

*Speyer, Germany, Summer 1125*

Holding her dead husband's imperial crown, Matilda felt the cold pressure of gemstones and hard gold against her fingertips and palms. The light from the window arch embossed the metal's soft patina with sharper glints of radiance. Heinrich had worn this crown on feast days and official occasions. She had an equivalent one of gold and sapphires, fashioned for her by the greatest goldsmiths in the empire, and in the course of their eleven-year marriage had learned to bear its weight with grace and dignity.

Her people called her 'Matilda the Good'. They had not always been her people, but it was how she thought of them now, and they of her, and for a moment grief squeezed her heart so tightly she caught her breath. Heinrich would never wear this diadem again, nor smile at her with that small curl of amused gravity. They would never sit together in the bedchamber companionably discussing state matters, nor share the same golden cup at banquets. No offspring born of his loins and her womb would occupy the imperial throne. The cradle was empty because God had not seen fit to let their son live beyond the hour of his birth, and now Heinrich himself lay

entombed in the great red stone cathedral here and another man ruled over what had been theirs.

Matilda the Good. Matilda the Empress. Matilda the childless widow. The words crept through her mind like footfalls in a crypt. If she stayed, she would have to add Matilda the nun to her list of titles, and she had no intention of retiring to the cloister. She was twenty-three, young, vigorous and strong, and a new life awaited in Normandy and England, the latter her birthplace, but now barely remembered.

Turning, she gave the crown to her chamberlain so that he could dismantle and pack it safely in its leather traveling case.

‘Domina, if it please you, your escort is ready.’

Matilda faced the white-haired knight bowing in the doorway. Like her, he was dressed for travel in a thick riding cloak and stout calfhide boots. His left hand rested lightly on his sword pommel.

‘Thank you, Drogo.’

As the servants removed the last of her baggage, she paced slowly around the chamber, studying the pale walls stripped of their bright hangings, the bare benches around the hearth, the dying fire. Soon there would be nothing left to say she had ever dwelt here.

‘It is difficult to bid farewell, domina,’ Drogo said with sympathy.

Still looking around, as if her gaze were caught in a web of invisible threads, Matilda paused at the door. She remembered being eight years old, standing in the great hall at Liège, trembling with exhaustion at the end of her long journey from England. She could still recall the fear she had felt and all the pressure of being sent out of the nest to a foreign land and a betrothal with a grown man. The match had been arranged to suit her father’s political

purpose and she had known she must do her duty and not incur his displeasure by failing him, because he was a great king and she was a princess of high and royal blood. It could have been a disaster but, instead, it had been the making of her: the frightened, studious little girl had been moulded into a regal woman and an able consort for the Emperor of Germany.

‘I have been happy here.’ She touched the carved doorpost in a gesture that clung and bade farewell at the same time.

‘Your lord father will be pleased to have you home.’

Matilda dropped her hand and straightened her cloak. ‘I do not need to be cajoled like a skittish horse.’

‘That was not my intent, domina.’

‘Then what was your intent?’ Drogo had been with her since that first long journey to her betrothal. He was her bodyguard and leader of her household knights: strong, dour, dependable. As a child she had thought him ancient because even then his hair had been white, although he had only been thirty years old. He looked little different now, except for a few new lines and the deepening of older ones.

‘To say that an open door awaits you.’

‘And that I should close this one?’

‘No, domina, it has made you who and what you are – and that is also why your father has summoned you.’

‘It is but one of his reasons and driven by necessity,’ she replied shortly. ‘I may not have seen my father in many years, but I know him well.’ Taking a resolute breath, she left the room, carrying herself as if she were bearing the weight and grace of her crown.

Her entourage awaited her in a semi-circle of servants, retainers and officials. Most of her baggage had gone ahead by cart three days earlier and only the nucleus of

her household remained with a handful of packhorses to carry light provisions and the items she wanted to keep with her. Her chaplain, Burchard, kept looking furtively at the gelding laden with the items from the portable chapel. Matilda followed his glance, her gaze resting but not lingering upon a certain leather casket in one of the panniers, before she turned to her mare. The salmon-red saddle was a sumptuous affair, padded and brocaded almost like her hearth chair, with a support for her spine and a rest for her feet. While not the swiftest way to travel, it was dignified and magnificent. The towns and villages through which they passed would expect nothing less than splendour from the Emperor's recent widow.

Matilda mounted up, settling herself and positioning her feet precisely on the platform. Seated sideways, looking both forward and back. It was appropriate. She raised her slender right hand to Drogo, who acknowledged the signal with a salute and trotted to the head of the troop. The banners unfurled, gold and red and black, the heralds cantered out and the cavalcade began to unwind along the road like jewels knotted on a string. The Dowager Empress of Germany was leaving the home of her heart to return to the home of her birth and a new set of duties.

