

The Crusader Kings II Stories Competition

MATILDA OF TUSCANY

Identification of Contestant

Name: Bianka B.

Submitting for category: Most Dramatic

Disclaimer: To avoid confusion, this will base its characters and history on what is present in the game.

I

THE CANOSSA WOMAN

1066



My name is Matilda di Canossa, Duchess of Tuscany, mistress in all but name of central Italy, which is presently under the rule of the Holy Roman Empire. I have been called a witch, a whore for the Kaiser, a whore for the Pope, but more than flesh and blood, I represent a concept. I am the

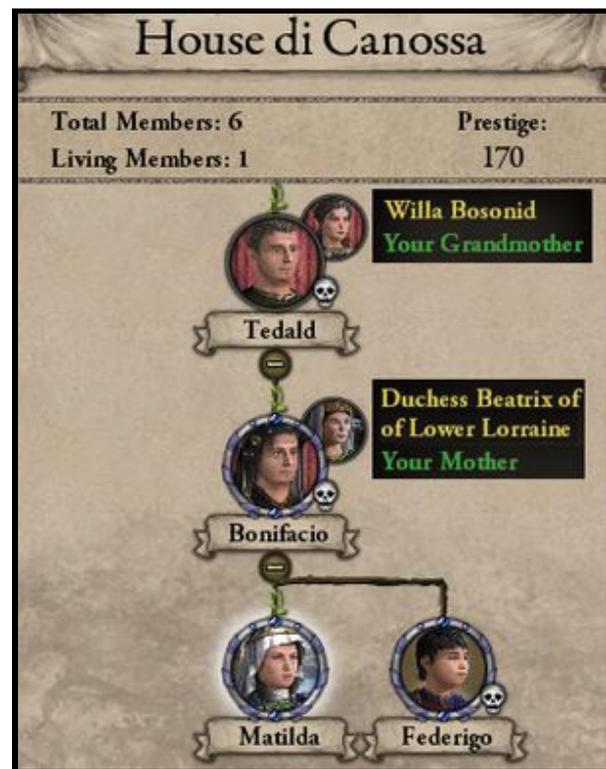
interregnum, a necessary evil. It has been accepted that, as I came from the seed of my father, Bonifacio, some other *man* shall put his seed in me, and from my womb, my own personal kind of throne room, shall emerge a male, already crowned in the honors and glory of my bloodline.

With his birth, his celebrated male birth, there are those who believe he will already have surpassed me in ability. As I write this account of my conquest of Italy, allow me to ask: have you?

I am but a vessel for the circlet on my brow, the ring at my finger, the great Italian vision. Everything I own, I merely borrowed, to hear them say. Looted from my father's still-cooling body, even though he died when I was but six years old, and between him and me came Federigo, my brother.

Tuscany was thriving. It's her neighbors who grew hungry, hungry for the glory that was all my father's. He rose over Italy like the great white sun of Canossa, but there are those who thrive better in the shade, and when I was six years old, they blotted him out.

A hunting accident. No doubt it was expected that me and Riggo -- that is what I called Federigo -- would hide, burrow into the earth like the hares and foxes Bonifacio had been so fond of, but Lady Beatrix -- our mother, from the House of Wigeriche -- had a different idea. The marriage to an enemy of the Kaiser, whom she accused of killing our father, the string of tutors brought to oversee my education, it was her way of taking revenge.



Some, the women-hating kind, say the Archangel Gabriel himself appeared on this earth and took Riggo away, that much-lamented Tuscany would be left with *me*, the whore. I was nine years old. They say: women are

hollow, women are meant for childbirth. There is no room in their bodies for the wisdom every good ruler needs. Fertile womb, empty head. There are days I long for a sword of my own. I would like to see what *they* are made of. Some, the more reasonable kind, recount a great fever, one I do not remember simply because I also suffered from it.

In another life I might have lived contentedly, sister to a great master of Tuscany, but in this life *I* am the master, and I am not content.



