

VOL. 6: WAR FEEDS ITSELF, END OF 605 AR

ESCALATION TO WAR

by Douglas Seacat; "Pit Stop" by Josh Colón & Matt Goetz; "Family Feud" by Matt Goetz

"The Fire & the Forge" is a feature that examines 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 older readers.

This concludes *Escalation to War*, the first series in "The Fire & the Forge," covering events taken primarily from the era of *WARMACHINE: Escalation*, a pivotal turning point starting at the end of 604 AR and lasting through 605 AR. These conflicts kicked off six brutal years of turmoil and war that reshaped the region and saw the rise of powerful competing factions.

ACTS OF SABOTAGE

By the last months of 605 AR, many conflicts had changed and shifted. While the Llaeese War had conclusively ended nearly half a year earlier, its aftereffects were still felt. With so much manpower and military assets allocated to the north against Khador, Cygnar struggled to adapt to other pressing threats. The kingdom's ability to harness the strength of its divided armies would be tested as the year closed, a foreshadowing of what was to come in the years ahead.

Despite the attack on the gates of Caspia by the Protectorate of Menoth in Octesh, Cygnar would find no quick solution to the festering hostilities so close to its capital. Four months later, they continued to endure attacks from the theocracy. Caspia itself remained secure, but the border along the Black River proved to be difficult to safeguard. The Sul-Menites refused to directly engage large armies at predictable locations. It would be some time before the Great Crusade of the theocracy would campaign in earnest. For a time, it kept its larger armies in reserve, mustering.

Cygnar's focus on preserving Caspia, Eastwall, Fort Falk, and Corvis while leaving large swaths of the border lightly defended may have seemed ill advised, but the nation's generals had little choice. Manpower was stretched thin, and the northern conflict increasingly demanded fresh soldiers. The policy of the Cygnaran Reconnaissance Service under Scout General Bolden Rebal was to scatter its rangers along the borders, each team instructed to prioritize tracking large troop movements.



There was little to be done that might prevent smaller groups from crossing, including those capable of guerilla attacks and sabotage. This was not a problem so long as any infiltrators could only strike minor targets, a largely unavoidable consequence of the current conflicts.

Many in the upper ranks of the CRS and the general officer corps were of the opinion that Protectorate saboteurs were receiving aid from Menites inside Cygnar. The truth of any potentially treasonous action by Cygnarans remains an unknown aspect of this time period. It is likely that rumors of collusion were exaggerated, as most Cygnaran-born Menites considered themselves loyal citizens, many even quite willing to volunteer for military service.

The situation was complicated by those who may have aided the enemy unknowingly. Cygnar's remaining Menite minority was often isolated, living in their own small towns or in segregated districts within larger cities. It became an accepted tradition for these Menites to offer food and shelter to visiting pilgrims traveling between communities. It would have been simple for Protectorate agents to exploit these practices and move unnoticed into Cygnar's interior, blending in with others of their shared faith who knew nothing of their true aims.

Tensions between those of different faiths in Cygnar would only increase after the events in Ashtoven of 605 AR, when a group of Sul-Menite saboteurs penetrated deep inside the interior to reach a major target. Their success would have massive repercussions, essentially breaking the back of Cygnar's most vital supply line between the north and south.

MAJOR CONFLICTS AND EVENTS

End of 605 AR



1 Destruction of the Marchbridge
Khadoven 15th

The Marchbridge spanning the Marchbank Ravine in the Upper Wyrmswall Mountains is destroyed by saboteurs from the Protectorate of Menoth.

2 The Umbral Cairn Is Prepared
Khadoven 18th-22nd

Starting on the 18th of Khadoven, Asphyxious initiates the activation of the Umbral Cairn, a site of occult power in the Thornwood.

3 Battle at the Umbral Cairn
Ashtoven 13th

Khadoran, Cygnaran, and Protectorate armies are lured into a conflict with Cryxian forces by Asphyxious. Deneghra lures Victoria Haley from the conflict to engage in a personal duel from which neither emerges unscathed.

4 Meeting of Warlords
Ashtoven 26th

Archdomina Makeda of House Balaash, head of the Army of the Western Reaches of the Skorne Empire, sends Saxon Orrik to bring the mercenary warlord Asheth Magnus to meet her at an encampment in the Bloodstone Marches.

