

## Chapter 1

### 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 travelling 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

**Commented [..1]:** suggest use lower case ‘d’ throughout for title in vocative, cf my lord, my lady, sire etc. I know it was cap in *Place Beyond Courage* but I now think too intrusive and better to tie in with the other forms of address?

My reply – Yes, that’s fine. I used the word ‘domina’ mostly because it sounds more imperial and I wanted to make a slight distinction.

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. Break

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 was crushing 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

**Commented [..3]:** this is summer 1125, if 60 then born 1065 but was he not born sometimes 1068-1069? Change to 'approaching sixty years of age'?

Or is there new evidence giving his birthdate as 1065?

My comment.

You're right and I knew thus -duh. He was the only one of The Conqueror's children born in the purple. So approaching sixty is correct.

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 tapestries 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 some 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

**Commented [..7]:** ms has said she went to Germany when she was 8 (and she was crowned at 8 in 1110): that was 15 years ago - but did she leave England when she was 7? (but NB p 32 says she was 8 when last on a sea journey)

My comment  
Yes, change to 15

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.



## Chapter 2

### The Road to Rouen, Normandy, Autumn 1125

A wet unpleasant morning had cleared to the east as Matilda's entourage wound its way through the forests of the Beauvais towards the great city of Rouen, heart of Normandy on the banks of the Seine. Now, with barely an hour till sunset, the blue sky was welcome, but the wind had picked up and was blustering hard. Tonight they were making camp by the roadside. They should have been met at noon by a party from Rouen led by one of her father's barons, Brian FitzCount, but thus far there was no sign of it, and Matilda was growing annoyed and impatient. Her mare was lame on her offside hind leg and she was having to ride pillion on Drogo's crupper as if she were a woman of his household, rather than his liege lady. Her knights and attendants were giving her a wide berth. Drogo's placatory remark that by tomorrow night they would be in Rouen with every comfort had not improved her mood; she was accustomed to precision and smooth order.

A gust of wind struck her side-on and she had to grab Drogo's belt. 'I refuse to ride into Rouen like this,' she hissed.

'Domina, if it comes to the worst, I will give you this horse and saddle up my remount, but there is no point doing so for what is left of the daylight.' He spoke with the pragmatic calm of one long accustomed to her demands.

She eyed the melted gold of the westering sun and knew he was right; there was no point, but it made her angry. Why couldn't people keep their promises?

Suddenly the knight drew rein and the jolt threw her against his spine. 'My

Commented [..8]: spelt Brian almost always so have standardised

apologies, domina,' he said. 'It appears our escort is here.'

Peering round him, Matilda saw a troop approaching at a steady trot. 'Help me down,' she snapped. 'I refuse to receive them sitting pillion on your horse.'

Drogo dismounted and swiftly assisted her to do the same. She shook out her gown, adjusted her cloak, and stood erect. The wind snatched at her veil, but fortunately it was well pinned to her undercap. She had to lock her legs to keep her balance.

The oncoming troop splashed to a muddy halt. Their leader flung down from the saddle of a handsome black stallion and, removing his hat, dropped to one knee before her.

'You are late,' she said icily. 'We have been looking for you since noon.'

'Domina, I am deeply sorry. We would have been here sooner, but one of the cartwheels broke, and there was a fallen tree across our path. The wind has made everything more difficult and slowed our pace.'

She was cold, tired and in no mood for excuses. 'Get up,' she said with a brusque gesture.

He rose to his feet and his legs were so long that they seemed to unfold forever. They were encased in fine leather riding boots laced with red cords. His black hair swirled about his face and his eyes were a deep, peat-pool brown. His mouth had a natural upward curve that made him look as if he were smiling, even though his demeanour was serious. 'Domina, I am Brian, son of Count Alan of Brittany, and lord of Wallingford Castle. I do not expect you to remember me. The last time we were in each other's presence, you were witnessing one of your father's charters in Nottingham before you went to Germany and I had not long entered your father's household as a

squire.'

'That was a long time ago,' she said, still annoyed.

'Indeed, domina.' He gestured over his shoulder at the men of his troop, who had also dismounted and were kneeling. 'We have brought a fine pavilion and provisions. It will not take us long to make camp.'

'It will take you even less time if you tell those men of yours to get up off their knees and start work,' she said tartly. 'My own will help if you have need.'