I want much and more, for my beautiful Tuscany. For she *is* beautiful, with the hills rolling golden and jewel-green, the palaces dating back to a long-dead empire, this one Roman in truth. I have come of age under the eyes of all of Italy. They were hoping for hares and foxes, but I have grown into a hound. A falcon, if we're being generous. I have been called stubborn, but zealous. Diligent, patient. And either way, I know what I want. Either way, the golden hills beckon, saying: *Rule, rule, rule.*

That was four years ago; I am twenty years old. I am of age -- of age for what? For marriage, for childbirth, to bring forth that cherished son of Canossa blood. Lady Beatrix lives in Upper Lorraine with her new husband. They're cousins, but the blood they share has thinned so much now that you couldn't build a house with it, the bricks wouldn't stick together.

Of age. What I am is of age to begin.

I begin.

Bonifacio left us domains vast and wide. When I was a child, Lady Beatrix would have me stand on a stool -- posture! -- and list them all. Florence, the jewel of my dynasty; Siena and Modena, close like sisters; Arezzo, Lucca and Parma, *sworn* to us rather than *of* us, but an oath is an oath; and in the south, nestled on the other side of the mountains that shield Rome, stand Perugia,

Aquila, Chieti, and vibrant Spoleto, the city-turned-duchy. We also -- I, it's *mine* -- have peaceful Brescia in the Alps, and the beautiful island of Corsica.



When I was four years old, the old Kaiser gifted my father with a map of Italy, all wool and golden thread, our domains illuminated in vibrant colors against the dull greens and browns of the merchant republics and the Papal States. I believe he wanted me for his son, then still an infant. Now, we may think of him as the fourth Heinrich. My father refused, stating that I would marry an Italian. I lost my father

soon after, and then poor Riggo, but I got to keep the map. You'd think the colors would've faded with time, but they haven't. It's as if only the map kept its word, for as you well know, I did not marry an Italian.

The more I looked at the colors, the more they seemed to brighten, seeping into neighbouring cities like paint from the careless artist. The gold of Tuscany washed over the Apennines, bathed Rome in the warm glow of Canossa. In my dreams, I would see hundreds (thousands!) of horsemen, riding golden thread and crimson blood. There wasn't enough thread for the lot of them; Italy must stand alone.

Do not think me a lunatic, entranced by visions or voices. I know what is best for my Italy. What does he know, the Kaiser, up in Germany? He is

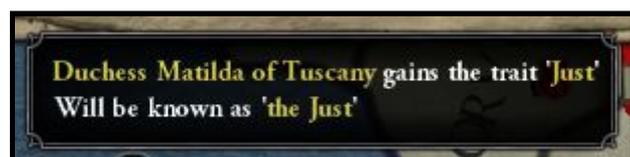
surrounded by sycophants, people ready to obey his every whim. I do not have such a problem; most of my vassals despise me, mostly because of what's between my legs. Some even volunteered to be my husband, take me to wife, take care of Tuscany for me. I don't need a *caretaker*. Already I have plans; already I am in talks with my neighbours, to find the proverbial husband that would put my vassals at ease.



I begin where everything begins -- not God, but cold money, although one might say financial success comes from the Lord. I borrow 300 gold coins from Jewish merchants, and I use the money to bring the brightest minds in the Empire to my court. My castellan, Jürgen, I send to Verona. The great bloodlines of Tuscany have mixed and muddled for

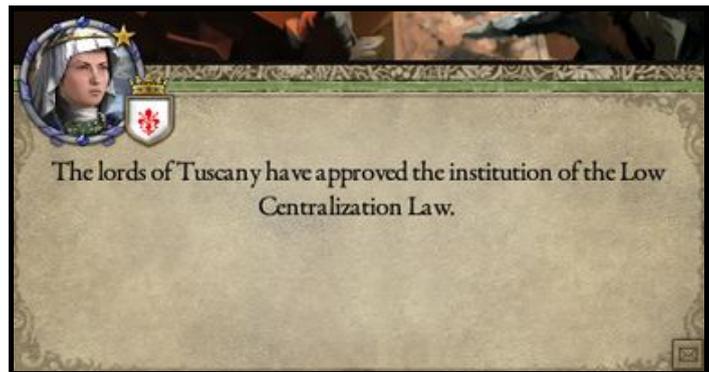
generations, and surely he can find a claim for me to lay on the city. While Jürgen toils away in Verona, my spies work at sabotaging the defenses of the city. Along with her neighbor Milan, Verona is key to my claim on the kingdom of Italy. To proclaim myself queen without them under my rule would be akin to building on sand.

