

*The Tragedy of the Burns Family and the First Expedition to Saltmarsh**

Chapter XVII: The Bridge of Green Light

In the year 453 CY, during the reign of King Tavish III, Keoland was ablaze with ambition. Charged by royal decree to expand their dominion, over a thousand men, women, and children departed the comforts of their homeland to claim the untamed lower lands from elves and lizardfolk alike. Among them was the noble house of Burns, their name synonymous with power and honor. Daphne and Clifford Burns, revered figures of the court, led this great expedition, their young son Charles by their side.

For Daphne and Clifford, this was more than conquest; it was destiny. Their house, venerated in the halls of Gryrax, saw the establishment of Saltmarsh as the key to solidifying Keoland's future. Charles, though merely sixteen summers old, had shown prodigious talent in the arcane arts. Yet his parents deemed that no library nor mage's tower could offer the lessons the wilds might teach. This was his

crucible, a trial by fire to mold the boy into a man who could carry the weight of his family's legacy.

The fleet of ten ships, brimming with eager settlers, navigated southward along the Azure Sea, their banners rippling proudly. Upon making landfall, the colonists marveled at the untouched beauty of the lands they claimed. Rolling meadows kissed by the sun, forests thick with mystery, and rivers shimmering under starlight promised prosperity. Scattered among these wilds were ancient structures, relics of elven craftsmanship. Most notable was an arched bridge of onyx, gleaming stone that spanned a quiet river.

The bridge was no ordinary relic. Those who crossed it spoke of whispers carried on the wind, seductive promises of riches, power, and glory. Some settlers claimed they saw visions of distant lands, others a glimpse of their future triumphs. Daphne, a woman of sharp intellect, dismissed these tales as mere superstition. Yet even she could not deny the allure of the bridge. Clifford, ever the skeptic, was drawn to its grandeur, his curiosity tempered by a soldier's pragmatism.

The peace that greeted the humans, however, was short-lived. It became clear that the elves who once ruled these lands were embroiled in a bitter civil war. The high elves and the drow, ancient enemies, waged

a brutal conflict over these lands, their hatred as deep as the roots of the forests. The Burns family, along with their compatriots, found themselves caught in the crossfire. Neither side saw the humans as allies, and both harbored mistrust of the new settlers.

As if the strife between elves and drow were not enough, The sea devils saw the settlers as easy prey. Launching merciless raids that targeted the humans, elves, and drow alike. Tensions rose within the colony, and whispers of desertion began to fester. The land that had once seemed a haven now revealed itself as a crucible of death.

On a fateful day, as dusk painted the horizon in shades of red and gold, the final blow fell. The settlers were beset on all sides, their fragile colony crushed under the weight of war. The Burns family, ever at the forefront of the charge, fought valiantly to defend their people. But the chaos overwhelmed them. According to deserters caught, the last sight of Daphne and Clifford Burns was of the pair standing defiantly, holding the line as their son Charles was hurried away to the center of the camp by the onyx bridge.

When the last supply ship arrived weeks later, they found a land of silence and ash. Near the bridge, a field of charred and lifeless bodies stretched for nearly a mile. Among the ruins, a lone figure sat by

the bridge, his once fine robes singed and torn. It was Charles Burns, now the sole survivor of the ill-fated expedition.

Reports from the sailors spoke of the boy's vacant gaze and trembling hands. When questioned, he muttered only fragments of what had transpired. He spoke of a green light that erupted from the bridge, of screams that were swallowed by the inferno, and of an unnatural stillness that followed. "The bridge," he whispered, "it spoke Draconic, Thr... and then they burned."

Charles was returned to Keoland, his mind scarred and his future forever altered. The boy who had once aspired to mastery in the arcane arts was now a living testament to the horrors of Saltmarsh. The bridge, the crown jewel of the colony, had become a symbol of ruin—a reminder of human hubris in the face of ancient powers they could neither understand nor control.

Previous crews who had supplied the settlement, noted that the bridge had changed. It was no longer just onyx, but it was now smeared with green cracks.