

C.F.D. In The East

A Novel from Charlie War 16

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Chapter One: Surge

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - Charlie Shard, War 16

Good evening, soldiers of the Republic. This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio reporting live from the front. Today marks Day One of Charlie War Sixteen.

For the first time, the men and women of the C.F.D. have committed their strength to the Weathered Expanse.

Early this morning, the operation commenced. From Spirit Watch, our brave infantry surged forward and pressed into Wightwalk.

Both objectives were completed swiftly and decisively.

To the logistical team, the build team, and the harassment team, this broadcast extends the regiment's deepest thanks.

A special salute goes to our allies of the Ninety Eighth Regiment, who stood shoulder to shoulder with us on these fronts.

Private Ryan Vance felt the low vibration of the broadcast through the cracked rubber earpiece wired into his rucksack. The words were his own, polished and cleaned, then delivered back to the front runners to C.F.D Radio HQ.

Ryan shoved his shovel into the cold, gluey mud of Wightwalk. The newly captured town smelled of ash and wet cement. Boots slipped in the thick, sucking soil with every step. This uniform was not built for speed, he thought.

The men of the regiment were built for endurance, for the grinding, brutal work that this war will demand. The C.F.D. was a ragtag band of veterans, all of them carrying scars and grudges, but always getting the job done.

He was part of the build team, the backbone of the operation. And the broadcast's "deepest thanks" meant little more than the promise that no one was about to shoot him in the head. Thirty hours of near-continuous digging had left him exhausted. He had not noticed the swiftness of the victory, only the half-starved hunger that gnawed at his stomach with each swing of the heavy tool.

The cold clung to his threadbare coat. The radio's voice was a necessary lie, keeping shovels moving and men steady.

Commander Nighthawk appeared at the trench mouth, arms crossed, inspecting the progress with a critical eye. The sun had broken through the low clouds in thin, pale strips, reflecting off the mud and shallow pools.

"Nighthawk," Ryan said, adjusting himself, "the report is ready. Captain Sin wants it forwarded immediately."

Commander Nighthawk grunted. "He will have it. Make sure you do not miss anything. He does not like excuses." His dark eyes flicked over the trench line. "Keep moving."

Captain Sin, Ryan's superior, was a man carved by years of service rather than fame. He had once been a field medic before taking command, and though the rank had hardened him, traces of that healer's instinct still lingered in the way he spoke. He carried the weight of too many battles behind a distant stare, as though every decision still echoed in his mind long after the orders had been given.

Those who had served under him longest said that somewhere beneath the layers of smoke and steel, the old medic was still there, the man who once stayed behind under fire to tend to the wounded. But war changes everyone, and Captain Sin was no exception.

Ryan leaned on Medic Creaky, who had just shuffled into the trench carrying a crate of bandages and a pot of steaming coffee. Creaky was older than most of the men, his hair flecked with grey and his uniform permanently creased from long nights spent on the move. His hands trembled slightly, not from fear, but from the relentless work of saving lives that others would have written off.

Despite the mud, the noise, and the chaos, Creaky always carried a sort of quiet warmth with him, the kind that reminded the younger soldiers that there was still kindness left somewhere in this war. He had known Sin before the command days, back when both of them worked side by side in blood-soaked aid tents. Whatever had hardened Sin, Creaky had somehow managed to keep at least part of his humanity intact.

"You will be careful with your transmissions," Creaky said, voice low, watching Ryan secure his radio. "He is not one to forgive mistakes."

Ryan nodded, eyes following the treeline. "I know. Does he... ever change?"

Creaky shrugged. "He hasn't in the years I have known him. Some things do not get better. He just... moves forward. You learn to work around it." And the subject was dropped, as it always was.

Ryan glanced over the trench line again. The men of the regiment were working away in the mud wishing for glory and the rain to go away. The C.F.D. did not win wars with fanfare. They won them by refusing to break and by keeping the next position alive no matter the cost.