PIT STOP

Just South of Marchbank Ravine, Khadoven 1st, 605 AR

Edward Dominick Darius stared out the window of the *Sambert Limited* at the passing hills and scattershot trees that dotted the landscape of the eastern Wyrmwall Mountains. Lost in thought, he absentmindedly folded and unfolded the small paper note handed to him by a weary-looking ranger at the train's last stop. Darius had wondered about his reassignment to escort this supply rail from Caspia to Bainsmarket—particularly since the new orders put an early and abrupt end to his scheduled leave, which he had been happily spending refining prototype steam boilers for the Cygnaran Armory. After a few minutes using one of the simpler CRS cyphers, it all became clear.

Captain E. Dominick Darius. Possible attack on Cygnaran supply train Sambert Limited imminent. Protectorate saboteurs spotted. Top Priority: Safe delivery of five dozen assorted heavy warjacks plus military cargo. Reinforcements will not arrive in time. Do not alert train crew.

There was no signature identifying the author of the dispatch, only the spyglass and key insignia of the Cygnaran Reconnaissance Service.

It was impossible not to feel a certain anxiety at this vague warning. As a mechanic, Darius always approached any problem, no matter how subtle, with a direct and analytical approach. The idea that the Sul-Menites were bold enough to attack a military supply train far from the border unnerved him, as it was difficult to imagine how it was even possible. The train was heavily armed and protected. If an attack came, it would come prepared to neutralize the train's weaponry, which left its protection ultimately to him, as they would not have anticipated a warcaster. Rubbing his left ear, Darius felt his mood darken. He was snapped back from his thoughts by the sensation of the train decelerating.

From the doorway of his cabin came a gentle voice. "Sorry to bother you, Captain." It was Sergeant Dowdes, one of the military engineers serving the supply line. He added, "You wanted to be called if anything weird was going on."

Darius tried to keep his face neutral as he said, "Go ahead, Sergeant."

"We were closing on the Marchbridge when the conductor spotted a stack of debris dead-center of the crossing. We're stopping now, and we were just about to send some of our boys to clear the path, but I remembered your orders," the young sergeant said.

Darius felt his heartbeat increase. His instincts told him this was no coincidence. If the Protectorate were to attempt an ambush, the Marchbridge was a perfect spot.

"It's probably nothing, Captain," Dowdes said in a casual manner. "Our boys can have the tracks cleared before you know it."

Darius looked down at the crumpled piece of paper. To follow his orders to the letter, he should let Dowdes and his men clear the path. He was sure it would mean their deaths if this were

indeed an ambush. But if he went to check on the obstruction personally, it might prove to be a distraction intended to pull personnel away from the train, which would leave his cargo vulnerable. He wished he had brought a swift, light warjack like a Hunter or a Charger, but since he assumed the train's gun turrets would be enough to protect from lighter armed threats at range, he had instead brought Hullsworth and Clunker, an older Centurion and a quirky Hammersmith. The two heavies were powerful machines, but their size and bulk made them ill suited to be left alone on the middle of the bridge in an ambush. Darius felt the weight of his limited options. He had to get the train moving across that bridge and away from any likely ambush point. He doubted the ambush party would be able to catch up with them if they could get underway. The matter might come down to choosing between the cargo and the crew. There were nearly twenty souls serving on this train.

"Captain, your orders?"

Darius recalled a late-night heart-to-heart talk with his friend and mentor Arlan Strangeways. As the two had commiserated over a bottle of *uiske* about the life of a military mechanic, the usually gruff older man had become uncharacteristically reflective. He had said, "All you young gearheads care about is proving you're the best with a wrench. But our craft's purpose isn't keeping struts aligned and oil pumping. It's about maintaining the machines that keep our people safe."

Darius rose from his seat.

"Sergeant, get everyone on this train inside the rear two cars. We're about to be attacked."

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"Fear not the moment of your death. It is not a time of mourning but a time to rejoice. It is the price we must pay to journey to the City of Man and be bathed forever in the golden light of Menoth's presence."

Like the other pious Menites around him, Darmon whispered the priest's words to himself. The sharp, cold air of the mountains snatched his whispers and cast them away.

"We seek your divine hand in this hour of our need. Illuminate us, so we may cast down your foes. Bless and guide our blades, feed our flames, and sustain us with your glorious fire."

The words were a comfort. Each time he heard them, they kindled a spark in his soul, warming him like he might be warmed by sitting close to a fire. He had shared some portions of that sermon with wounded companions as they had died in his arms, as they'd fought across miles and miles of Cygnaran wilderness. He always saved the words about the warmth and comfort of Menoth's holy light for the moment he saw the glimmer of life fading from their eyes.

"My brothers," one of the lookouts said from his perch, "the train approaches."

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Darmon's body tingled with his religious fervor. Judging by the faces of Alad, Shireeya, and all the others, theirs did as well. A stooped battle priest named Sivius moved with them, propping up his old bones with his Menofix-capped staff as they crept toward the barricade.