His expression impassive, he bowed and went to give brisk orders. A host of workmen and serjeants began unpacking sections of a large, circular, red and blue tent from a two-wheeled cart. The outer canvas was stamped with golden lions. There was a pale silk inner lining and rich woollen hangings set on curved rods for the interior. The wind billowed the canvas like the sail of a ship in a storm. Matilda watched the men struggle with their burden and mentally shook her head. Had she not been so tired and cross, she would have burst out laughing.

One of Brian's company, a wide-shouldered young man, was examining her mare, running his hand down her lame foreleg and soothing her with soft talk. When he saw Matilda watching, he bowed and said, 'She needs rest and a warm bran poultice on that knee, domina. There is nothing wrong with her beyond the strain of the road.' He gently scratched the mare's neck.

He was not a groom, for his cloak was fur-lined and his tunic embroidered. His open features were raised above the average by striking hazel-gold eyes. 'Were you at Nottingham with my lord FitzCount too?' she asked.

He shook his head. 'No, domina, but my father would have been. He is William

D'Albini, lord of Buckenham in Norfolk and one of your father's stewards.'

'I do not recall him,' she said, 'but I know of your family.' Obviously he was a spare young blood at court, sent out with FitzCount on escort duty. 'Your own name?'

'Domina, it is William, the same as my father.'

'Well then, William D'Albini, you seem to know about horses.'

He gave her a wide smile, exposing fine, strong teeth. 'Well enough, domina.'

He rubbed the mare's soft muzzle with a large, gentle hand.

'I hope my lord FitzCount has a spare mount.'

'I am sure he does, domina.'

Matilda was not so certain. Sounds of a heated exchange flashed across to them. Someone had mislaid the tent pegs and everyone was blaming everyone else. 'This would not have happened at my husband's court,' she said with displeasure.

D'Albini gave an equable shrug. 'There are difficult days when whatever you do, you suffer mishaps; today is one such.' Clucking his tongue to the mare, he led her away to tether her with the other horses.

The tent pegs turned up in a different pannier to the expected one and, following more bad-tempered oaths, were driven into the ground and the canvas secured. Brian FitzCount directed operations, now and then scraping his hands through his hair, looking increasingly embarrassed and exasperated.

Gradually, however, order emerged out of chaos and Matilda was able to enter the tent and at least be out of the wind, even if the canvas sides flapped like wings striving to lift the structure into the air. Her women set about making her bed, layering several mattresses on to the strung frame and topping them with clean sheets and soft

**Commented [..10]:** I wondered why when 'de' is contracted is it capital 'D', but not when it is full - cf de Beaumont or de Meulan, but ms has D'Albini and D'Ypres (latter as spelt in *Place Beyond Courage*). Prob does not matter ...

My comment.

Hah! I thought you would know! ☺ I don't have a clue and just go by what looks right to my eye????

blankets. A manservant hooked a partition across the middle of the tent and someone else fetched a chair with a quilted cushion. A bench and a small table arrived. Matilda remained standing, arms folded.

Brian FitzCount entered the tent followed by servants bearing a flagon and cups, loaves of bread and assorted cheeses and smoked meats. ‘The men are making a windbreak,’ he said. ‘At least it isn’t raining.’

‘No,’ she agreed, thinking that rain would have been the final seasoning. She sat down on the chair. The servants spread the table with an embroidered cloth and brought food and drink. Before she could change her mind, she indicated that Brian should join her. News of the court in advance of her arrival there would be useful.

He hesitated, went to the tent entrance to bellow more instructions, then dropped the flap and returned to serve her himself. She studied his long fingers as he poured wine into silver cups. An emerald ring glinted, and another of plaited gold. His hands were clean, the nails clipped short, but they were ink-stained, as if he were a common clerk. She tried to remember him from her childhood, but found no trace. It had been too long ago and he would have been just another youth at court.

‘My father is well?’ She took her first sip and felt it warm its way to her stomach.

‘Indeed, domina, and eager to see you, even if the circumstances are sad.’

‘I have seen him but once since I was a little girl,’ she said shortly. ‘I know why he is pleased to welcome me home.’

Silence fell between them. She decided that the windbreak must have been successfully erected, because there were fewer flurries at the sides of the tent. She broke bread and ate it with a slice of smoked venison, gesturing him to eat too.

**Commented [..11]:** why does she ask him, actually?

My comment.  
I have added a reason. This was an Akashic piece and we just took it for granted that she would dine with the official sent to fetch her.