The faint thump reached him before the tremor arrived in his boots. A Warden shell landed somewhere downrange. The vibration rolled through the mud and up his arms. He was reminded of the truth that the radio could not cover. The counterattack had begun.

"Stay alive," Ryan whispered to himself, gripping the shovel. "Stay steadfast."

The next shell thumped closer, the air vibrating as if the sky itself were warning them. Mud shifted under Ryan's boots and he felt the ground tremble in a way that made him wish for quiet roads and a bike ride home. The radio in his pack hummed. HQ would want the report. But first, he had to survive.



Chapter Two: Vigilance

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

Good evening, Colonials. This is your trusted voice from the frontlines, broadcasting once more from the Colonial Frontline Defence.

The Weathered Expanse has fallen to Colonial hands. The Hex is now secured, though our work is not yet complete.

Watchtowers and vital supply routes must be built to ensure the territory remains firmly in our grip.

Patrols are to remain vigilant. Warden partisans have been sighted in the area. Shoot them on sight.

The next objective lies before us: the Viper's Pit. Our sights are set on Moltworth Town Base, a stronghold that must be taken if the Colonials are to press deeper into enemy lines.

Elsewhere along the front, fierce battles continue. The Deadlands, Marban Hollow, and Loch Mor are all contested, with neither side yielding an inch.

Reinforcements are scarce, and it is only a matter of time before the Wardens lay siege to our positions.

Soldiers of the Republic remain steadfast. Each trench dug, each supply line guarded, and each shot fired brings us closer to final victory. Dig in, keep your rifles ready, and trust in the strength of your comrades.

The second night in the Weathered Expanse was colder than the first. Ryan Vance sat behind the wheel of a small, battered truck, His rucksack wedged against the seat. He was not digging this time. His mission was to establish vital supply routes, and every mile burned in diesel was a gamble against the unseen.

Lance Corporal Pretzel rode beside him in the cab, muttering about the dirt tracks, the wheel ruts, the scarcity of fuel. Ryan had heard it all before, but Pretzel was fast, reliable, and the kind of man who would take the first hit and still arrive on time.

"Keep your eyes open, Vance," Pretzel said, voice low but steady. "These roads do not forgive mistakes."

Ryan grunted, scanning the dim road ahead. "Partisans are supposed to be ghosts," he muttered. "Nothing to see, nothing to shoot."

"They leave more than you want to find," Pretzel replied, eyes sweeping the tree line. "Broken branches, tracks, scraps of cloth. They watch, they wait. You do not notice until it is too late."

The truck rumbled forward. Every mile felt like a slow heartbeat in the dark, the trees leaning over the road like twisted sentinels. Ryan could feel the weight of each crate in the back, each one a vital cog in the small, fragile machine that kept the regiment alive. Every failure could mean half-starved troops, empty rifles, or a stalled reinforcement. Vigilance was not just a slogan; it was a constant, gnawing anxiety.

They reached a narrow clearing. Ryan pulled the truck off the main track to check a bridge foundation and mark the potential patrol route with a basic signpost. Pretzel climbed down, muttering about mud.

"I'll help" Pretzel muttered.

The forest was silent except for the distant buzz of insects and the creak of his hammer striking wood. And then came the faint snap, almost imperceptible. Ryan froze.

Pretzel's hand went to his rifle. "Eyes front," he whispered. "They are here."

A sharp crack rang out. The bullet struck the truck's metal side with a deafening ping. Ryan dropped his tools and ran towards the cab and tripped. Another shot. Pretzel was already moving, dragging the fallen Ryan to the far side of the truck.

A sniper had them. Green-clad Warden partisans, concealed in the shadows, attempting to pick them off one by one.

"Go!" Pretzel shouted, shoving Ryan toward the cab. "I will cover you!"

Ryan hesitated. "Pretzel!"

"Move!" Pretzel barked. He fired once, twice, forcing the shooter to shift. Then he moved to the open, taking the next rounds directly and drawing fire.