Adeliza gripped the bedclothes and stifled a gasp as Henry withdrew from her body. He was approaching sixty years old, but still hale and vigorous. The force of his thrusts had made her sore inside, and his stolid weight had crushed her into the bed. Mercifully, he gathered himself and flopped over on to his back, panting hard. Biting her lip, Adeliza placed her hand on her flat belly and strove to regain her own breath. Henry was well endowed, and the act of procreation was often awkward

and uncomfortable between them but, God willing, this time she would conceive.

She had been Henry's wife and the consecrated Queen of England for over four years, and still each month her flux came at the appointed time in a red cramp of disappointment and failure. Thus far no amount of prayers, gifts, penances or potions had rectified her barrenness. Henry had a score of bastards by various mistresses, so he was potent with other women, but only had one living legitimate child, his daughter Matilda from his first marriage. His son from that union had died shortly before Henry took Adeliza to wife. He seldom spoke of the tragedy that had robbed him of his heir, drowned in a shipwreck on a bitter November night, but it had driven his policies ever since. Her part in those policies was to bear him a new male heir, but thus far she had failed in her duty.

Henry kissed her shoulder and squeezed her breast before parting the curtains and leaving the bed. She watched him scratch the curly silver hair on his broad chest. His stocky frame carried a slight paunch, but he was muscular and in proportion. Stretching, he made a sound like a contented lion. Their union, she thought, even if it brought forth no other fruit, had released his tension. His sexual appetite was prodigious and in between bedding her, he regularly sported with other women.

He poured himself wine from the flagon set on a painted coffer under the window, and on his return picked up his cloak and swept it around his shoulders. Silver and blue squirrel furs gleamed in the candlelight. Adeliza sat up and folded her hands around her knees. The soreness between her thighs diminished to a dull throb. He offered her a drink from the cup and she took a dainty sip. 'Matilda will be arriving soon,' he said. 'Brian FitzCount is due to meet her tomorrow on the road.'

Adeliza could tell from his expression that his thoughts had turned inwards to the weaving of his political web. 'All is ready for her,' she replied. 'The servants are keeping a good fire in her chamber to make it warm and chase out the damp. I have instructed them to burn incense and put out bowls of rose petals to sweeten the air. They hung new embroideries on the walls this afternoon and the furniture is all assembled. I—'

Henry raised his hand to silence her. 'I am sure her chamber will be perfect.'

Adeliza flushed and looked down.

'I think you will be good company for each other, being of a similar age.' Henry gave her a slightly condescending smile.

'It will be strange to call her daughter when she is hardly a year older than me.'

'I am sure you will both quickly grow accustomed.' He was still smiling, but Adeliza could tell his attention lay elsewhere. Henry's conversations were never just idle gossip; there was always a purpose. 'I want you to cultivate her. She has been a long time absent, and I need to consider her future. Some matters are rightly for the council chamber and for father and daughter, but other things are better discussed between women.' He stroked the side of her face with a powerful, stubby hand. 'You have a skill with people; they open themselves to you.'

Adeliza frowned. 'You want me to draw confidences from her?'

'I would know her mind. I have seen her once in fifteen years, and then but for a few days. Her letters give me news, but they are couched in the language of scribes and I would know her true character.' A hard glint entered his eyes. 'I would know if she is strong enough.'

‘Strong enough for what?’

‘For what I have in mind for her.’ He turned away to pace the chamber, picking up a scroll and setting it down, fiddling with a jewelled staff, turning it end over end. Watching him, Adeliza thought that he was like one of the jugglers he employed to entertain his courtiers, keeping the balls all rotating in the air, knowing where each one was and what to do with it, adapting swiftly as a new one was tossed into the rotation, discarding another when he had no more need of it. Lacking a legitimate son, he had to look to the succession. He was grooming his nephew Stephen as a possible successor, but now Matilda was a widow and free to come home and make a new marriage, the game had changed again. To think of making Matilda heir to England and Normandy was beyond audacious. The notion of a woman ruler would make even the most liberal of his barons choke on his wine. Adeliza’s brows drew together. Her husband often gambled, but he was never rash and he was accustomed to imposing his iron will on everyone.

‘She is young and healthy,’ he said. ‘And she has borne a child, even if it did not survive the birthing. She will make another marriage and bear more sons if God is merciful.’

A pang went through Adeliza. If God was merciful, she herself would bear sons, but she understood his need to pursue other avenues. ‘Do you have anyone in mind?’

‘Several candidates,’ he replied in an offhand tone. ‘You need not trouble yourself on that score.’

‘But when the time comes, you expect me to smooth the path.’

Henry climbed back into bed and pulled the covers over them both. He kissed her again, with a hard mouth. ‘It is a queen’s duty, prerogative and privilege to be a

peacemaker,' he replied. 'I do not think for one moment you will fail me.'

'I won't,' Adeliza said. As he pinched out the bedside candle, she set her hand between her thighs and felt the slipperiness of his seed, and prayed that this time she would succeed.