

The land was lost—burned beyond recognition. Only the bridge remained, untouched, defiant. The survivors we found were few, scattered, and barely clinging to life. Among them was Martyn Oweland, a deserter, though I had little energy to judge him. The others were no better—some wounded, some too shaken to speak. And then there was the boy. He did not weep, did not speak, only stared, trapped in some distant horror. Why had he survived when nothing else had? I have seen men shaken by war, but this was something else.

At Revell Island, I left the boy in the warden's care. The others, I took to Gradsul. My son, now Marshal, claimed custody of the prisoners, though I doubted he would find answers in them. They were already lost. Perhaps we should have left them where we found them. The stockades seem crueler than death for men so far gone. Their eyes held no hope, only a quiet, creeping dread, as if something still clung to them.

The King summoned me at once. He wanted another expedition. I refused, warning him of the dangers. The land itself rejects us. He argued, but in the end, relented. I do not wish to see more men die. The place

is cursed. No army will change that. Even if we return, I fear we would only be feeding whatever darkness lingers there. Those who survive do not return whole.

That night, I felt it—something reaching, searching. The same question gnawed at me: why did the boy live? The fire took all, yet he remained. I fear the land did not spare him. It marked him. What did the burns do? And more importantly, what or how would this effect him?

It was only later, in 524 CY, that Eda Oweland, granddaughter of Martyn Oweland, led an expedition back to Solmar, determined to reclaim what had been lost. Even under strong protest from then-Grand Marshal Arlen Solmar, King Tavish V was unwavering in his resolve. He was intent on completing his grandfather's vision, pouring resources into the expansion of Saltmarsh and the surrounding lands. What had once been abandoned as cursed and dangerous was now seen as an opportunity—one that the king would not allow to slip away.

Yet fate was unkind. Tavish V would not live to see the fruits of his ambition, as war to the north consumed his final years. It would be King Skotti, who ultimately reaped the benefits of this gamble. The land, once feared and forsaken, now flourished, its