The group moved across the Marchbridge, a towering structure of stone and steel that spanned the width of the Marchbank Ravine. Between the wooden ties Darmon could see the long drop to the river below, where other faithful Menites clambered among the lattice of supports, preparing explosive charges.

"Try not to look down," Shireeya said, grasping his bicep.

Broad-faced Alad smiled at him, the white of his teeth startling against the dark brown of his Idrian skin. "Darmon dreams of flying," Alad said. "In the City, we will fly together, brother."

Darmon returned Alad's smile and kept moving, despite the fluttering in his stomach and the swimming of his head.

One by one, his group joined the zealots already crouched behind the barricade on the tracks. They had kept low to stay out of sight. The zealots here peeked through gaps at the distant train, firebombs in their waiting hands. Darmon recognized one of them as Shijad Al-Rajad. The man was a baker from his home village, well known for the sweet honey cakes he sold. Baker he might have been, but his expression conveyed readiness to do violence to the unbelievers now.

The Cygnaran train was an iron beast, as tall as a two-story building. Thick armor protected the hull of the engine, which was stopped several car-lengths out onto the Marchbridge. An arms master gauged the distance to the train with a brass apparatus and clucked his tongue. Darmon guessed that it was stopped too far away from their barricade for skyhammer rockets to reach. He doubted they would have much of an effect against it, anyway.

"Why did they stop so short?" someone asked.

"This was always one of the uncertainties of this mission," replied the priest, the mask on his face muffling his words. "With faith, we will persevere. Eliminating the bridge is more important than destroying the train."



Sharp bursts of steam vented from the sides of the engine, and a thin trail of smoke rose from its stack. The armored turrets atop the rear cars swiveled a few degrees one way, then the next, as if scanning the countryside for danger.

"Your brothers and sisters prepare below us," the priest continued. "We must hold the unbelievers' attention here until their task is complete. What we do today will echo through time, my children. Our names are already inscribed in Menoth's ledger."

"In his name," Shireeya said. A handful of others echoed her words.

"In the name of the Creator and the Law," Sivius agreed.

The older man moved to raise his Menofix-capped staff to signal others still concealed in the trees, but the sight of three shapes emerging from the train stayed his hand. Concealed by rolling clouds of steam were forms much larger and bulkier than a man.

One by one they lumbered out of the haze. Darmon thought he recognized two of the heavy and ponderous bodies of cerulean blue. Warjacks, in the bold colors of Cygnar's army. The third shape was squat and misshapen with a peculiar third arm in the shape of a crane swaying over one of its shoulders and a squat cannon above the other. Its movements were odd, lacking the mechanical surety of a steamjack.

"Our enemy approaches," said Alad.

"Let them not find us lacking," said the priest, though Darmon thought the man's voice sounded dry and husky, like his throat was thick from fear. They could do little to such a foe.

At the edge of the bridge, the smallest of the three machines approached. It placed one foot gingerly on a tie, testing its weight, then stepped back to study the way ahead.

"They are too heavy," Darmon said in surprise.

Alad scowled. "Not heavier than a train."

"A train spreads its weight over many rungs at once," Darmon explained, pressing his hand flat against his palm. "They can't do that. They have to step on them one at a time, like we did."

"Menoth smiles," Shireeya said. "They can't approach."

She was right. Mostly. The smallest of the three gestured at the two heavier warjacks, which took tentative steps back from the edge of the steep ravine. The smallest one moved back onto the ties, cautiously at first but gaining confidence with each step. As it moved closer, Darmon could make out a pale man's face tucked away inside the heavy blue armor.

"That's a man," he said with faint amazement. The man must have been wearing some kind of heavy steam armor, like the Man-O-War of Khador. It looked even bulkier than what Exemplar bastions wore.

"Then we send him to Urcaen," Sivius said.

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Darius didn't like it. The fine hairs on the back of his neck stood on end despite the heat of his armor's boiler. The objects on the track. Not haphazard. Arranged, deliberate. Overlapping areas of cover. A barricade, not an obstacle.

"Time to wake up, boys," he said, whacking his wrench on the side of his armor.

With a whirring of machinery, halfjacks shook loose from the rear port, clattering onto the rails behind him. The simple machines took a moment to get their bearings, scanning their surroundings with their single crescent-shaped eyes. Darius sent a mental command to Hullsworth and Clunker, instructing them to watch for anything suspicious.

Gripping his quake hammer in one hand and his wrench in the other, Darius approached the barricade.

