

Vol. 1: The Invasion of Llael, 604 AR

ESCALATION TO WAR

by Douglas Seacat

“The Fire & the Forge” is a feature examining pivotal moments in the recent history of western Immoren and its groups battling for supremacy or survival. It is intended to allow newer readers to become familiar with what has come before and to serve as an engaging reminder to veteran readers.

Escalation to War, the first series in “The Fire & the Forge,” will be chronicled in six parts and goes back to the era of *WARMACHINE: Escalation*, covering a pivotal turning point starting at the end of 604 AR and going through 605 AR. These conflicts launched six brutal years of turmoil and war that reshaped the region and saw the rise of powerful competing factions. Escalation to War will include the Llaelese War and the onset of the Protectorate’s Great Crusade, as well as the start of Cryx’s mainland ambitions. It all began with an invasion of a vulnerable nation caught between rival superpowers.

WAR BEGINS

In the final weeks of 604 AR, Khador launched a three-pronged assault against its eastern neighbor, the kingdom of Llael. The attack on Llael’s western border was masterminded by the brilliant Kommandant Gurvaldt Irusk, who sent his nation’s finest warcasters to overwhelm the garrisons at Laedry, Redwall

Fortress, and Elsinberg. If these three vital positions could be seized, Irusk knew he could rapidly advance into the interior and gain an insurmountable advantage before Llael’s allies could gather sufficient forces to stand against him.

Llael had been a kingdom long coveted by Khador—with wealth accumulated from its fertile soils and from its geographical position as a centralized market for trade. The Black River running through its center served as the primary artery for goods exchanged between Rhul and Cygnar, and Llael’s markets had long benefitted from trade with Ord and even Ios before their seclusion. Llael’s northern mountains near Rynyr are one of the Iron Kingdoms’ most abundant sources of the minerals required to make blasting powder, a vital military asset. The Order of the Golden Crucible—headquartered in the northeastern city of Leryn—had exploited these mines to become a powerful and wealthy organization famed for its premier alchemists.



The Khadoran High Kommand, at the behest of Queen Ayn Vanar, intended to seize all of Llael's many assets for their exclusive use. This was to be but the first step in a longer campaign to restore Khadoran supremacy: to return the lands and strength it had boasted as the Khardic Empire before being broken apart by the Orgoth. The Khadorans believed they were fighting to reclaim what was theirs by right.

By 604 AR, Llael suffered from a troubled government. The rift between the poor and the wealthy had become vast, with scheming nobles living lives of excess while many of their citizens starved. The last king had died under mysterious circumstances nine years earlier and had not been replaced. While he sired a large number of sons and daughters—both legitimate and illegitimate—his heirs perished amid a series of assassinations and “mishaps.” Into this power vacuum rose Deyar Glabryn, Archduke of Southryne, who seized power as prime minister.

Glabryn became preoccupied with internal politics, seemingly oblivious to the vulnerable state of his nation. The Llaelese Army suffered years of neglect, their numbers diminishing as the treasury reduced spending on salaries and armament. The men and women in uniform along Llael's western border proved to be patriotic and determined soldiers, willing to

give their lives to protect their homeland, even without the support of their nobles and the prime minister who led them. Llael increasingly looked to mercenaries to supplement its army while making demands of Cygnar, its longstanding ally, for support. Llael's major garrisons—particularly at Redwall Fortress—relied on the presence of a large number of Cygnaran soldiers to protect their border. On these walls, strong friendships were forged between the soldiers of both nations. Some of the Cygnarans stationed in Llael had brought their families into the kingdom and had come to view it as a second home.

These defenders did not anticipate a Khadoran assault as the end of 604 AR neared. Conventional wisdom suggested that launching a military campaign at the onset of winter was the height of folly. Winter is a time when supply lines are difficult to sustain, and the weather favors the defender. Hundreds of years of tradition insisted the campaigning season should be after the thaw in the spring. Yet if there was any military force conditioned to endure the hardship of launching a war in winter, it was the Khadoran Army. When the first mortars and rifles fired against Llaelese garrisons on Ashtoven 15th, the attack took everyone by surprise. The battles that followed would be shaped by and would inspire ongoing advances in military technology, forcing an evolution of tactics and

strategies. This period also saw an alarming rise in the intensity of supernatural forces, including both profane and holier influences.

The Cygnaran Reconnaissance Service, arguably the most skilled and well-funded intelligence network in western Immoren, was caught off guard by the invasion of Llael. There were reasons for this failure. Scout General Bolden Rebald's agents had, in fact, been following a number of interesting leads related to the movement of military forces inside Khador. When the conspiracy-minded Rebald and his senior officers evaluated these facts, however, they came to the wrong conclusions.

Signs pointed to the possibility that Great Prince Vladimir Tzepesci, an esteemed Umbrean warcaster, was gathering an army of his loyal retainers. He also appeared to be accumulating, in secret, an unprecedented number of old and unstable heavy warjacks, ones removed from the High Kommand's active duty roster. These and other movements of armed forces inside Khador were evocative and noticed, but they were interpreted incorrectly.

The conclusion seemed obvious to Rebald—Great Prince Tzepesci, whose line had once sat on the Khadoran throne and had long been a thorn in Queen Vanar's side—was making a move to depose the queen. The notion of internal civil war between the Vanar dynasty and Tzepesci's allies delighted the head of the CRS, and he concluded Cygnar need not worry about a threat from the north for some time to come. As the new year neared, CRS agents toasted the imminent turmoil in Khador's capital...even as mortar shells began to fall on the defenders at Laedry.

THE TACTICIAN, THE SPY, AND THE BLACK PRINCE

Just outside Laedry, northwestern Llael

Kommandant Gurvaldt Irusk walked carefully through the dark tunnel, his gauntleted hand tracing along the stones of its wall. Night had fallen, and the overcast sky had shrouded the area in darkness, even beyond the old bridge beneath which the warcaster had found the passage to the tomb where he would meet with his most cunning protégé. His adjutants had not wanted him to go alone, so far from his army, but he ignored their pleas and left them with his horse at the road. They had already taken too many risks of discovery. The outer graveyards of Laedry were uninviting and ominous, but patrols did sometimes roam the paths. The city itself was very near, its outer wall topped by occasional flickering torchlights.

He stopped for a moment and listened; he felt confident no one had followed him. He wore his warcaster armor but had set its turbine to its lowest

setting, giving forth the smallest wisps of smoke. The armor felt heavy on his frame without its field empowered to lift its weight, but its joints had been oiled, and it fit him like a second skin. He found the weight comforting.

He rapped on the tomb door lightly twice, harder twice, and then once after a pause. It creaked open, revealing a dim orange light within, and a hand beckoned him in.

"Kommandant, well met. Care for a cigar?" The man spoke in perfect Llaelese inflected by a distinct eastern Umbrean accent.

Irusk froze for a moment, as the voice was not familiar. The thought crossed his mind he might have been somehow betrayed or tricked into ambush. But then his eyes adjusted, and he saw a familiar smile.

He walked into the small damp chamber and waved away the offered cigar. Standing before him was a well-built younger man in the armor of a Llaelese officer. His short-cropped black hair and goatee, together with his larger frame, immediately suggested he was Umbrean. This was not uncommon among the western border forces; Llaelese Umbreans dominated their officer corps, particularly in Laedry. Despite that, they were underpaid compared to their Rynnish counterparts. The insignia on his shoulder marked him as a Llaelese colonel.

"We are in position," he said, now in Khadoran. Impressively, even his return to his native tongue maintained the Umbrean and Llaelese accent. He raised a match to light his own cigar, the flame revealing a self-satisfied expression and eyes Irusk knew well. "I await your go-ahead."

"You startled me," Irusk said with a low chuckle. "A convincing accent. And disguise. You have a remarkable talent, Oleg Strakhov."

"Please, let's not use that name here," the other man said. "I'd prefer to stay in character."

"Of course, *Colonel*," Irusk said. "Our forces are very nearly ready. Two or three days, and we begin. I need you to accomplish your mission just before we move. Can you get to Archduke Vladirov by then? This will go much more smoothly if he were to disappear. Preferably by tomorrow, or the day after at the latest."