I work on my domains, work on understanding the intricacies of



archaic laws, trading routes and dynastic allegiances, until word of my sense of justice spreads. I sit with Fra Benvenuto, the monk who oversaw my education. I listen to him, even if years have passed and I am now *of age*. As we play chess -- I have no real head for it, which greatly amuses the man -- Benvenuto says there's a new king in England. He says the little French king is threatened on all sides, he says that brothers are warring in the west, across the Mediterranean, fighting over what remains of their father's kingdom. And he says that unless I want the same thing happening to me, I should *delegate*. I cannot oversee my domains in Florence, he says, *and* the ones in Corsica, *and* the ones along the Apennines. Not for lack of an education, he's quick to point out. Simply because I cannot be everywhere at once.

I gather my councilors in the war chamber, in Florence, the room from where I can see every palazzo and garden. As of now, my domains are barely centralized. I propose we change that. They're in assent, mostly. I am young and it's the first time I bring them all here, the first time I make a demand, the first time I have an idea -- one that I voice. Maybe they figure it will be the last. But that is a problem solved. I part with Aquila, Chieti, and Brescia, granted to men faithful to my family. Now that I have less on my plate, it's easier to oversee troops and taxes, please local mayors, keep up with demands and festivals and visiting dignitaries.



While I wait; after men, after wars in the north and in the west, after my own womb, I think of Riggo. May he get the contentment I once craved; I shall have the greatness that should have been his, and make it tenfold.

II
LADY MILITANT
1067 - 1084

As the goddess Minerva sprung fully grown from the head of Jupiter, sword and shield in hand, Italy can spring fully grown from *me*, armed and armored. I fear not the pain of childbirth, as you surely know, or the loss of war. What I fear is waiting. Patience comes easy to me, that is true; waiting after the unknown does not. While I wait, I write the Lady Beatrix in Upper Lorraine, that she might convince her new husband of the righteousness of my cause -- a united Italy, to better serve the Kaiser.



At the southern tip of Italy stands the proud Sicily, but they would never wage my wars for me. Instead, I must look inland, to Swabia and Bavaria, but none of those dukes is possessed of a son I could marry. I look to Bohemia, where rules a duke with too many brothers. I write Jaromír, Bohemian on his father's side and German on his mother's, and

invite him to Florence. My vassals won't like that he's a foreigner, but they'll like the armies his brother provides us with. The flag of Canossa will rise, while the Kaiser throws his men away on the French border.

Jaromír's chaplain describes him to me as trusting and chaste, if a bit slothful and... well, the word he uses is "arbitrary". He professes of his young protégé's love of hunting. I think of hares and foxes. I think of the hound of Canossa. We marry in January of 1067.

Truth is, Jaromír is uncouth and humorless, but I need only a son or two from him. Slothful as he might be, he performs well in that duty, I believe. But Florence bores him; he speaks of battle, he speaks of Verona. At least we have that in common. But his attitude isn't without consequences; his *ennui* is known, and some men in Tuscany -- neighbors and vassals alike -- view it like a challenge. I turn each of them down, I blush prettily and proclaim myself a married woman, I do what is expected of me. I long for a crown, a sword, anything. I long for a son.

A dark rectangular notification box with yellow and white text. The text reads "Rejecting Seduction Attempts" in yellow and "Sex Appeal: +10" in white.

I am Queen in waiting. It would not do to attack Verona without just cause. I will not turn House di Canossa into a house of rogues. I do what I'm best at. I wait. And soon as Chancellor Jürgen can find me a claim on Verona, I will strike.



