

FADE IN:

...on the NIB OF A QUILL PEN moving in small, neat strokes across a sheet of parchment. The black ink forms letters in Latin script.

SUPER: 'If on the death of a baron or other of my men a surviving daughter is the heir, I will give her [in marriage] with her land following the advice of my barons.'

Clause in the coronation charter of Henry I, King of England and Duke of Normandy, 1100 AD

As we hear FEMALE VOICES murmuring prayers in Latin...

CUT TO:

INT. BEDCHAMBER

Dark, cave-like. Floor strewn with rushes. A fire burns in the central stone hearth, throwing shadows onto the walls.

SUPER: England. Christmas, 1126 AD

A YOUNG WOMAN, flushed and sweating, lies on a straw mattress. FEMALE ATTENDANTS dip cloths in bowls of water and wipe her face as they murmur their prayers.

A sharp cry from the young woman. The baby is coming. The MIDWIFE urges her on. A long shuddering groan...

...and a sudden release. A gush of bloody fluid, and the BABY slithers out into the arms of the midwife.

The mother slumps back, exhausted.

The midwife wipes the blood and mucus from the baby's face. It breaks into an outraged wail.

EXT. PALACE OF WESTMINSTER - DAY

Bright, cold sunlight. Leather boots crunch on frosted grass as SIR THOMAS (early 20s) strides across to meet the newly-arrived MESSENGER dismounting from his horse.

They confer briefly, breath condensing in the chill air.

Sir Thomas spins on his heel and strides back, towards a fellow knight, SIR JOHN.

SIR THOMAS  
(disappointed)  
Another daughter.

SIR JOHN  
Daughters can still be useful,  
Thomas.

The two knights walk together towards the entrance to the stately stone fortress, on the banks of the River Thames.

SUPER: Royal Palace of Westminster, near London

INT. GREAT HALL, PALACE OF WESTMINSTER - DAY

KING HENRY (late 50s), stocky and black-haired.

KING HENRY  
My lords, it is time.

Beside him, his daughter THE EMPRESS MATILDA (mid 20s), haughty and hard-faced, in the black garb of a royal widow.

King Henry may not be the largest man there, but by God he owns this place, and the assembled BARONS, the great Anglo-Norman nobles, all feel it.

KING HENRY  
It has been six years since the death of our beloved son and heir, William, in that great tragedy which took the lives of so many sons and daughters.

FLASHBACK - THE ENGLISH CHANNEL - NIGHT

A sliver of moonlight on the dark sea. A ship, ripped apart by a rock at the mouth of a harbour.

A drowning 17-year-old BOY, dragged down by the weight of his silks and furs.

Dozens of other YOUNG NOBLES around him. Some already dead. Others crying out for help as they struggle in the water.

BACK TO SCENE

Faces show that the grief and anguish are still keenly felt.

KING HENRY  
In that time God has not seen fit to give our queen another son. Therefore I have made this decision. My daughter Matilda, widow of the Holy Roman Emperor, will be my successor, to rule over the lands on both sides of the sea, the lands of England and Normandy. You will all now swear to accept her as my heir, and to uphold her rights, and those of her future heirs, after my death.

Some raised eyebrows, but no one dares to question it.

One of the oldest barons steps forward. This is DAVID OF SCOTLAND. He kneels before the Empress.

DAVID OF SCOTLAND

My lady.

THE EMPRESS

Uncle.

DAVID OF SCOTLAND

I, David, King of the Scots and vassal of King Henry of England, do solemnly swear...

As David completes his oath, STEPHEN (late 20s), the golden boy of Henry's court, steps forward to be next in line -

- at the same time as another baron: the darkly charismatic ROBERT, EARL OF GLOUCESTER, a decade older than Stephen.

A few moments of shoulder-barging and scuffling between the two men. They glare at each other.

Then Earl Robert, with exaggerated courtesy, allows Stephen to precede him.

Stephen kneels before the Empress.

STEPHEN

I, Stephen, Count of the lands of Mortain and Boulogne, and vassal of King Henry of England, do solemnly swear...

Unnoticed at the back of the room, our two knights look on.

SIR JOHN

So the King's nephew precedes the King's bastard.

SIR THOMAS

You should know our man by now. Always determined to be first.

They watch as Stephen kisses the Empress's hand.

INT. ROYAL HUNTING LODGE - DAY

SUPER: Royal hunting lodge, near Rouen, Normandy. Nine years later.

King Henry, his receding black hair streaked with grey, lies in bed. He is dying, slowly and in agony.

THE BISHOP OF ROUEN leaves his side as a grim, travel-stained Earl Robert enters the room.

BISHOP OF ROUEN

He has made his last confession.