The Khadoran warcaster pretending to be a Llaelese colonel gave Irusk a steady look and then nodded, drawing on his cigar. "No problem. I will also remove a substantial number of his command staff. Chances are I will lose two-thirds or more of those I brought with me during my extraction. Unavoidable, given the timeframe. They are skilled, well trained. A costly loss."

F&F INTEL: UMBREANS

Umbrey was an ancient kingdom once joined to the Khardic Empire. Its descendants, Umbreans, were divided between the newer nations of Khador and Llael. There remain familial ties and a shared culture between them, though some are proud Khadorans and others are patriotic Llaelese.



◀ Invasion of Llael Battles
Beginning Ashtoven 15th,
604 AR

BATTLE OF LAEDRY

ATTACKERS:

3rd Division, 2nd Khadoran Army,
led by Kommandant Irusk
House Tzepesci Forces, led by
Great Prince Tzepesci

DEFENDERS:

Laedry Garrison, Llaeese Army
Thunderhelm Irregulars

BATTLE OF REDWALL FORTRESS

ATTACKERS:

4th Division, 2nd Khadoran Army,
led by Kommander Zoktavar

DEFENDERS:

Redwall Garrison, Llaeese Army
Llaeese Brigade, 2nd Division,
1st Cygnaran Army

BATTLE OF ELSINBERG

ATTACKERS:

2nd Division, 1st Army,
led by Kommander Kratikoff

DEFENDERS:

Elsinberg Garrison, Llaeese Army
Llaeese Regiment, 2nd Division,
1st Cygnaran Army

Khadoran Army Advance

Cygnaran Army Advance

"As you say, unavoidable," Irusk said without flinching. "Should this operation succeed, each of their deaths will potentially save the lives of hundreds of their countrymen."

The other warcaster nodded, and his expression suggested he understood the stakes. In a lighter tone, he said, "If you will allow me to speak freely, Kommandant..."

Irusk waved a hand. "Please do. We are alone."

"I have been thinking about it, and I am surprised you wish to eliminate Vladirov like this. He is a great general. A famous tactician. Not as esteemed as you, of course, but his books are also studied. I had thought you might wish to defeat his army conventionally in order to prove your superiority. It would be a blow to the Llaelese morale."

Irusk shook his head. "It would do nothing but feed my pride. No. Vladirov is a man I respect too much to play games with. In this campaign, we must plan for the long haul. Every soldier we lose here is one who will not join us at Rynyr, at Riversmet, at the siege of Merywyn. If I can secure a swift victory by being underhanded, by cheating, then so be it. Vladirov is the only general in Llael worthy of the rank. Therefore, we remove him."

The younger warcaster chuckled morosely, gesturing with his cigar. "So, you respect him too much to give him a good death? Great Prince Tzepesci would not approve."

"Tzepesci is not here to complain. Vladirov has earned a good death, but he will not get one at my hands."

"Very well. It shall be as you command."

Irusk shifted slightly. Strakhov would perform his task without any explanation, but then again, Irusk had spent considerable time molding him into the weapon he had become. He wanted Strakhov's understanding.

Irusk said, "The Umbreans are proud, even the eastern ones. If the archduke lived and escaped, they would rally to him. They would plague us, even after we took Laedry from them. His vanishing will hurt his army far more. No one will know how or why. It will sow seeds of paranoia and panic. When I give them a target to attack, one that seems easy, they will not hesitate as Vladirov would. They will expose themselves. I do not expect a bloodless victory here. But I will do everything in my power to defeat them before they fire a single shot."

"A solid plan. I will do my part." Strakhov said this with a more genuine smile. "I intend to be away before the explosions begin. By that point I'll have accomplished my task—or died trying. Here, share this with me."

He offered a bottle of Llaelese vyatka, an expensive one. Irusk hesitated but then took it and tipped it back for a long swallow.

"To fortune, and courage," he said. "You have always had more than your fair share of both."

Strakhov did not sip his portion like a Llaelese noble and officer but rather threw it back with the gusto one would expect of a brave son of the Motherland. They shared another look, and each nodded. They left the tomb and went their separate ways, passing through the wrought-iron fences of graveyards that would soon be more crowded with fresh dead.

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Flurries of snow fell from the sky, though winter's full strength had yet to be felt. It might have been a particularly cold autumn day. There were no further incidents before Irusk returned to the main column, there to take his place among its van. The long military column stretched out behind him, making its slow but steady way through the foothills of what had once been Umbrey but was now the outskirts of northern Llael. It was an impressive force, their red, gold, and black armor leaving no illusions as to their identity, though the weather and cold had so far conspired to allow them to close on the city without attracting attention. This had also involved the hard work of Widowmaker snipers and manhunters working on the periphery of the army's advance, spotting any potential patrols and working to either evade them or silence them.

Despite the strength of the army accompanying him, including among them the peerless Iron Fangs, a sizable number of newly built artillery pieces, and an impressive arsenal of battle-ready warjacks, Irusk was being cautious. Timing was everything, and for this first assault he intended that everything should fall in his favor—not just for this battle but for the other prongs of the invasion advancing on the border farther to the south.



The Rampant Stallion and Crossed Spears of Umbrey

A massive force of heavy armor and wall-breaking warjacks accompanied Kommander Zoktavor, better known as the Butcher of Khardov. This was the axe and hammer that would shatter the strongest fortification of Llael's western border, Redwall Fortress. Irusk expected that fortress to be annihilated utterly, and he had dispatched the proper weapon to see it done. Laedry and Elsinberg were different—large and occupied cities, each with useful assets and with citizens who might be conquered and joined in time to Khardor. Irusk had chosen to deal with Laedry personally, since the northern attacks were the most crucial to his long-term plans. Elsinberg, he left to the very capable Kommanders Kratikoff and Harkevich with orders to take that town as intact as its defenders allowed them.

When Laedry was seized, they would plunge onward to seize Rynyr and then, most important, Riversmet. Gaining control over the Black River would put them in a position of strategic supremacy for all subsequent conquests within Llael. They could prevent any smuggled supplies or goods from Rhul. They could advance across the river to move on Leryn, when they were ready to do so, and to pressure Merywyn itself, the capital of Llael, located downriver from Riversmet. So long as they could quickly seize Riversmet, the other prongs of Irusk's attack might falter or be delayed and he should still come out ahead.

The army marched on toward their assigned positions while he double-checked the maps in his command tent before directing his adjutants to pack them up and prepare to reposition. The bulk of the army would not yet close on Laedry; instead, they would stay back enough that their full strength would not be revealed, even when the city's lookouts realized an enemy approached. His intelligence suggested the large mercenary force joined to the Llaelese Army defenders would be wary unless convinced of their numerical superiority. They were positioned at an encampment east of the city amid the hills. He needed to draw them forth.

He double-checked the detailed city maps and written orders intended for his artillery crews. These were soon sent by runners. Irusk stepped out into the cold air for a walk, surveying the lay of the land, his mind filled with the markers representing his soldiers and their positions. For a moment he was left alone, and he savored it, as he always did when battle neared.

A solitary figure in dark armor broke from the tree line just south of his position and approached. Irusk frowned but felt no alarm. His power was at his fingertips and his warcaster armor was on him, its arcane turbine fueled and fired. His warjacks were not far. Several of his senior officers were also nearby, and he knew at least two squads of Widowmakers watched his position. They would not allow an assassin to get so close.

The tingling sensation at the back of his head told him it was a warcaster who neared just moments before he recognized the distinctive and archaic armor worn by the other man. There were no smokestacks on his back; at his side were the sheathed blades passed down through his family line for generations.

"Great Prince Tzepesci," Irusk said. "This is a surprise."

He offered the man a slight bow, as was proper for someone of his station when speaking to one of the highest-ranking nobles

in Khardor. But just enough. Irusk's military rank put him at a higher echelon when it came to decisions of war, not that he'd expect the great prince to obey him.

"Kommandant Irusk," Vladimir Tzepesci said with a small smile, inclining his head a bit less than he should have. Irusk expected no less.