But Jürgen is taking his time. I do not doubt his loyalty, but 1067 passes without progress in our schemes, then 1068 and 1069. Jaromír grows restless, talks with much longing of his native Bohemia. My womb remains empty, and my

brow crownless. In 1069, I decide to seize the city of Capua. It won't help my claim to Italy, but it'll help my coffers, and remind Italy that House Canossa's hounds



did not die with Bonifacio. It's an easy war, one that begs the question: what next? South of Capua is Neapolis, weaker than Capua was. There's another way, one that would require a great show of Catholic devotion, and mayhaps even a journey to Rome, but I cannot bet the future of my dynasty on the whims of the Pope.

The Kaiser forces my hand, in the spring of 1070, declaring a war of vassalization on the Duke of Apulia. Heinrich craves those independent counts and dukes, Italian and Norman and even Greek. I cannot let him get all of them, I cannot let him send his armies in the Apennines unopposed and surround me with his vassals. I strike at Neapolis.



Heinrich and I are blessed on the field of battle. I take Neapolis, and the Kaiser takes Apulia... but it comes with a cost. Heinrich Salian dies on the warpath, and Ernst von Babenberg is left to claim the spoils of his victory. The new Kaiser doesn't give me cause to worry. I have enough gold to pay his taxes, enough diplomats to placate him, and the Alps between us to protect me, should he grow hungry for my lands. No, the real issue comes a bit later in the year, when the Holy Father and the Duke of Lower Lorraine, Lady Beatrix's second husband, die in quick succession. Beatrix returns to my court, despondent at my lack of children, but she is nothing if not shrewd. The means she dares suggest, the secret,

sordid trysts with guards... Anyone that shares my coloring, really, as to not alert Jaromír... as if he would notice. A useless oaf and some cynical, desperate schemer, that's all they are. I turn my attention to Beata Maria, a true mother to all.

Bless me with a child and I shall build a church in Your holy name in my Florence. My stomach remains flat. Instead of a church, I build a little pavilion for Beatrix in the gardens. It's there, with her guiding the words like a viper slithering on the page, that I draft my letter to our new Holy Father. I do not embarrass myself with frivolities. Fra Benvenuto has been in Rome for years now, spreading word of my good deeds, and I am liked, if not beloved. I have set my sights on Susa and her young duke, who is also burdened with Savoy on the other side of the Alps. *Too much power in such young hands*, I say. If the Pope finds my words ironic, I do not know. His answer comes quickly, and I move quicker still. The war in Susa is short and brutal, but I wrestle four counties from the young duke, and the right to call myself Duchess of Susa.



There are other titles I could lay claim to, but they pale in comparison to *Queen of Italy*. And they pale still when compared to my greatest triumph of the blessed year 1077: a pregnancy. I am thirty-two years old, long past the age for giddy displays of girlish youth, but I order new gowns, and build the church I promised our Mother Mary. I do everything I can, *everything*. I pray thrice a day and rest for my child's good health, I vow to Mother Mary to be charitable and take care of the needy of Tuscany. What better way to help the poor than a church which could distribute alms, bread, offer shelter? I have

I am surely with child... my husband will be pleased.

always been good. I have always been pious. I sit with Lady Beatrix in her pavilion and think of the son the Virgin will surely grant me, an heir for my united Italy.

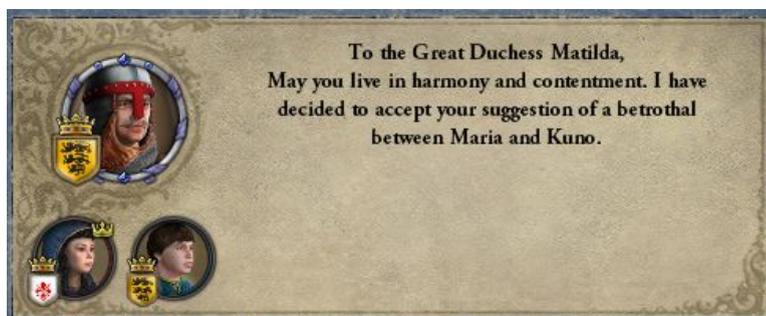


But it's not meant to be.