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"What are those things?" Darmon whispered. Three small, spherical machines had fallen free of the man's armor like metal ticks. On spindly legs they hopped from one railroad tie to the next ahead of their master.

"Trouble," Alad said, hefting a firebomb.

The arms master hissed at his cadre the moment the armored man was in range. Each of his deliverers muttered a short word of prayer then sparked the fuses of their rockets.

With a shriek and cloud of smoke, the battle began. Rockets arced into the sky, trailing tails of white smoke.

Darmon roared a battle cry and rose from cover, hurling his first firebomb. It detonated in a bloom of fire that showered down to the river below, far short of his target. Other zealots rose and flung their own projectiles, causing a rippling curtain of fire to separate the approaching man from them and engulfing him in flames. A heartbeat later the skyhammer rockets rained down, some smashing into the trestle bridge, others falling far from it to impact on the face of the ravine.

"For the hierarch!" Darmon screamed.

His elation was cut short as the armored man emerged from the flames. A nimbus of blue-white energy enveloped him, sparking like lightning.

Darmon had heard of power fields, but he had never seen it with his own eyes. *Not just a man*, he thought. *A Cygnaran warcaster*. His mouth tasted like ash.

The warcaster pointed to the barricade, prompting his strange little machines to rush forward. One scabbled along the metal rail of the track, its feet ping-ponging as it went. When it reached the barricade, there was a thunderclap and a blast.

The explosion knocked Darmon from his feet. Bits of wood and bodies showered him.

Alad jumped atop the barricade, two firebombs in his hands. He hurled one after the other at another rushing machine, which exploded several yards from their position. The Idrian whooped in triumph, but then the warcaster's cannon barked.

Alad flew back, his chest a bloody ruin. His body bounced off the bridge and tumbled down into the trees below.

Darmon got up and saw smoke from the shot that had killed Alad still trickling out of the cannon. It chambered another shot.

"Hold him, my children," the priest cried, pointing at the warcaster with his staff. The zealots responded with a fervent cry and emerged from their hiding places behind the barricade. A half-dozen sprinted forward, hefting clubs and firebombs.

The man's steam armor let out a shrill whistle as he moved to meet them. Swinging his great hammer, he smashed two zealots sideways off the bridge. They screamed as they fell, the sounds growing faint before silencing abruptly. The warcaster's third mechanical arm unfurled like a mantis' claw, grabbing another man by his skull and crushing it. Al-Rajad the baker hurled himself at the Cygnaran with an ululating war cry, smashing his maul down on the warcaster's armored hull. The warcaster responded with a backhand that spun Al-Rajad around, then he clapped the man's chest between his wrench and hammer. Broken and flopping, Al-Rajad fell from sight.

As the man pummeled his opponents, the last small machine darted between the zealots' legs until it was surrounded, then it detonated with a blast. Burning and mangled bodies flew in every direction.

The priest sang a hymn of holy battle as another wave of zealots rushed forward. Darmon looked down to where the bodies had fallen and saw his fellow Sul-Menites crawling like ants among the latticework of the bridge. They dodged burning timbers and falling debris, trying to complete their work.

Darmon saw as the warcaster noticed the warriors below. He gestured at the two heavy warjacks he'd left behind. They stepped between the train cars, and

F&F INTEL: THE CITY OF MAN

The City of Man is the name for the divine domain of Menoth said to await the devoted in Urcaen, the realm of the afterlife. It is described as an impossibly vast cityscape where all the pious who have worshiped Menoth spend their eternity after death, laboring harmoniously in service to the Lawgiver. While it is described as a single city, it is thought to be as large as a continent on Caen—a vast protected space amid the hellish wilds beyond. It is surrounded by a towering wall that shields its inhabitants from the Devourer Wurm, Menoth's ancient foe. The Devourer Wurm, together with a host of ravenous beasts and profane followers, periodically assails the city's defenses as part of the larger War of Souls that also occupies the Twins, Morrow and Thamar, who dwell in their own far-off domains.

While considered a mystical and unknowable place the living can never visit, the City of Man is considered very real by most of humanity due to certain accounts from those who have been granted the miracle of resurrection and who have described their experiences in Urcaen. Additionally, the Testament of Menoth is alleged to have crossed to Urcaen and visited it while still alive, recovering the holy Omegus. While there are those who may doubt their ability or willingness to reach the place, few doubt its existence.

Darmon heard the sound of metal uncoupling. The warcaster braced himself in his heavy armor as the barrel of his shoulder cannon tilted downward.

“No!” Darmon screamed, vaulting the barricade. He rushed forward, pulling bomb after bomb from his satchel and hurling them at his enemy.