Interactions with the great princes involved many layers of tricky protocol, and none more so than the controversial Umbrean standing before him. Many in the High Kommand and in the capital believed Tzepesci to be more than a loose cannon. They thought him a legitimate threat to the throne, a rival of the queen. Irusk did not consider it his place to dwell on such matters, though the great prince's sudden presence here was unnerving. He had no doubt the man had his own forces with him nearby, yet Irusk's own scouts had clearly seen no sign of them.

"I believe the queen had requested you protect the border we share with Cygnar," Irusk said. "She is a dangerous woman to defy, even for a prince."

"I do not defy her." Vladimir's eyes flared. "But she allows me some liberty interpreting my orders, so long as the interests of the Motherland are served. I will be where she wishes me to be, once we are finished."

"And what brings you here? Do you offer me some special wisdom pertinent to my campaign? Or did you intend to wish me good fortune? If so, it is appreciated." Irusk inclined his head again, his smile only slightly sardonic.

"Laedry belongs to the Umbreans. In time, I will unite them. Meanwhile, I will assist you in seizing this city, so long as it does not become rubble. Old Korska once stood not far from here. It was the eastern capital of the Khardic Empire. And it was razed and forgotten. Khardor turned a deaf ear to the Umbreans, leaving them destitute. The Ryn did what the Khard would not—they rebuilt this city as Laedry, as a promise that in Llael they would always have a home. It is for this reason that half my people abandoned the Motherland. Destroying this place will only seal their resolve against us."

Irusk considered those words, trying to restrain the annoyance he felt at the prince's assumptions and his scholarly tone as he lectured. "I do not intend a protracted siege. Nor is it my goal to raze Laedry. It will suffer some inevitable collateral damage, but pains will be taken to seize it as quickly and as intact as possible. Its industry will serve the Motherland."

Vladimir stared at him intensely, perhaps trying to gauge his sincerity. Finally, he said, "That is good. With my help—and my warjacks—this outcome can be assured. Without my aid, you will be bogged down fighting in the streets. Inevitably, you will feel the need to resort to superior firepower. I offer my help to avoid this. And once we are finished here, you and your troops can advance on Rynyr while I go to seize Riversmet. Our goals are aligned. If done quickly enough, I can hasten to Ravensgard to answer the queen's orders, as promised."

There was a sound of rumbling engines and the crashing and snapping of trees and underbrush being torn apart. Behind the great prince, a number of hulking shadows emerged from the

trees, striding forward with postures of eagerness. Warjacks, more than a dozen of them, most with axes in each hand. A few had shields and swords; others had pointed wedges in place of hands. Where the paint had not been scraped off, their armor was red, but each chassis bore the scars of battle in long gouges and hastily repaired rents and armored plates that did not quite match. One of the double axe-wielding machines directly behind the great prince glowered at Irusk with malevolent ferocity, its glowing eyes a baleful red. It howled and shook an axe, and the kommandant saw chains dangled from it, including several with skulls attached, strung like trophies.

Irusk was taken aback. They were mostly Berserkers but also a few Mad Dogs and Ragers, all old and largely outmoded warjack designs from previous centuries. None of them were widely used by the military. He held his ground and his tone was steady. "Such machines are highly unstable and dangerous. They might cause as much damage to you as to your enemy, if pushed."

"I know how to handle them." Vladimir folded his arms and smiled as the deranged Berserker with the skulls came up beside him and stopped at his smallest gesture, like a dog made to heel. "The mercenaries in Laedry fear them with just cause. They will have greater impact than the newer machines already at your disposal."

"How many did you bring?" Irusk asked, feeling growing disbelief as he realized there were yet more of them behind the others, obscured by the weather and the trees.

"All of them," the Umbrean warcaster said. "At least, all those remaining that I could seize. I have spent long months acquiring them. They had been neglected—but no more."

"No one can control so many!" Irusk said, shocked. Yet, almost against his will, he was also impressed. No wonder the prince had been able to muster such an army in secret. These older chassis had been steadily abandoned, many of them given up for scrap. A few old military commanders saw them as an interesting curiosity, but their usage had fallen outside the normal supply lines, leaving them untracked and unchecked. If Vladimir actually had several dozen of them here, they might indeed make quite a difference against the tenacious Thunderhelm Irregular mercenaries, a company noted for having an impressive stockpile of its own old but still battle-ready warjacks.

"They listen to me," Great Prince Tzepesci said, "and fight quite well without needing to be guided. They can be deployed in waves. Each serves the Motherland and is as willing to be sacrificed for victory as the Motherland's most courageous sons and daughters. They are patriotic, in their own simple way."

Behind him, the machines shifted and stepped forward, several clapping their axes together as if they understood the Umbrean's words.

From the trees came men as well, mostly in black armor that was touched here and there with a hint of red. Umbreans, their officers wearing the sigils of the Tzepesci family and of others loyal to him. Iron Fangs, both infantry and cavalry, plus squads of riflemen. It was an impressive force, one that grew as Irusk watched. It was sobering to consider how easily the great prince

had brought them here unseen. That he had all the Berserkers on display suggested his own supply lines, perhaps even the help of eastern Umbreans.

Could he have moved such a force as easily into the heart of Khador? Was his army large enough to threaten the garrison at Korsk, depleted as it was while the armies marched into Llael? It seemed likely, Irusk thought. Yet this dark prince, whom the nobles feared, had not threatened the queen but had come to help Irusk instead. He had no illusions that Tzepesci would follow his orders, given how cavalier he was with the queen's. He was a formidable warcaster, a master of unique sorceries. His presence here might just make all the difference.

Irusk stepped forward and offered a hand to the other warcaster. "Let us do this together."

Vladimir smiled and took his hand in a firm clasp. "Yes, let us show our enemies a new type of war—one the Iron Kingdoms has not seen before!"

AFTERMATH: LAEDRY

The swift seizure of Llael's northwestern city was an accomplishment of supreme strategic and tactical ingenuity.

Irusk initiated a long-ranged bombardment of the outer walls by mortar and cannon, firing from an elevated position among the hills northwest of the city. His artillery was expertly coordinated to eliminate defensive batteries that would otherwise have been able to retaliate. Additional shells exploded in the streets of Laedry, creating panic and chaos. Industrial centers were avoided to focus on military barracks and government buildings that might have been useful to the defenders. A number of residences were also demolished, and hundreds of civilians were killed. Given the size of Laedry, these deaths were considered quite low in number.

The Khadoran artillery battery was protected by a carefully chosen battalion of Winter Guard and Man-O-War soldiers. Their numbers were commensurate to represent a real threat to Laedry's army garrison but inadequate to overwhelm the sizable mercenary force joined to the city's defenders. It is unlikely the famous Lord General and Archduke Alreg Vladirov would have fallen for this gambit, but he and most of his senior staff had disappeared two days before the Khadoran attack, leaving their subordinates in disarray. They relied upon the expertise of Commander Jakob Scull of the Thunderhelm Irregulars, who was confident his force could drive off the Khadorans and eliminate the artillery battery in a show of overwhelming force.

These efforts appeared to be successful initially. The 28th Assault Battalion of Khador's 2nd Army withdrew before the disciplined and well-ordered Thunderhelm forces and their warjacks, forced to abandon most of their artillery pieces. However, the true strength of the attacking army was soon revealed when the mercenaries were encircled and subjected to an even more concentrated barrage of cannon and mortar fire. As their lines tattered and collapsed, they were set upon by the rest of Irusk's 4th Assault Legion, which crushed them utterly. The remnants fled to Laedry and were soon set upon by Vladimir Tzepesci's forces.

A full Laeese Army battalion and three Cygnaran companies put up a brave fight but were disordered. Lacking central leadership and thrown into disarray as the invaders came from multiple directions, the defenders were unable to establish a coherent defense. They briefly rallied at the government offices at the center of the city, but Tzepesci's Berserkers annihilated the warjacks kept in reserve while Widomaker snipers atop the rooftops prioritized anyone ranked sergeant or higher. Soon thereafter, what remained of the city's leadership surrendered. Laedry's walls and the archduke's compound took down banners and flags showing the crown and stars of Llael to be replaced with the Khadoran Anvil.

