

Prologue

“My lord, riders approach. ‘Tis the king’s banner.”

The young man turned to see the sunburst and sword of his father’s flag. He stood waiting on the stout stone bridge over the Trenta. He was tall, like the king, and had his coloring: sandy hair, sun-tanned skin, remarkable blue eyes, and his warrior’s build as well. He was clad in mail and a thick blue wool cloak. He was the ætheling, the heir to the throne of Críslícland, the kingdom that was no more.

“Peter, my son!” the lead rider of the small company of armed men called. Peter saluted him, fist to chest, and his grin broadened. He approached the stirrup of the horse that bore his father and reached up to help the older man dismount.

“I don’t need that, not yet anyway.” King Lawrence swung his leg over the horse and hit the ground with perhaps a little too much bravado. As they walked together back to the side of the bridge, Peter noticed his father limping. It was the old, very old, thigh wound. As the king aged, the leg troubled him increasingly.

Peter looked at his father. He was still a strongly built man with the developed shoulders, chest and arms of a man of the sword. His eyes were as piercing as ever, but there was gray in the once dark blonde beard, and wrinkles at the edges of his eyes and lips. “So, you come from Lincoln. Is it done then, Father?”

Lawrence glanced sideways at his eldest child; now well into his own adulthood. He leaned his forearms on the stone barrier of the bridge. “Aye, the treaty is signed, sealed and in the Bishop of Lincoln’s hands. You are looking at earl Lawrence.” He looked down at the passing water of the river.

“Regrets?” Peter asked. His tone was amused.

His father’s wry smile was all the answer Peter would get. “I should be asking you that, son.”

Peter sighed and looked upriver. “You know my thoughts on it all. You really had no choice. Either give it up willingly or Offa would eventually have taken it.”

“Or the raiders,” the older man inserted.

“Oh, I think I could have handled the raiders.” He quickly added, “My liege.”

“Nay, not liege any more.”

Peter joined his father leaning on the bridge. “I can remember when I was terribly little looking up to you and thinking you would be king forever. But then I also thought you were king of everything.”

Lawrence grinned at his profile. “Then you weren’t impatiently waiting for me to die so you would be king?”

Peter laughed ruefully. “I didn’t even think of that. Mother never allowed us to talk about a time when you or she would be gone. It was almost like a superstition she had.”

“Not almost. It was a superstition. She would not let me talk about it either. Only once.” He looked to the west and the Roman road that led from the bridge to the stronghold and town of Ratherwood.

“Was that the time you were in siege and she had been caught behind the battle lines?”

“Aye, and we had a bittersweet reunion. I thought I would never see her again. Or you and your brother and sisters.” He cast down his eyes. “That was a very long time ago.”

“This bridge was here then, right?” Peter stood back and surveyed the heavy stone structure.

Lawrence followed his gaze. “Aye, it was. It was built when I was a boy. Your uncle, the ætheling then, and I went with our father to be betrothed to the king of Affynshire’s daughters. King Edwærd and my father first started making plans for the bridge during that visit.”

Peter laughed aloud. “You were betrothed that young? How old was Mother?”

Lawrence now stood and stretched. “I don’t know, don’t remember. Eight, I think. She was a wild one.”

Peter settled his back against the wall, his arms crossed. He loved the stories of his parents’ early years. “Wild? In what way?”

The king scratched his head and considered. “Imperious, though she denied it. She was in no hurry to warm up to me. I found her in a tree and told her girls should not climb trees. It wasn’t fitting for a lady.”

“I remember this story. That’s when she replied, ‘I am a lady and I climb trees, so that means it must be fitting.’”

Lawrence chuckled and nodded. “She was holding...what was it? A cat? No, a coney. She dropped it and I caught it. That’s when she decided she would agree to marry me.”

Peter laughed and slapped his father’s shoulder. “That sounds like Mother, all right.” He left his hand on his father’s shoulder. Looking around again, he said, “So this bridge went up after that. It must bring a lot of memories back.”

Lawrence leaned to look at the river. “It does indeed.” He looked over at the eastern bank. He lifted his arm to point. “I was just over there when I learned I was to go with my own father and brother to war.”

“The war with Nifhmund? Your uncle?”

“Aye. That’s when everything changed. When everything fell apart.”

“Not this bridge,” his son proclaimed, slapping his palm on the stone. “It will last forever.”

Lawrence shook his head absently. “Nay, my son. Nothing lasts forever.”

Peter could see his father was drifting back through more than a score of years of memory. He took a pensive position of his own, enjoying the silent companionability with his father.

Be great in act, as you have been in thought;
Let not the world see fear and sad distrust
Govern the motion of a kingly eye:
Be stirring as the time; be fire with fire;
Threaten the threatener and outface the brow
Of bragging horror: so shall inferior eyes,
That borrow their behaviors from the great,
Grow great by your example and put on
The dauntless spirit of resolution.
Away, and glister like the god of war,
When he intendeth to become the field:
Show boldness and aspiring confidence.

King John, Act 5, Scene 1