The birth is long and difficult. I name my daughter Maria, after She from whom I begged so hard for a son. There's something odd with her foot, something odd with her breathing, something odd with her weight. She is sickly, says Fra Benvenuto, she might die. He does



everything he can, of course. He swears on the Virgin to save my little girl, but I tire of all those Marys. As soon as I'm able, I must return to my conquest of Italy, and my little Maria, bless her fragile heart, has provided me with something I previously lacked: a pawn in the complex marriage game. I write Duke Rudolf of Swabia, whose domain expands just beyond the Alps. The Duke has two sons, and I offer him Maria for the youngest. Soon we are in agreement, he and I. *Allied*, able to crush Verona and Milan between us if we so wish. But I



have no desire to crush them. Merely, I want to hold them in the palm of my hand. I desire the golden shafts of wheat, not meager flour.

It's a dangerous game, of course. Maria is heir to all I possess. Should I not produce a son, there will be no Swabian marriage. Surely the Duke knows this, or perhaps he still hopes that once I am Queen of Italy, I won't mind trading our name for the might of his armies. It's something to ponder, while I return to my war chamber and my councilors. We focus on Milan, sending Jürgen to fabricate a claim, and Cassio, my spymaster, to sabotage the inner workings of the city. Maria lives to see her first birthday, and with the letter of congratulations sent by Jaromír's brother comes a different announcement: the



man has proclaimed himself King of Bohemia. I cannot begin to guess Jaromír's feelings on this, but I know mine: *good*. Pave the way, anger the Kaiser. Once he is surrounded by kings and queens, rightful leaders of their people, he won't know where

to put himself. Just like the Bohemian people now have Vratislav, the Italians shall have me.

Disaster strikes in February of 1080. Jürgen, who had such a good head for diplomacy, dies while in Milan. I find a Greek to replace him, a man named Nikolaos, whom I send to Milan with haste. He's been gone for no more than a few days when I am blessed with

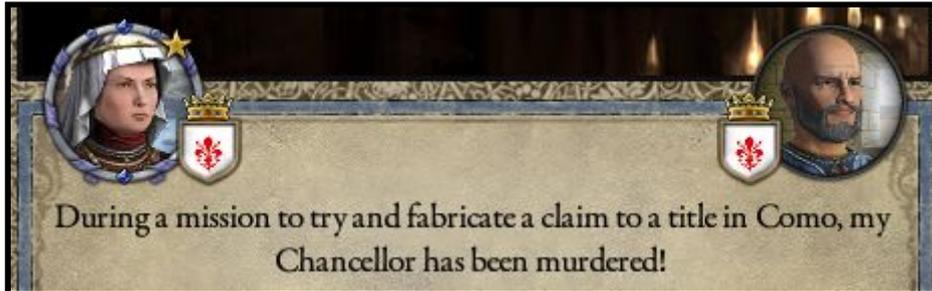
the first good news of the year: I am once more with child. The

I am surely with child... my husband will be pleased.

Blessed Virgin is on my side at least -- she *must* be, as completion of the church I am building in her name approaches -- for not long after I get past the early stages of morning sickness and odd cravings, Nikolaos sends me the news I have been waiting for, it seems, my whole reign. He finally managed to fabricate a claim on the Duchy of Milan.

Come home, I write him. Come home and meet your future King, the son I carry.

It pains me greatly to write of what came next.



I do not know precisely what happened, in July of 1080. Nikolaos wrote me, sent me his

documents, and left Milan by the northern road, so that he would not be followed. And yet he was. Men of the Milanese duke find him, and send him back to us. They bring the dagger that killed him, they speak of tragedy. And in my war chamber, ringed hands resting on my swollen belly, I speak of war. Nikolaos was almost home, he *should* have been home. I will avenge him, as I will avenge Jürgen, dead in Milan of *natural causes*.

Forgive me, Blessed Virgin. This war I wage, I wage in your name, to wrestle the fates of the Italian people from the hands of corrupt men. I want Italy to sing your praises, I want trade and peace, I want art, culture, foreign dignitaries. I want Greek men like Nikolaos to share their wisdom, I want to spread the good news of Your son's birth far and wide. If you would simply allow me a son of my own...

I give myself until the spring of 1081, after the birth of my second child, to fill my coffers and prepare for the war on Milan.

And then I wait.