THE BUTCHER'S BILL

Redwall Fortress, western Llael

Sergeant Jylle Ryvesh of the 13th Heavy Pistoleers stood in position alongside his brothers and sisters in arms, in a ready stance with his gleaming pistol in his right hand and resting steady atop his left arm. They were inside the Redwall Fortress courtyard, back from the main wall and prepared for what seemed an inevitable breach. His ears were already ringing from the continuous sound of rifle and cannon fire from atop the battlements. Bodies fallen from above were scattered across the open ground ahead of him. Those atop the wall were still firing valiantly at the approaching foe, but they had clearly already failed in keeping the enemy from closing.

The gatehouse was still intact, but both its towers were shorn off, exploded in earlier fire from Khadoran Destroyers. Smoke rose from the stout northern tower, though several of its cannons were still firing periodically. The number of infantry atop the battlements was less than it was, having endured constant withering fire from those without. Few of the crenellations were intact, and the courtyard was littered with stone, blood, shattered rifles, and other debris. They had thwarted the foe's first drive at the main gates, leaving the wreckage of warjacks piled up beyond, but this had come at a cost, including the fortress' senior warcaster—Marshal Hayser d'Kiellion, who had bravely sallied forth alongside his battlegroup to confront the enemy vanguard. Though his efforts had taken a toll, the heavy armor of the Khadoran assault had been too much for him.

Jylle's position among the fortress' inner defenders had not given him a direct view of that clash, though rumor had soon spread. The marshal had negated and stalled the front line of heavy Khadoran warjacks and Man-O-War, but that was when a line of Shocktroopers had parted to let an axe-wielding maniac through. With a single heavy blow, the Khadoran giant had ended him. They said the strike had ruined the man, almost cutting him in twain.

The defenders had worked hard to barricade and block the gate, using their own wreckage to hinder any approach, but the enemy was undeterred. Rather than continue against that blood-soaked and entrenched area, they went to the thick adjacent wall instead. Man-O-War Shocktroopers with shields as tall as a man flanked specialized heavy warjacks with piston-rams for hands. These were followed by members of the Demolition Corps, each wielding a huge mechanikal maul, perfectly engineered to shatter metal or stone. They had set against the great outer wall with the enthusiasm of miners following a gold vein.

Jylle watched the wall shudder and shake, occasionally booming like some giant's heartbeat. Two soldiers who had yet to abandon the top lost their balance and fell, screaming, to land with sickening thuds in the courtyard. One stared with unblinking eyes in Jylle's direction as if beseeching him to run. Jylle gritted his teeth, sweat beading against his forehead, but stood firm. He was an elite heavy pistoleer, not some weak-kneed town militia. His friends were to his right and his left, and he gave those nearest a reassuring look, nodding slightly.

His lieutenant was not far away, though the lieutenant's own expression was less determined. He seemed to be very pale and was watching the shuddering wall with his mouth slightly open as if hypnotized. Redwall Fortress was as stout as they came—its walls of heavy stone reinforced with steel. The surface facing had been alchemically treated and soaked to add to its resilience, letting it shrug off explosive blasts. Yet all such measures had limits. Clearly, Jylle's lieutenant felt those limits had been reached.

In front of the line of pistoleers were several rows of pikemen with their long weapons lowered and ready, veteran soldiers adorned in plated armor and steel helmets, refined in their purple tabards with gold trim. Pikes were admittedly a slightly outmoded weapon in the modern era but were still useful, especially in close quarters. Were the wall to be breached, they could surge against anyone foolish enough to charge through the gap. Even a warjack could be crippled if enough sharp implements could hit vulnerable pipes or wedge steel points into exposed joints. Intermixed among the forward ranks were several platoons of Cygnaran trenchers, though many of those allies had already perished beyond the walls. Behind Jylle's position and up along several elevated platforms were both Llaelese riflemen and Cygnaran long gunners, all in position and ready to deliver a torrent of bullets.

Everything was still where Jylle stood, as though each of them waiting could barely remember to draw a breath, frozen with fingers on triggers and hands gripped upon weapons. Yet around them was chaos and shouting, the hustling of dozens of soldiers trying to heed the commands of their superiors. There was a great deal of movement up on the walls to either side of their position, as the defenders sought to find some method to thwart the breach. They knew heavy armor could be penetrated in time. The men within Man-O-War rigs were mortal, made of flesh, blood, and bone. They could be rattled to death or wounded badly enough to withdraw. The Khadorans could not have a large enough army to continue the pace of this onslaught. The defenders only had to hold until word could reach Merywyn, and reinforcements were sent.

It was already too late. With another booming thud the stones of the wall gave way at last and tumbled down. The smashing of metal against stone escalated, and giant hunks of rock came



The recently invented Khadoran mortar played a key role in Kommandant Irusk's invasion plans.

flying back from the wall, instantly crushing to death a number of soldiers near the fore. Their sergeants shouted and the lines reformed, even as the dust began to clear amid the clangor. A wide V-shaped wedge was torn through the thick wall. And into that gap came a roaring sound, as of engines and wild beasts blended in some maddened combination.

The Marauders came first, ponderous Khadoran heavy warjacks with their wedge-shaped fists; they had likely done the majority of the work battering through the wall. Their armored plates were already pocked and riddled with the impact of countless bullets from the defenders above, and as soon as they stepped from the clearing dust, a new barrage from inside the courtyard impacted them. Jylle's hearing was drowned out by the explosive reports. He could feel the thud as one after another fell, but they had withstood enough damage to allow the Man-O-War Demolition Corps to close.

They too were met with a barrage of fire, enough to pierce through even their heavy armor to kill several, but the others reached the line of pikemen, and the melee was on. Jylle fired over the heads of the men before him with his pistol, choosing his shots with careful expertise, aiming for the small slits in the Man-O-War helmets. In great smashing swings, the frost-rimed hammers obliterated anyone they hit, sometimes battering through two pikemen at once or sending a man at the fore crashing back through those behind him.

There was a cadence to the fire but with a slight lull as more of them reloaded, and it was into this slight pause that the Khadoran giant revealed himself. He followed behind two newer massive warjacks, hunched and growling, their postures akin to the bears after which they had been named. Their shovel-like armored fists battered the nearest defenders to bloody scraps of meat, similarly breaking through the pike hafts as if they were twigs. Kodiaks, sophisticated but brutal machines. They just cleared the way for he who followed.

The giant warcaster's eyes were shining with their own light—filled with tangible arcane power as he let loose a roar that did not sound human. He seemed eight feet tall and as thick and wide as an ogrun, his bald head gleaming with a strange sheen. The armor he wore seemed hardly less encumbering than what the Man-O-War troopers endured, but he moved with a swiftness that belied his size. Gripped in his oversized gauntleted hands was an axe that a warjack might have swung, a brutal and inelegant weapon with an edge that gleamed silver. He was a warcaster—but more. This was the Butcher of Khardov, a living monster. Khadoran brutality given flesh. Behind him rushed a number of doom reavers, their horrific fellblades in hand, chained to their wrists. An inhuman and throat-rending howling rose up from them that drowned out all other sounds.

Jylle had fought in several battles and no less than four duels. He had faced certain death more than once. He liked to think he had nerves of steel, but now they failed him. He raised his pistol and felt startled to see his hand shaking badly. A dizziness had come over him, and he felt almost apart from his body, as if he were a puppet on strings. His bullet fired, and despite his shaking, it should have hit true, but the Butcher's power field flickered into brightness. The bullet was deflected away.

Then the giant and the doom reavers behind him were amid the men, like incarnations of slaughter. The warcaster's great axe swung in terrible killing arcs. It did not slow for steel or bone but tore through both, leaving a wash of bloody gore behind it. His power field became a glowing and shimmering dome around his person as incoming fire failed to penetrate. Jylle saw a few holes open in the Butcher's armor where individual bullets had landed. Blood oozed from a shoulder wound and another on his side, yet the maddened giant did not slow. He did not register a single injury. His mouth hung open, his scowl deep as if inscribed in his brow by a sculptor's hand. Carnage lay about him, and there was a great deal of screaming and shouting, though it felt muffled to Jylle's already deadened hearing.

