the self-important lords of the larger landholdings, the minor nobility tended to know their rightful place and Godfrey approved of this acknowledgement of his superiority. Perhaps the evening would not be as dreary as he'd thought.

"Bishop Godfrey! Welcome. Our village is blessed to be graced with your presence. Please."

The lord ushered Godfrey toward a long dining table, giving him the seat at the head of the table closest to the fireplace. The Bishop's aching bones appreciated the gesture which partially compensated for the embarrassingly thin spread of food on offer. It was late but the family appeared to have waited to join the Bishop for his meal.

"Your Excellency, it is a pleasure to meet you," the lord interrupted as Godfrey chewed on a scrawny chicken leg. "I am Sir Simon, lord of these lands. This is my wife Ida and these are our children."

The family insisted on small talk and introduced themselves one-by-one. The eldest son was a knight and the second son training to become one.

"I've almost completed my first tapestry," the youngest daughter chimed. "Mother is helping finish the final stitches."

"And I'm John," finished the youngest son, average in every way. "Do you know of Plato?"

Godfrey bristled at being directly questioned and Sir Simon berated his over-inquisitive son. The lord correctly sensed that Godfrey's patience was wearing thin and asked the family to eat the rest of their meal in silence.

Simon offered to personally show Godfrey to his quarters as the table was cleared.

"I must confess, it's John's room. Our youngest son. It's small but it has the sturdiest bed. We prayed that you would understand."

Their prayers hadn't worked. Godfrey was offended, but he was too tired to rise to the slight. He set his jaw and entered.

The room was little more than a closet. It lacked the main hall's warm hearth and wind whistled through gaps in the wooden walls. Fresh flowers released a pleasant scent but it was like putting a dress on a donkey. The room was far beneath Godfrey's station.

The Bishop grunted goodnight to his hosts and was about to collapse into the small bed when he noticed a small desk in the corner of the room, covered with loose paper. Godfrey had seen some of the richer nobles learn their letters but never the third son of a poor minor lord.

Probably an over-zealous local priest, Godfrey thought, looking to secure another victim to work for the church.

The penmanship was scrappy. Among scattered Latin prayers and hymns were several pages of drawings and text that Godfrey couldn't read. They used the familiar Latin alphabet but the words made no sense.

Too tired to bother deciphering any more, Godfrey gave up and collapsed on the bed. Sleep took him instantly.

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Godfrey woke the next morning to the sound of Peter rapping at his door. He had once again overslept and was late for Mass. The weather remained miserable.

The village's tiny wooden chapel was already crammed shoulder to shoulder when Godfrey finally arrived. The building's sole chair had been reserved for the Bishop and he slouched in it, barely able to keep his eyes open. Godfrey's mind wandered as Peter led the congregation through a grating refrain of his favourite hymn. He found himself thinking about the writing from the boy's room and he tried to recall the names he had read.

Hrothgar. Grendel. They sounded English.

Epiphany struck Godfrey like a bell as the hymn finished and he bolted upright in his seat.

The boy could write English! He was transcribing scenes from Beowulf, the English epic.

Godfrey decided to overlook the boy's celebration of a clearly inferior language and was instead filled with an overwhelming sense of opportunity. He'd found someone that could write, and presumably read, English! Just the person he needed to decipher the heretical tome.

The Bishop contained his excitement and got through the rest of the service with enhanced vigour, taking care to mask his attempts to spot the average boy amidst the congregation. Godfrey tolerated the incessant requests from the villagers, blessing them absentmindedly as he started planning which parts of the Heretic's Book the boy should work on first.

The congregation thinned and eventually only the priests and the family remained. Godfrey seized the opportunity.

"I thank you for your hospitality," he said sweetly as he approached Sir Simon.

"I've never seen the chapel so full! My family and I should've arrived earlier, we almost struggled to squeeze in."

"Indeed, a most enthusiastic congregation. Now perhaps the issue of space is something I could help you with?"

Godfrey saw the local priest's eyes widen, no doubt hoping for a new church.

"Oh really?" Sir Simon asked, intrigued but wary. "How so?"

"Well, I realised while staying in your son's room..."

"We truly do apologise for that my lord," the wife interrupted. "Simon, we should have just slept on the floor."

“Not at all my dear,” Godfrey replied impatiently. “I have realised that your son has a unique talent. One that could be very useful in the service of the Church.”

“He does?” the eldest brother questioned. The whole family looked surprised.

“He does,” Godfrey echoed. “Boy, how long have you been writing?”

“A couple of years,” the boy replied timidly.

“Oh, writing?” Sir Simon said. “Father Reginald here has taught all of the family how to read and write Latin. John is particularly talented.”

“But how long have you been writing in English?” Godfrey asked John.

“English?” Father Reginald asked with surprise. Everyone gawked at the boy.

“Not long,” John conceded. “A few months perhaps. I was bored and wanted to try something new with the letters.”

“He’s not in trouble, is he?” the boy’s mother interrupted again.

“No he’s not, though he was lucky it was me who found out. Others may have been less...lenient.”

The family milled around in an uncomfortable silence, not sure what to say.

“I propose,” Godfrey continued, “that the boy returns with me to the cathedral in Bath. He can join the seminary and train to become a priest. He would be well taken care of and, if he continues to show promise, I will grant him access to my private library.”

Sir Simon paused in thought as he considered the offer.

“No!” came an emphatic response, though it wasn’t Sir Simon.

Everyone looked back at the boy.

“I don’t want to go,” he cried defiantly. “My home is here. My life is here.”

His mother put her arm around his shoulder but the boy’s defiance was already deflating under the Bishop’s withering glare.

“Don’t test the limits of my generosity Simon. Many have asked for such a privilege on my tour, to have their sons join the clergy to serve their Bishop. Others would have the boy flogged, perhaps even his eyes taken out, for daring to waste precious paper and ink to spread the commoner’s tongue. I can ensure that his talents are put to a righteous use.”

Simon was quiet, looking from the boy to Godfrey and back again.

“Ok,” he surrendered.

The room melted into a storm of emotions. Godfrey felt triumphant. The boy cried out in despair. His brothers looked amused. The local priest looked robbed.

“Very good!” Godfrey clapped. “Well. Peter. John. Hurry now. We must arrive at our next destination earlier than last night.”

“Yes Your Excellency.” Peter ran off to prepare the carriage for their departure.

Feeling generous, Godfrey turned to his new recruit.

“Boy, take a moment to collect your belongings and bid farewell to your family.”

The boy glared at Godfrey, his eyes oozing contempt for the Bishop. Godfrey mirrored the gaze but added a glimmer of triumph. John broke eye contact and accepted his fate with defeat, following his family back to the castle to collect his belongings.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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