As I enter confinement, my ally in Swabia claims the dignity of king for himself. His is a kingdom in shambles, bordered left and right by enemies, but

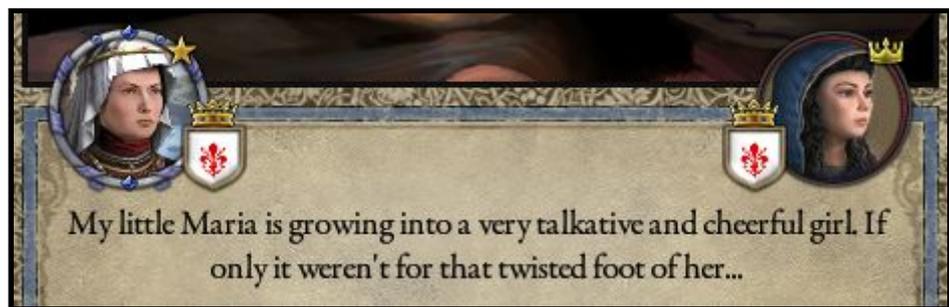


he remains a powerful friend to have. I long to write that awaited letter, I long to call him to arms. But first, I must be delivered of this child.

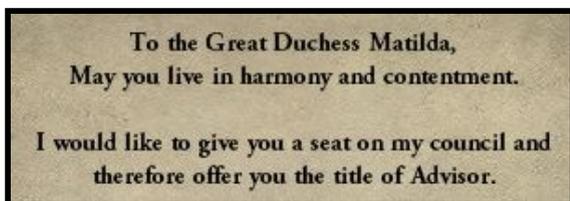
I name my second daughter Beatrice. My lady Mother is most pleased.

Her birth is not a disappointment. Rather, it's eye-opening. She is as I once was, full of possibility, and fully healthy. She has Jaromír's coloring, light blond hair, and he delights over her more than he ever did with Maria. I suspect my poor girl's clubfoot factors in her father's disdain of her. Nevertheless, Maria thrives, and over the summer of 1081, Jaromír and I grow closer together. He no longer misses Bohemia as sorely, now that my crown is so close at hand.

Before our second daughter has turned one year of age, I realize



I am pregnant again.



But this news, and the rejoicing that surrounds it, is dampened by the Kaiser's death. He is replaced by young Magnus Billung, who installs his court

far in the north, near Denmark, and writes to me of his desire for my counsel. I am to be his Advisor, even if the Empire stands between his capital and mine.

While I wait for the birth of my third child, I drill my troops and oversee my finances. We might need to hire mercenaries to conquer Milan, tasteless as it might be, but I want to be ready. In October, the Kaiser invites me to his

coronation. I bring Jaromír, Fra Benvenuto, my lady Mother, and young Maria, whose betrothal is formally announced in the Kaiser's capital of Luneburg. There, I learn of the death of Rudolf of Swabia, and renew my alliances with his sons.



And in April, I give birth, finally, to a son of my own. I name him Bonifacio, after my father. Mere weeks after his birth, I plan his betrothal to a daughter of the Duke of Friuli, north of Venice. Beatrice, I promise to a grandson of the Duke of Bavaria, beyond the Alps.

Spring has come. My coffers are full. In the north, the Kaiser is losing control of his more powerful vassals, but the south is unaffected. On the 2nd of May 1083, I declare war on Milan. My councilors take some convincing -- it's been so long, and the cost it seems has been so high already, but I am confident. I write the Kings of Bohemia and Swabia, I write the Duke of Friuli, and send my troops up to where Milan awaits.



Perhaps I am too eager. By spring, I have taken Pavia, and the Milanese seize nearby Brescia, the city they've eyed for years. In April, we meet in Milan proper, where everything is to be decided. I await in Parma, safely under my rule. We cannot see Milan from the hills of the city, but the messengers sent back and forth between the camps speak of fire and great columns of smoke, the Milanese in disarray, my allies from beyond the Alps swarming down upon them like falcons.

I think of hares and foxes.