Jylle holstered his pistol and drew his sword. There was nothing but empty air and piles of the dead between him and the Butcher. His brothers were at his side, and they too were screaming, trying to muster their courage to charge this monster. He did not need to look at them to know their eyes were filled with fear.

"Charge! Take him!" he yelled, forcing his terror into courage. He ran forward, his sword raised above him in both hands.

They had chosen their moment well, or so they thought. The Butcher had just finished a sideways sweep and was extended, recovering from the effort. It seemed like a moment when he had left himself open. But then his head turned to face the charging pistoleers. His smile was horrible to behold. His teeth and lips were covered with blood. His eyes flared and runes formed around his body. The ground across which they rushed lurched and was torn asunder. All was thunder and explosion and pain before Jylle felt the wetness of the blood-drenched and muddy ground against his face. Darkness took him.

AFTERMATH: REDWALL FORTRESS

There were very few firsthand accounts to provide details as to what transpired at the Battle of Redwall Fortress. This fight soon became known as the Massacre at Redwall, for the losses endured here by the defenders were tremendous. Kommander Orsus Zoktavar, known as the Butcher, led the attacking force and appeared to have been bent on obliterating it utterly, along with those who defended its walls.

Subsequent Khadoran military records confirmed the rumor that orders were to give no quarter here. When the terrified and surrounded soldiers inside the inner keep tried to surrender, Zoktavar set his warjacks and the Demolition Corps to demolishing the support walls, collapsing the keep upon itself. The only survivors were some few who fled earlier in the battle and had evaded any pursuit. They spoke of Zoktavar as an infernal fiend, an immortal terror. The most lucid of these survivors was later institutionalized for a variety of mental afflictions.

These tactics stood in stark contrast to the almost simultaneous attacks on both Laedry and Elsinberg, where surrender was accepted with aplomb, and prisoners were treated humanely. It seems quite clear that Kommandant Gurvaldt Irusk sought to demonstrate to the rest of the Llaelese the two possible fates awaiting them. They might hope to be treated fairly by their conquerors, by the civilized officers of the Motherland. But they might instead be confronted by the Butcher of Khardov, in which case only Morrow and Menoth could comfort their shorn souls.



SMALL MERCIES

West of Elsinberg, western Llael

Briefly encamped in the unsettled region called the Willow Barrens west of Elsinberg, the three Khadoran kommanders gathered in the primary command tent. Though younger than the two men with her, it was Kommander Sorscha Kratikoff who had command of the mission. The raven-haired warcaster showed no hesitation in directing the others, though she did give Kommanders Izak Harkevich and Negomir Tarovic due respect, given their lengthy service records and accomplishments.

She said, "Gentlemen, do not be fooled by the apparent simplicity of our task. There are several ways this could go wrong."

Tarovic grunted. He was oldest of the three, a veteran campaigner who had long served the Motherland and had slowly risen to his position. His beard was grey and his body a bit soft, though still fit for service. The man was not a warcaster, but his long experience leading the Winter Guard under his command recommended him. Sorscha had worked with Tarovic on several occasions and found him efficient and reliable, if moody. With a sour expression, he eyed the maps spread before them.

"There will be no glory for us here," he said. "Two warcasters is two too many. I could have handled this by myself."

"We could take our warjacks elsewhere, if you'd prefer," said Harkevich mildly, his chest rising as he chuckled to himself. With his thick beard and ample girth, he took up more of the tent than the other two combined. Despite his friendly demeanor, he was also a proven warcaster noted for his numerous victories and unusual ease of control over large numbers of warjacks.

"No," said Tarovic with a shrug, "I suppose since you are here, we might as well avail ourselves of your machines."

"Too bad we didn't come months ago," Harkevich said wistfully. "We missed the March of the Dead."

When Sorscha had first been given command over Harkevich, she had thought there might be tension between them. Indeed, she had asked Kommandant Irusk if it were even proper. Certainly by right of seniority, Harkevich should have been the one in charge. Irusk insisted he wanted her to direct the attack. And then, to her surprise, the older warcaster had taken it well. He seemed comfortable being one piece in a larger mechanism. He had

F&F INTEL: MARCH OF THE DEAD

Elsinberg is most famous for a recurring haunting that happens every year in autumn, when hundreds of spectral soldiers parade through the town as if marching to war. This unusual manifestation draws crowds of visitors seeking a glimpse of these doomed ghosts.



established a quick rapport with Tarovic—the two had been sharing stories during the march over cigars and uiske.

“Militarily, Elsinberg stands no chance,” Sorscha said, giving a detailed assessment of the city’s garrisons on the map and the positions of various defenders, according to their most recent intelligence. “The reason we are all here is to make sure that they learn this swiftly and that they comprehend the folly of needless death. Kommandant Irusk made it quite clear he wants the city intact. That is its own complication, as it will severely limit our modes of engagement. Yet we will need to move swiftly into the interior afterward. We have not been given much time for this operation.”

She assessed them both. “There is no margin of error.”

Harkevich sighed. Sorscha looked at him sharply, expecting to see a look of disappointment. She knew a number of senior officers who would have reacted this way. She blinked as she realized he was actually relieved. He saw her look, smiled, and said, “I have never enjoyed being the bully. I am glad not to partake in slaughter.”

She frowned at him. “Be prepared to be as intimidating as possible. They must be convinced resistance will be met with terrible consequences. This is no time for making friends.”

He scratched one of his bushy eyebrows as he answered. “With all respect, Kommander, they will find our ‘jacks intimidating enough. Better if the civilians see our restraining hand and know there is a chance we might offer mercy, if they ask nicely.”

Tarovic had been staring at the map. He pointed to a pair of large buildings at the heart of town and looked up earnestly at Sorscha. “The Monastery of Ascendant Angellia and the adjoining library should not be touched. Not a whit. It is vital it remain unharmed.”

The older kommander had clearly braced himself for argument, but Sorscha relented with a small but disarming smile. “I have no intent of performing sacrilege. I am sure in time the Greylords will want to investigate the library. But by the time we reach it, most of the city’s defenders should have surrendered to us.”

Harkevich said, “Temples and churches sometimes fall in war. There are no guarantees. Bombards are not entirely accurate, despite best intentions. Besides, what if some of our enemies take shelter there?”

“This place holds the remains of the ascendant herself. She built the library with her own hands. It is very holy.” Tarovic was clasping his Morrowan symbol that dangled on a chain around his neck. Sorscha did not think he realized it. She knew him to be a pious officer, more than was typical, even among those who attended services.

Sorscha held up a hand between them. “Should any soldiers take shelter there, we will deal with that problem as we must. Otherwise, we will give those grounds a wide berth.”

Harkevich finally nodded. “Well, I have no wish to wake up any ascendants. Besides, harming such a place would cement the resolve of any in the city who are pious to fight us to the death.”

“Assuming the Llaelese are even capable of that much resolve. I have my doubts,” said Tarovic. “They are a cowardly people. Still, I’m glad we are in agreement. The library has stood for over a thousand years. I would not have its destruction on my conscience.”

“Then let us be about this business,” Sorscha said. “We will attack at dawn and neutralize the hard targets as swiftly as possible. Harkevich from the north, I will enter from the west. Tarovic, you will proceed with your men to seize the central garrison after Harkevich has the gate. We have signal flares should anything transpire that requires our attention. Do not embarrass me in my first major command, gentlemen.”

She gave them a look, and saw their eyes crinkle with amusement at the acknowledgement of her youth. They returned respectful nods.

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“I am surprised to see you so patiently enduring being shot at, Kommander Harkevich,” Sorscha said as she approached the outer wall of the headquarters of the Elsinberg Royal Fusiliers.

The other warcaster was standing back from the main gate, his warjacks at the ready, one of them standing between him and the broken windows from which the occasional rifle shot came. Several bullets bounced off the nearby wall and another off Black Ivan, his rumbling warjack. Near his foot, the flare that had drawn her attention petered out, giving its last wisps of reddish-pink smoke.