‘Would you rather have stayed in Germany?’

The directness of his question took her by surprise; she had expected him to continue being the deferential courtier. ‘It was my duty to return at my father’s bidding. What would have been left for me there without my husband? His successor has his own affiliations. I would either have had to marry into them, which would not suit my father’s policies, or retire to a nunnery and live out my days in service to God.’

‘That is a worthy thing to do.’

‘But I am not yet ready to renounce the world.’ She gave him a shrewd look. ‘Has my father spoken to you of his plans for my future?’

He returned her stare. ‘He only speaks in general terms and even if I did know his heart in the matter, it would not be for me to say. You must be aware of some of his intent yourself, domina. If he did not have plans for you, then you would still be in Speyer.’

‘Oh, I know he has plans, but not what they are.’ She leaned back in the chair, beginning to relax a little. On the other side of the partition her women talked quietly among themselves.

Brian leaned back too, mirroring her posture. ‘When you left England, you were a serious little girl, full of learning and duty. I remember you well from that time, even if you do not remember me. You did not want to go, but you stiffened your spine and did as you were bid, because it was your duty. That part has not changed, but now you are an empress and a grown woman, accustomed to holding the reins of power and command.’

She gave an acerbic smile. ‘It is true I do not suffer fools gladly, my lord.’

**Commented [..12]:** ‘a wry?’

My comment  
Keep acerbic. Wry is slightly too soft a word and suggests self deprecation which is not the intent here.

‘You are your father’s daughter,’ he replied with a straight face, but there was a spark in his eyes.

Matilda almost laughed and hastily covered her mouth. It was the wine, she thought, and the tiredness. Suddenly her throat tightened with grief, because this blend of politics and near-flirting was too close to what she had had with Heinrich, and it made her ache with loss. She controlled her voice. ‘I am indeed my father’s daughter. If you cannot tell me what my future holds, then at least tell me about the court so that I may be prepared.’

He offered her more wine and she shook her head. He poured himself a half-cup. ‘If you were accustomed to your husband’s court, then you will be accustomed to this one. They have the same denizens.’

‘But who is friend and who is foe? Whom can I trust, and who is competent?’

‘That is for you to make your own judgement, domina, and for your father to advise you.’

‘So again, you will tell me nothing.’

He led out a deep breath. ‘Your father is surrounded by men who serve him well. Your brother, the Earl of Gloucester, will be pleased indeed at your return. Your cousins Stephen and Theobald will be there also.’

His expression was bland. She had a vague recollection of her Blois relations. Older youths, more concerned with male pursuits and paying her small heed except when they had to serve her and her mother at table as squires in training. ‘Stephen is recently married, isn’t he?’ There had been a letter but she had been too caught up in worry for her sick husband to pay it much heed.

‘Indeed. To Maheut, heiress of Boulogne. Your father deemed it sound policy. It keeps his northern borders strong.’

Matilda was thoughtful. Maheut of Boulogne was her cousin on her mother’s side, even as Stephen had that kinship on her father’s – and that made the family ties close indeed. What did her father intended with all this spinning of threads? He was a master loomsman and no one else could weave the cloth of politics in quite the same way. ‘What is Stephen like these days?’

Brian shrugged. ‘More settled since his marriage. He’s a fine horseman and soldier. He makes friends easily and your father is fond of him.’

His assessment made Matilda feel uneasy. Stephen had had the time to cultivate her father and gain his attention that she had not. ‘Are you?’

He looked wary. ‘He is good company when we ride to the hunt, and we understand each other well enough. He knows when to leave me to my books and my thoughts, and I know when to leave him to the company of other men. His wife keeps him to the mark these days. She gives him backbone, and sound advice.’ Brian raised his cup and drank. ‘Your father has imprisoned Waleran de Meulan for rebelling against him, and he is still being threatened by William le Clito.’

‘That is old news,’ she said with an impatient wave of her hand. ‘William le Clito will never be King because he has no ability and Waleran de Meulan was a fool to support him.’

‘Even so, it will still inform your father’s policies and determine what he does next. Perhaps it is the reason he has raised Stephen on high – as a counterbalance.’

A gust of wind flurried the side of the tent and Matilda felt invigorated by its

**Commented [..13]:** first several mentions of Waleran have 'of Meulan', later on he is often called 'de Meulan'. I know they are technically the same but I did wonder if it should be standardized?

If not, perhaps introduce the second version here straightaway so reader gets used to it?