The battle of Milan is won, and so my armies chase them even further north, in Como, where they murdered our dear Nikolaos. *Let them hide, I think, let them burrow into the earth.* We outnumber them, outnumber them so very



much indeed that *battle* is hardly the word for it, it should be *slaughter*. I no longer shy from battle, I no longer feel afraid. My father almost did this, almost placed the crown of Italy upon his own head. I am walking in his footsteps, as my own heirs one day shall.

Queen, they already whisper, in Parma, as we await news of the battle. *Queen, queen, queen.*

On the 20th of August, 1084, my troops seize Milan, and the fate of this country is decided.



III

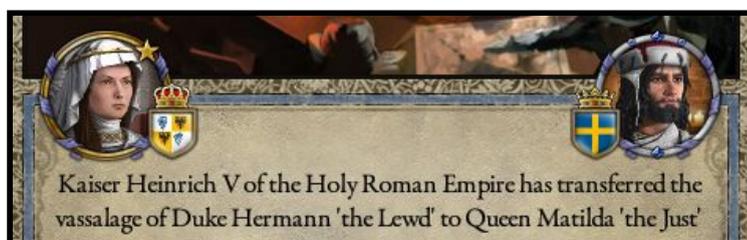
THE ITALIAN QUEEN

1085 - 1089

On the 24th of June 1085, the Feast of Saint John the Baptist, I proclaim myself Queen of Italy, after some time spent refilling my coffers and writing my allies. I am thirty-nine years old, and pregnant with my fourth child. It's a most difficult pregnancy, but I draw strength from what I've just accomplished, as Jaromír and I parade through Florence and Sienna. Lady Beatrix rides in the carriage behind us with the children. She is sixty-five, nearing the end of her life, and yet I've never seen her more resplendent. I am no longer a girl, no longer hungry for her approval, but her words -- *I'm proud of you, Matilda* -- echo in my heart long after she has said them.

Queen Matilda the Just, they call me. It's a title I accept gladly, one I hope you can inherit, or surpass. Bonifacio the Bold, Bonifacio the Benevolent. Yes, I can see it.

More than ever before, I delegate. I make Dukes of my faithful vassals, grant counties and cities to my trusted advisors, renew my alliances with our neighbors. The Empire is struggling with civil war, for the Kaiser has died and his successor has raised some jumped-up bishop as his own lackey pope. It complicates things greatly, as you will no doubt remember.

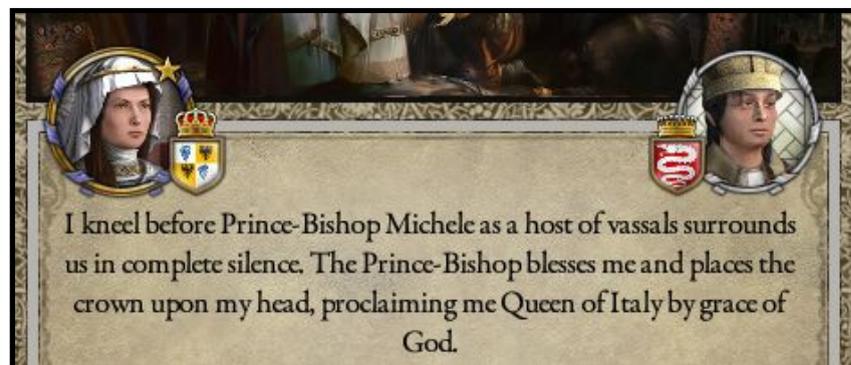


The Kaiser recognizes my divine right to rule the Italians, and is quick to act, granting me authority over