“These ones appear determined to die in battle, Kommander Kratikoff.” Harkevich looked sad as he took another puff from his cigar. “We knew they’d be trouble. I have to admit, I admire them. They’re soft and pampered Llaelese, but they have grit. Not a single warjack, firing old-fashioned rifles, and they still won’t surrender.”

F&F INTEL: ASCENDANTS

In the Morrowan religion, both Morrow and his twin sister Thamar are served by a few saint-like ascended souls, each a hero of the faith who transcended into a powerful spiritual being prayed to and revered as an intermediary for their god. Those serving Thamar are called scions.

In just two short days, they had swiftly neutralized the majority of the soldiers of Elsinberg. But in several places within the city, the defenders had fought with surprising tenacity, ignoring the orders of their already surrendered leaders.

Sorscha found herself admiring the rank and file soldiers more than their so-called superiors. Especially Archduke Cherydwyn of Wessina. One of Tarovic's first targets had been his estate, where they had expected his household to put up at least a token defense. Instead, as soon as Khadoran boots stepped on his lawn, he had scrambled to surrender. It was soon clear his sway over the local military was limited, regardless of his title or standing in the capital. Pockets of resistance continued to fight despite the odds against them.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked Harkevich. "We need to secure this building, one way or another."

He jerked his head to indicate the open gate. "Tarovic went in to see if he could talk reason to them. He asked me to stay back. I think he's going to get a bullet for his trouble."

Sorscha gritted her teeth and strode past, summoning her arcane power to cloak herself in shrouding fog while maintaining her armor's power field at its highest intensity. She moved swiftly through the exposed lane and past the side of the building to where a tense standoff was taking place between two groups, each with firearms pointed at the other. Atop a flight of steps and taking partial cover behind the stone pillars of an ornate front porch were a number of royal fusiliers. Their rifles were more like works of art than proper weapons, each engraved and decorated, their barrels so long they required crutch-like rifle rests to steady them. Apparently leading them was a tall woman with long black hair and a fierce expression, dressed in finery. She looked Umbrean to Sorscha's eye.

Nearer to Sorscha were Tarovic and his Winter Guard escort, hunkered down amid the statuary and among the neatly trimmed and squared-off hedges. Tarovic had his rifle pointed at the opposing leader, but he seemed reluctant to pull the trigger.

Sorscha watched him lower his weapon, a strange look on his face. Clearly his adversary had no similar compunction as she fired back at him, narrowly missing his head. Chips flew from the marble arm of the statue of a soldier he was behind. Then the two of them were occluded from one another as the fog Sorscha brought with her filled the space between them.

"Kommander," she said, startling him. "Is there a problem you need me to resolve?"

Tarovic's familiar scowl returned. "I'm trying to talk her into surrendering! She's a baroness, they say. Stubborn, though, as are the rest of these idiots. We're at a bit of a stalemate."

"A baroness," Sorscha said thoughtfully. She turned back in the direction of the fusilier compound. "Yes, I suppose we should try to keep her alive, if possible. Thank you, Tarovic."

Without waiting for a reply, she gathered her magic again, this time to accelerate her movements. She kept Frostfang behind her and drew her hand cannon in her right hand. An icy wind surrounded and blew through her, carrying her swiftly across the yard and up onto the porch in an instant. Those hunkered there seemed stunned by her sudden appearance from the midst of the inexplicable fog. Two of them had the well-drilled instincts to begin turning their rifles in her direction.

Blazing bluish-white runes surrounded her in concentric rings, and a mystically powerful cold poured outward, freezing all of the fusiliers where they stood. Each was coated in a thin layer of constricting ice. It would not last long, but she did not need it to.

"You will surrender to me," she said, speaking directly to the tall black-haired woman who had shot at and missed Tarovic. "Or all of you will perish."

Sorscha squeezed the trigger of her weapon, sending a heavy bullet through the head of the nearest frozen fusilier, a very young man. Sorscha could see from the widening eyes and shock of the woman that the leader was watching him, even if she couldn't move. Sorscha reloaded and fired a second shot to kill the man to her left. Then they began to thaw.

"Lay down your arms. Now!"

Each face she saw was ashen and terrified, and they hastened to drop their rifles. The woman—the baroness—was calmer and retained her dignity, but she too let her firearm go. Sorscha did not exchange a word with her as she brought her prisoners back to Tarovic and delivered them into his custody.

AFTERMATH: ELSINBERG

Of the initial attacks along Llael's major western garrisons, the victory at Elsinberg was the swiftest and least bloody, though more than three hundred Llaelese soldiers perished in the clash. The wisdom of seizing this city largely intact would prove itself in the coming weeks and years, as there was considerably less hostility to the occupiers in Elsinberg than was the case in other corners of the war-torn kingdom. Kommander Kratikoff was credited with the victory here, though she commended both her peers and recommended Negomir Tarovic to govern the occupied city. After the war, this became his focus, though until then he continued to actively lead invasion forces, performing admirably in the subsequent Siege of Merywyn. Baroness Rashel Ganelyn, better known as the "Willow Baroness," remained in Elsinberg and argued often with Kommander Tarovic, all the while secretly supporting the eventual Llaelese Resistance. Most of the surviving Royal Fusiliers also joined the Resistance.

THE BELEAGUERED CYGNUS

Things had not exactly been peaceful for Cygnar and the other nations of the Iron Kingdoms even before the invasion of Llael. Border conflicts had been common—with clashes between Khador's 5th Border Legion and Cygnar's First Army taking place regularly along the Thornwood Forest. Such bloodshed was thought to be an inevitable consequence of longstanding grudges between nations. Yet to those governing the southern nations, the possibility of all-out war seemed remote, for they could see no profit in it. They were also distracted by other concerns.

The year before, early in 603 AR, Cygnar saw one of its major cities assailed by invaders from across the eastern wastes—Corvis was briefly occupied by hostile forces from eastern Immoren. An army of the Skorne Empire led by the ex-Cygnaran King Vinter Raelthorne IV crossed the Bloodstone Marches on a mission of conquest. Vinter hoped to seize this northeastern Cygnaran city and use it as a mustering point for further incursions into the Cygnaran interior, eventually intending to besiege Caspia. The fulfillment of an old Morrowan prophecy prompted the rise of an army of the restless dead to drive these foreign invaders back into the wastes. The threat from Corvis was averted, though by the narrowest and strangest of margins.

The western seaboard also experienced an escalation of raids and attacks by ships from the Cryxian Empire. To the east, the Protectorate of Menoth had shown every sign of arming itself for war. The Harbinger of Menoth emerged from a small village in the Protectorate near the end of 603 AR and went before the Synod. Soon proclaimed Hierarch Voyle's personal advisor and confirmed to speak with Menoth's voice, she endorsed the coming crusade, vowing to bring all humanity to the worship of the Lawgiver, by fire and sword if need be.

Contact between the theocracy and the government of Cygnar, ostensibly its parent state, was increasingly strained as it became obvious the Sul-Menites were in flagrant violation of agreements against maintaining a standing army. The stockpiles of weaponry accumulated by the theocracy were impossible to completely hide, as were its warjack foundries and the escalating numbers of citizens taking up arms as Temple Flameguard and Knights Exemplar.

The Cygnaran crown and its intelligence arm were preoccupied by these alarming signs. Earlier in 604 AR, King Leto ordered his war council to present military proposals for proactive measures against both Cryx and the Protectorate, clearly intending to weigh the cost of fighting one or the other. Whether this might have turned into an actual plan of attack is unknown, as the choice would soon be taken from him. All eyes turned north.

Word of the simultaneous attacks along Llael's western border soon reached Northguard, the closest major Cygnaran fortification, and from there it spread to other Cygnaran commanders and generals. This news shocked the upper command and jolted them into action. All who served the First Army in particular were eager to join the fight, as some had friends or brothers or sisters stationed at Redwall Fortress, Laedry, or elsewhere in Llael.