(Found it as 'of Meulan' in *Place beyond Courage* but can't remember if it is thus throughout whole book)

My comment  
Standardise as de I think.



force. She wanted everything to blow away and leave the world swept clean. Her father had kept his throne against great opposition. He had seized England and Normandy from his rash older brother Robert and cast him in prison, where he lingered even now; but Robert had left a son William le Clito, another male for Matilda to call cousin, and one who was claiming his right to rule. Powerful young hotheads like Waleran de Meulan supported his cause, and although her father had stamped down the rising, like a soldier putting out a dangerous small fire, the smoke still lingered. And where there was one fire, others would rise. Waleran had a twin brother, and their family interests straddled both England and Normandy. Weaving, she thought. It was all a matter of twisting the threads, and keeping an eye cocked for unravelling strands while dealing with others who were weaving designs of their own.

She eyed Brian thoughtfully. Her father clearly found him useful and had raised him on high. He held over a hundred knight's fees by dint of his arranged marriage to Maude of Wallingford. But what to make of him now, on this first meeting? His arrival had been less than impressive, but William D'Albini seemed to think she should give him the benefit of the doubt. She suspected he was adept at hiding his thoughts, and that they ran deep. No shallow blunderer, this one, for all the irregularity of their initial meeting.

As Brian put his cup down, her eyes were drawn again to the ink staining his elegant fingers. 'Are you your own scribe, my lord?'

'Sometimes,' he said with a diffident smile. 'I find it easier to think with a quill in my hand, and to assemble notes, even though scribes might make the final draft. I am

indebted to your father for my education.'

'He obviously values you.'

'As I honour and serve him.' Brian cleared his throat and stood up. 'I beg your leave, domina. I should go and make sure all is ready for tomorrow.'

'You may go,' she said formally. 'I hope that one of your concerns is finding me a decent horse.'

'Indeed, it is my first and most urgent business, domina.' He bowed and departed the tent.

The moment he was gone, her women, Emma and Uli, bustled through the partition. She let them remove her dress and comb out her hair, then dismissed them with a flick of her fingers because she wanted to be alone to think. Fetching the coverlet from her bed, she folded it around her body, and sat cocooned in the chair, her knees drawn up and her fist pressed against her lips.

Outside, Brian stood in the wind and exhaled his tension. He had not expected the King's daughter to be so mettlesome and perceptive. She was as keen as a knife and just now he felt as if he had the cuts to prove it. When he arrived, she had looked at him as if he were an incompetent fool, and he was still smarting. He hoped he had salvaged something from the situation, but knew his reputation would be ruined if he did not have a horse for her by morning. There was nothing for it; he would have to put her up on his courser and use his squire's mount. The lad could go double with one of the serjeants.

The white-haired knight who headed her escort stepped out of his own small tent, where he had obviously been keeping a lookout for Brian. 'My mistress is always vexed

when things do not run as smoothly as she wishes.’ He spoke not to excuse Matilda, but rather to reproach Brian.

‘I have apologised and done my best to mend matters,’ Brian replied. ‘Be assured the Empress will enter Rouen in full dignity.’

The knight gave him a strong look. ‘Sire, you will find that my mistress does not know how to compromise.’

Brian bit his tongue on a sharp retort. ‘The Empress will find that a fitting welcome has been prepared.’

‘I have served my lady since she was a child,’ the knight said. ‘I have watched her become a woman, and wield power as consort to an emperor. She has greatness within her.’ He glanced at the tent from which Brian had just emerged and lowered his voice. ‘But she is fragile too, and in need of tender care. Who will give her that, when her pride is both her shield and her sword? Who will look beyond all that and see the frightened child and the vulnerable woman?’

Something stirred within Brian that he was at a loss to identify: neither pity nor compassion, but a glimmer of something more complex and disturbing. Her eyes were the grey of lavender flowers but clear as glass and they had met his with steady challenge, and even contempt. He did not see what this ageing knight saw, but he did not know her. What he had seen was truth and integrity, and it was as if she had taken a sharpened quill and written those words indelibly across his skin.

**Commented [..15]:** meaning? suggest rephrase

My comment

Same meaning as hard or powerful. Leave as it is.

**Commented [..16]:** ‘grey of *dried* lavender’? Lavender is purple?

My comment

Not all lavender is bright purple and comparing the colour to ‘dried lavender’ does not have the same effect. Leave as it is.