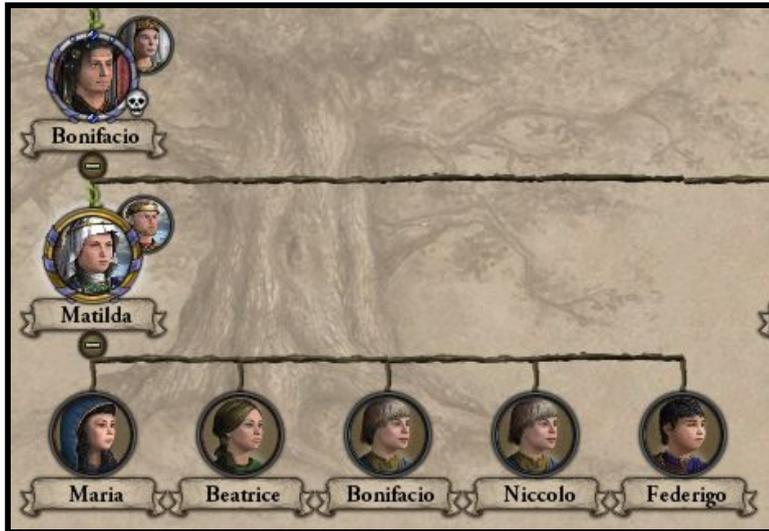
the Duke of Verona. Ah! I'm sure the irony won't be lost on you. As for the Duke himself... He visits us right after I enter my confinement, and revels with Jaromír more than he pays homage to me. No matter; I have bested him. I have bested these men who called me *whore*, and thought of making Italy their own.

I name my son Niccolo, both after our current -- our *true* Pope in Rome -- and Nikolaos, the man who all but gave me the crown, and lost his life in the process. The Kaiser -- the new Kaiser -- once more offers me a seat on his council, as his Advisor. I have conquered Italy, I have forged treaties with allies far and wide. I could marshal the man's armies, I could receive foreign dignitaries on his behalf, but I remain a woman. A vessel, once for sons, now for a crown. I look upon the faces of my assembled courtiers and wonder how many of them long to see me dead, to see you crowned. You are merely five, merely a *child*, but my brother Riggo was a child too. As was I.

In March of 1087, two months after Jaromír and I celebrate twenty years of bittersweet marriage, I am



officially crowned Queen of Italy. The Kaiser's antipope is a German good-for-nothing, and the Holy Father in Rome fears that even I, his devoted servant, would lure him into a trap, and so I am crowned by the Prince-Bishop of Arezzo, who traces a cross on my brow with the holy oil, blesses my soul, body, and rule, and places the crown upon my head, at last. I feel my father at my side, in this moment, and poor little Riggo, who should have been the one receiving such glory.



Shortly after my coronation, I discover that I am once more with child. It's a shock, at my age; I am forty-two, and had put the hopes of having more children to rest, busy as I was ruling my kingdom, listening to my advisors,

my vassals, my people. I am perhaps too old for childbirth, but I'm unafraid. The Blessed Virgin denied me children for ten years, but in the end she provided, did she not? I have faith in her, and I am rewarded, as ever. I name my third son Federigo, and bid the ghost of my little brother's cut-short hopes and dreams farewell. This Federigo, this prince, shall thrive and make the sun of Canossa shine ever brighter, I can feel it. The way I could feel, all those years ago, that one day the crown of Italy would rest upon my brow.

Once I am well enough to visit Florence again, I stop by the Church of Santa Maria, which is almost complete now. I watch the sculptors at work, direct where this or that pane of colored glass should be placed. This is the church I offered the Blessed Virgin in exchange for you, Bonifacio, and it will stand here in Florence, forever, or until the heirs of your heirs, having surpassed us in piety and skill, build something of even greater beauty.

One day, my Bonifacio, when you are grown, I shall recount to you in person the long string of struggles that allowed the crown of Italy to finally rest upon my head, and one day yours. By then, mayhaps, we shall no longer be under the rule of the German emperors, and there shall be no more antipopes, and no more senseless war against the French. You shall be a king of peace and

piety, and your sisters shall wed dukes and kings, and your brothers, God willing, shall assist you in all your endeavors, the sons of Canossa working as one to ensure Italy is never again left at the mercy of men unfit to even walk her soil.

But for now I must leave you, and send our dear old Fra Benvenuto back home on his own, with my ink and paper. I have met the most fascinating pilgrim while touring Santa Maria, and would love to hear what he thinks of my new Italy. But have no fear; I will return to my journals soon.



Some days being Queen is no easy thing. There is always business to attend to, subjects seeking audiences and vassals complaining about imagined injustices. Finally you are having a moment to yourself, strolling the gardens. In the distance you spot a stranger dressed in a simple garb.