The Crown and Stars of Llael

King Leto Raelthorne had previously had some difficulties with Llael during his reign, and he was never especially fond of Prime Minister Glabryn in particular. Still, he feared the potential consequences of a Khadoran victory and felt honor bound to live up to longstanding promises to this ally. The difficulty of defending Llael immediately became a challenge of logistics as the army attempted a rapid redeployment, relying on Cygnar's well-established railways as well as the vital river conduits connecting to Llael.

The first priority was to get the most capable and battle-ready of the nation's veterans and military leaders into the fight, before it was too late for them to make a difference. The only hope of buying the allies time to shore up their position rested with Cygnar's seasoned and talented warcasters, together with battlegroups including the most advanced military hardware in the Iron Kingdoms.

ROUSED TO WAR

Corvis, Cygnar

Commander Adept Sebastian Nemo had been around long enough to know that insistent knocking on his door late at night was never a good thing. On this occasion, he was glad he was not already asleep, as he had been kept up in his office going over summaries of reports attached to the main garrison in Corvis. He felt considerably less glad after he talked to the visitor, a babbling mercenary who had apparently ridden from Laedry with urgent news.

He had accompanied the king to Corvis from Caspia along with several members of his senior council, as King Leto was eager to check on the progress of fortifying the northern city and allocating a stronger garrison there after the unfortunate series of events more than a year before. The king had been speaking with the warmaster general about putting Nemo in charge of the new garrisons at Corvis, a matter he remained uncertain about. Much depended on whether he would be able to create a similarly expansive and elaborate laboratory here in Corvis as he had in Caspia. He had also been expecting he might be needed more by the Strategic Academy, to which his Caspian facilities were attached. It was a matter under negotiation.

All of those thoughts had been scattered from his mind on hearing the harrowing story of one Cullyn Lopryssti of the Thunderhelm Irregulars. Or rather, the now *former* Thunderhelm Irregulars.

He bade the mercenary to get some well-deserved rest and went to inform the king. He realized he had neglected to eat dinner. Then again, at his age he'd found his appetite wasn't what it used to be. His mind was often more hungry than his belly. And now he couldn't even imagine eating.

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When he ran into the captain of the Royal Guard, the man did something of a double take. "I was just about to come get you, Commander. Come with me."

It seemed the king was already gathering several of his key personnel, which led Nemo to believe he was not the first to hear of what had transpired with their northern ally. They gathered at the borrowed estate of one of Leto's vassals, a location that had been loaned to the king during his visit. Nemo was not surprised to see Warmaster General Turpin was in the dining chamber before him, sitting in a large chair, while the king stood nearby. Both the king and warmaster looked slightly disheveled, indicating to Nemo that he was not the only one summoned hastily.

He had barely walked into the chamber before Scout General Rebald came in behind him, looking more or less like his normal self with his lean frame and nondescript dark clothing. Nemo was fairly certain Cygnar's spymaster didn't bother sleeping.

"Let's get right to it," Leto said without preamble. "We're now at war with Khador. They've invaded Llael."

Turpin looked morose, and Nemo noticed he had cupped in his right hand a large round-bottomed glass with a reddish-brown liquid at its bottom. He was staring into its depths with a deep frown. He had clearly already heard the news.

"Can I have one of those as well?" Nemo asked and then proceeded to pour himself one from a flask offered by Turpin. "Thank you. I'd thought to bring you the news. I had a visit from a member of the Thunderhelm Irregulars who survived the attack on Laedry."

He told the others what he had heard. He saw the king's hands tighten on the edge of the table, but Rebald was not surprised.

The king nodded to the scout general, who added what else he knew. Nemo felt his spirits sinking even further as he heard the details of the attacks on Redwall and Elsinberg as well. He could hardly contain himself. "All three at once? At the onset of winter? Unbelievable. Damn the reds! That takes some nerve. I didn't think they were ready for anything like this."

"Casualty numbers are still being accumulated, of course," Rebald said. "But I have it on good authority we lost nearly everyone stationed at Redwall. That was Zoktavr."

Nemo shook his head. "The Butcher," he said under his breath. "That son of a bitch. Thamar take him."

"Elsinberg and Laedry fared better, from my reports. Though everything is relative."

"Is Elsinberg still besieged?" Nemo asked. "Any chance we can get to them in time?"

It was Leto who answered, his voice betraying his anger. "Not besieged. Taken. I had hoped Laedry might hold out longer. What your mercenary described suggests a complete defeat."

"Irusk handled Laedry personally," Rebald added, "together with Great Prince Tzepesci. I don't have confirmation of who led at Elsinberg, but it might have been the Iron Wolf, Harkevich."

Nemo felt compelled to pull out and sit in a chair. He gripped its arms. "Redwall, you said? Wasn't Commander Stryker there? And Haley with him . . ."

He fought against a sinking feeling. He would have thought himself immune to that brand of dread after so many years and so many friends lost in battle, but there it lurked, waiting.

King Leto paled and looked sharply to Turpin.

The warmaster general seemed to have been lost in his own thoughts, but he quickly collected himself, straightening in his chair. "What's that? Coleman Stryker? No. He'd done a number of patrols together with forces out of Redwall but then returned to Northguard. I believe that's where he is now, though I'd have to check with my clerks. As for Captain Haley, she might also be at Northguard or sent back to Highgate. I can't recall. But not Redwall, no. Not there."

He said the last more firmly, as if convincing himself. "No warcasters of ours were lost in that fight, though a number of other good soldiers and officers were. I'll have the full list soon."

Rebald turned to Leto. "This puts us in a very difficult position, Your Majesty. Such casualties demand a response, but—"

Leto glowered at the scout general, looking angrier than Nemo could remember seeing him in years. "Of course it demands a response! And we must give it at once!"

"Your Majesty, let's not be hasty," Rebald said, holding up a cautioning hand.

Leto continued talking over him. "We need to get our forces on the move with whatever speed we can manage. We've already lost too many hours, too many days. If Llael's western defenses collapsed that rapidly, things are going to become dire and quickly. We have to hope the decision to invade in winter will still hinder them, regardless of their preparations."

"We can't hasten our forces into Llael in winter!" Turpin said it perhaps more sharply than he intended, and he appeared to have startled himself. One did not speak like that to the king. He swallowed and lowered his voice. "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but consider this carefully. With reason, not emotion. We do not have a proper assessment of the threat. Nor a good estimate of what it will take to try to counter it. The closest forces are at Northguard, but those soldiers are vital to the defense of our northern border. We'll need to reallocate from Fort Falk, Point Bourne, Stonebridge, Corvis, possibly even Eastwall and Highgate. It'll need to be staggered. That will take time."

"Enough!" Leto said, his face red. "I will not have us sit idly by while our ally of the last three centuries is overrun."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Turpin said, though he did not look convinced or enthusiastic.

Leto turned on Rebald. "You said they'd be preoccupied by civil war. That Tzepesci was gathering an army to march on Korsk. Now we have the great prince marching into Laedry alongside Kommandant Gurvaldt Irusk. How is that possible?"

Rebald's face was impressively impassive. He calmly said, "Clearly, mistakes were made. We misread the facts. There are no certainties in my business."

"Clearly," Leto said. He took a moment and stared between them as if slightly embarrassed by his outburst. He then turned to Nemo. "What's your assessment, Commander?"

Nemo frowned and looked down, his eyes narrowing as he focused on his hands, running scenarios through his mind. "We need to get as many warcasters as possible into Llael. You'll need to start with the forces at Northguard. We're lucky Stryker is still there. They'll need to be wary of interference from Ravensgard, but Merywyn is close and in friendly hands. That can be our headquarters. We'll want Lieutenant Caine with us, as well as Captain Kraye. Their expertise in covert operations will be vital. We will also require discretionary funds for mercenary support. Any we hire will be unavailable to Irusk."



Turpin had focused on him and was clearly listening with his full attention. King Leto inclined his head and asked, "What else?"