“Illuminate us, so we may cast down your foes!” he screamed as the first bomb detonated. “Bless us and guide our blades!”

The second bounced off the warcaster’s armor and exploded.

Menoth must have guided his arm, because one after the next the bombs impacted the warcaster, wreathing him in a plume of white-hot flame. Darmon’s heart hammered and his spirit burned as the flames scorched the wooden ties of the bridge and the rails glowed cherry-red.

The Cygnaran warcaster emerged from the flames. Darmon’s bombs had done little more than blister his armor’s blue enamel.

Darmon felt cold and dizzy, standing alone to face this monster of steam and steel. He glanced back to where Shireeya and the priest stood behind the barricade.

The bridge shook as the warcaster charged him.

Darmon closed his eyes. “Fear not the moment—”

Below them, the saboteurs finished their work. The roar of an explosion flooded the world and washed Darmon clean with fire.

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For what seemed like an eternity, the whole world was made up of blinding light, choking smoke, and the deafening sound of crashing steel. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the chaos stopped, giving way to a ringing in his ears that faded to profound silence. Darius opened his eyes, not sure what surprised him more: the fact that he still lived or that he found himself—and his suit—suspended in mid-air.

Glancing upward, Darius smiled as he saw his trusty crane latched to one of the Marchbridge’s few remaining support struts a dozen feet above his head. The warcaster couldn’t even remember activating the crane before the blast.

“Thanks, old girl,” Darius said to his battered armor as he cautiously pulled the levers controlling the crane’s high-tensile-strength cables. “Just hold a little longer.”

As he rose inch-by-inch toward the relative safety of what remained of the Marchbridge, he mentally reconstructed what had happened. The intel he had received had been wrong; the Menites weren’t after the train but the bridge itself. The explosion had collapsed most of the central portion of the bridge, sending the front cars of the *Sambert Limited* to their doom in the Marchbank below. He felt a pang of alarm as he wondered if Hullsworth and Clunker had received his mental command in time to uncouple the rear cars.

Reaching the end of the cable, Darius used his quake hammer and large wrench to gain purchase on a nearby stretch of rail. It creaked and groaned as he pulled, but he managed to climb to safety. Stepping forward, he spotted Hullsworth and Clunker, the pair of warjacks releasing a burst of steam at the sight of their master. Behind them, Darius could see the two rear cars of the train, uncoupled as he had hoped. The crew of the *Sambert Limited* was stepping out of the freight doors, some looking at the destroyed bridge with disbelief.

Darius considered what a debacle this had been. He had killed the saboteurs—but too late. He had lost his military cargo, lost the supply train, and Cygnar had lost one of its most important bridges. He considered whether he might be demoted and swallowed against the lump in his throat. He tried to look on the bright side. Cygnar needed warcasters, so they had to keep him, didn’t they? He imagined sharing a beer in some disreputable officer’s tavern with Lieutenant Allister Caine and almost wept. But then he looked back and saw the faces of the train crew, of those who would almost certainly have perished if not for him. Perhaps he had chosen poorly, but as far as bad choices went, this one would let him sleep soundly tonight.

AFTERMATH: SABOTAGE OF THE MARCHBRIDGE

By 605 AR, the modern Cygnaran Army had come to rely heavily upon its railway infrastructure to support its far-flung forces. While each of its major armies was operationally self-sufficient, their supply lines were inter-reliant. This was especially true given the tremendous shift in resources and manpower to the northern theater beginning with the Llaeese War. For the army to remain in fighting shape, there was a continual rotation of active duty personnel as well as a steady demand for ammunition, warjacks, and related gear, hardware, and other supplies. The most vital channel of supply was the Market Line railway from Caspia to Bainsmarket.

The disruption caused by the demolition of the Marchbridge was considerable, forcing the army to rely on much slower and less reliable alternatives, including wagons sent up the King’s Highway and steamships up the Black River. These routes were more vulnerable to enemy interference and interception in addition to being markedly less efficient. Shipping supplies without the railway required more support personnel, enough to place a strain on both the Cygnaran treasury and its bureaucracy. Beyond military issues, this also caused considerable disruption to commerce between northern and southern Cygnar, affecting access to food surpluses ordinarily managed through Bainsmarket. This had a ripple effect in Cygnaran politics, causing northern nobles and merchants to feel neglected and ignored by the crown. This facilitated efforts by conspirators who were already working to undermine King Leto. In later years, the demolition of the Marchbridge following the defeat of the Llaeese War would be marked as the end of the “golden era” of Leto’s early reign, entering into the war-torn and strife-filled era that marked the rest of his time as sovereign. The strife-filled era that marked the rest of his time as sovereign.