Nemo considered. "Trusk will strike for Riversmet as soon as he can. He'll want to control the Black River. We'll need to be sure they can't cut it off from the south. Forces need to hasten up from here, Fort Falk, and anywhere else they can be spared. We'll have to be sure to leave proper support at the northern border, but it can be thin for a little while. The Thornwood is itself a powerful barrier, as was proven back in five-eleven. Be sure to get Lord General Duggan from Fellig. Have him coordinate with Stryker. No one knows the reds better than Duggan. They'll need to march with as much ammunition and fuel as they can carry, as supply lines will be vulnerable."

Turpin nodded. "A solid assessment. I concur. I will do some juggling to keep the home garrisons intact. We will need to return to Caspia at once. We can't have the king so far north."

Rebald said, "I'll set things in motion." His tone suggested he was less than enthusiastic about this direction, but he did not allow his feelings to interfere with efficiency. It was a trait Nemo admired.

King Leto's eyes lingered on Nemo's face. The older warcaster cleared his throat and said, "If I can be of any service, Your Majesty, just say the word."

Leto gave a small but knowing smile. It reminded Nemo of when they were both younger. "I need you to go to Northguard, old friend."

Nemo felt his mouth go dry, though he had felt it was coming. "Very well. I guess that means I won't be staying here in Corvis or transitioning to the Strategic Academy."

It wasn't fear he felt, just weariness. Age and bone-deep weariness. He'd not been young during the Scharde Invasions, a war that had almost been the end of him. And that had been twenty years ago. Leto had been his general then—a young prince, not yet the king. They shared a look.

Leto said, "Coordinate getting what you need to Northguard, then to Merywyn. Let Stryker take the active combat lead. I'll leave it to you what you want to do after. If you think you can't sustain the rigors of battle, I'll respect that. We all will. But leave that decision until you get there and see the situation firsthand. I'd feel a lot better if you were taking point on this for the generals, together with Commander Stryker. Your experience is something we can't replicate."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Nemo said, rising. He gave his king a salute, just as he used to, his mouth quirking into a sardonic smile.

"Enough of that," Leto said, extending a hand, which the old warcaster took and clasped firmly. "Be safe. Preserve our men. As many as you can. Send my regards to Coleman Stryker. Tell him I'm counting on the both of you to boot the reds from Llael."

"We'll do our best," Nemo said, not feeling optimistic. He bowed and turned to leave. A member of the Royal Guard was waiting for him, and they took him to where his warcaster armor and weapons had been collected so he could arm up.

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It was not such a long trek between Corvis and Northguard, and it was a route Nemo knew well, his duties having frequently required him to go from one corner of the kingdom to the other, often accompanying recently invented prototypes. The sight of him was a welcome one, as if he were a rich uncle on Giving Day. The stormsmiths who were the inheritors of his work and his peers in the voltaic sciences were always the most eager to see him and to hear of his latest discoveries.

This time he was accompanied by a substantial military force, as formidable as their leaders were able to gather from the Corvis garrison without depleting it completely. Corvis would be receiving additional troops from Fort Falk and elsewhere, some of whom would also be sent north to join them. His force included a substantial outlay of heavy hardware, including a number of light and heavy warjacks, some fresh from the factory floors of the Cygnaran Armory.

The onset of war would force the other garrisons to give up a great deal of their own hardware. Lord General Vincent Gollan of the Third Army had sent a number of requests after complaining of increased Cryxian activity. He would have to be disappointed yet again, though the leader of the Third Army knew how to make do with what he had. Times would be lean for Cygnar's other armies in the immediate future and perhaps longer. And where there was vulnerability, their enemies might strike.

They made their way up the Black River by boarding a number of riverboats, including several purchased hastily from merchant organizations in Corvis. The one Nemo stood on still reeked of the caged chickens it had once held. The river flowed along the edge of the dense Thornwood on one side, the outskirts of the Bloodstone Marches on the other. Even moving as hastily as they could, the entire process still took several long days, during which Nemo was all too aware that horrible things might be happening in Llael. The cold of the onset of winter had begun. Temperatures dropped noticeably the farther north they went, making Nemo's bones ache.

F&F INTEL: WARCASTER RETIREMENT

Many warcasters swear oaths binding them to the military for life. Retirement may happen when age takes a toll, but these rare assets are expected to contribute if possible, such as by training the next generation. They may be recalled to active service in times of war.

War was a game for the young, not the old, he mused. He had almost believed they would let him retire. He had almost believed he would accept it. But as the miles passed by under the churning of the steamship's paddlewheel, his resolve hardened. Old instincts returned. He could not sit idly by while those he had mentored fought and died. Would he sit safely behind a high wall of a Cygnaran city, content to read the incoming reports, as he knew Warmaster Turpin must?

No. He did not begrudge friends and peers who had stepped down, acknowledging their age, finding other roles to serve. Friends like Chancellor Birk Kinbrace, also a warcaster, who ran the Strategic Academy in Caspia. Kinbrace focused on training the next generation, a task that occupied a portion of Nemo's time as well. But he had never felt right teaching a warcaster in a classroom. True learning happened in the field, along the front lines or a threatened border.

The last and shortest segment of any trip to Northguard was usually the worst—crossing a portion of the swampy Bloodsmeath Marsh to reach the towering fortress complex surrounded by its array of trenches and bunkers. This was one region where the onset of cold weather was a help rather than a hindrance, as it hardened the soil and made supply roads easier to maintain. Before he could even step off the boat, he was startled to see a sizable force gathering amid the trees along the eastern shore of the Black River. The military docks built into the broadest section of the river were choked with transport ships, already busily loading soldiers.

He had imagined addressing Stryker in the halls of the castle, perhaps even given a chance to speak to his friend General Hagan Cathmore, Earl of Bloodsbane and Lord of Northguard. But, of course, word of their arrival would have been sent ahead, and it was by the Black River that the bulk of their army would be taken into Llael. Northguard already knew of the fighting in Llael. They needed to get as many boots and warjacks there as quickly as they could be spared.

Among the dozens of knights in blue armor lined up and awaiting their call to board, Nemo saw a familiar face. He directed the captain to set him ashore, and it did not take long before a small flat-bottomed landing boat was set in motion. As Nemo stepped onto the docks, Commander Coleman Stryker saw him approach. The younger man's frowning face brightened into a smile. Nemo felt his own heart lighten, though he kept his expression stern. Best not to show too much familiarity while among other officers and soldiers, though the truth was he sometimes thought of the red-haired warcaster as akin to an adopted son.

"Nemo!" Stryker exclaimed, striding up and seizing his hand with more than proper enthusiasm then slapping him on the shoulder with his other hand. The junior commander was taller than Nemo by almost half a foot and was broad of frame, particularly in his heavier warcaster armor.

So much for decorum, Nemo thought.

"Easy, boy," he said. "I'm not getting any younger. Good to see you. I worried you might be at Redwall."

For a moment Nemo could not help but imagine his old protégé dead on Llaelese soil, struck down by the Butcher of Khardov. He took in Cygnar's youngest commander with a critical eye. Not yet thirty, he mused, doing a quick calculation in his head. Coleman was twenty-nine. *Extremely young for his position, arguably too young,* he thought. King Leto had his reasons for advancing him up the chain. *I'm still more than twice his age, Morrow help us!*



At the mention of the Llaelese fortress, Stryker's face darkened. "I was just there a few weeks ago. I knew many of the soldiers and officers there. Good people."

He swallowed and added, "Morrow forgive me, but I left Lieutenant Jayne Kates with them. Thought it'd be good if she forged relationships with our allies."

He stopped as his voice caught.

Nemo felt his blood chill. Jayne Kates was one of their young journeymen, a promising young warcaster whom Kinbrace had spoken of highly. Cygnar couldn't afford to lose anyone with the gift, but he did not let his feelings carry to his face. Instead, he said, "Don't jump to any conclusions, Coleman. We don't know what happened up there. She might have been on patrol elsewhere. We'll find out."

Stryker nodded and gritted his teeth. "We'll repay the reds for this. There will be justice done. I swear it."

"There is no justice in war, Coleman," Nemo said, but then he gave a small smile. "But we can try for victory. Come, let's get underway. Kommandant Irusk is waiting, and we wouldn't want to disappoint him."