Adrenaline took over. Ryan jumped into the truck, slamming the gear lever forward. The engine roared, and he tore down the dirt track, weaving between trees and ruts, praying the engine would hold. Behind him, he heard the muffled chaos of Pretzel's final stand.

The forest blurred past, the weight of the supplies shifting with every bump. Ryan kept glancing in the rear-view mirror, half-expecting another shot, but the darkness swallowed the clearing. Pretzel had given him the chance to live, to keep the supplies moving, and the regiment alive for one more day.

Hours later, Ryan reached the small outpost on the edge of the border. Shaking, soaked, he unloaded what remained, checked the crate, and finally allowed himself a moment to sit. His fingers were stiff and raw. His stomach ached. And in the quiet that followed, he let the thought come: he had survived, but at a cost.

The radio hummed again with an earlier propaganda message. The next broadcast would speak of secure supply lines. No mention of Pretzel, no mention of the sniper, no mention of the fear, the mud, the forest, or the sacrifices. That was the difference between the story and the truth.

Viper's Pit waited ahead. Supplies had been delivered. Lives had been risked. And Ryan Vance, shaking and exhausted, knew tomorrow would be another long drive into the unknown.



Chapter Three: Breach

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, carrying a dispatch from Commander Nighthawk, currently stationed at the Viper's Pit frontline.

Colonials, we bring you news from the front. A foothold has been secured at a place known as The Rockaway. There, our forces have established a forward operating base. Though the Wardens struck fiercely, the assault was beaten back, and Rockaway still stands in Colonial hands.

In the dark hours of the campaign, our allies launched a daring manoeuvre. With the aid of our Russian and Chinese comrades, the regiments GK, Iron Vanguard, and the Ninety Eighth, the enemy was pressed from three key positions: The Friars, Blackthroat, and Fleck Crossing.

This relentless pressure forced the Wardens to yield both the Moltworth Town Hall and Earl Crowley. Through exhaustion and attrition, the enemy lines cracked. At this hour, Earl Crowley remains firmly in Colonial possession.

Stand strong, Colonials. Each stone laid, each trench dug, and each tower raised brings us closer to driving the Wardens from the Viper's Pit. The fight is not finished but victory is within our grasp.

The crackle of static faded, leaving Ryan Vance in the echoing quiet of the Rockaway base. The air was heavy with iron, damp earth, and the acrid tang of spent casings. Around him, soldiers moved with deliberate purpose, repairing equipment, fortifying walls, or taking short, exhausted breaths between duties. Victory, the radio had said. But the reality was mud, rubble, and the wounded overcrowding the medical tents. The town had been claimed, but the fight to hold it had only just begun.

Ryan shouldered his rucksack, heavy with equipment and stepped into the bunker mess area. He passed soldiers from the Ninety Eighth, their faces streaked with dirt and sweat, quietly laughing at some small victory or misfortune. The contrast with the broadcast was bitter and familiar. There was no music, no fanfare, only the worn rhythm of men holding together against exhaustion.

At the far corner of the bunker, he spotted Private Crab, known as Suffering, sitting with a tin mug of rum pressed to his lips. The man was legendary in equal parts for his daring exploits against the Wardens and his astonishing capacity for drinking. He had been caught up in a tank mission with Commander Nighthawk only days before, a brutal campaign of fire and steel that had kept the private on the frontlines longer than he could remember.

"Never thought I would see you take a quiet moment," Ryan said quietly, approaching him.

Crab tilted his head, one eye squinting. "Even I need a drink now and then," he said, his voice rough from smoke and exhaustion. "If you want, have a sip. First time in days I am not being chased by fire."

Ryan took the offer. The alcohol was bitter, but it warmed his chest against the chill in the base. He sank onto a nearby crate. "Rockaway is a mess," he said. "The radio says it is ours. The mud says something else."

Crab grinned. "The mud always wins, mate. But at least it has not killed me yet." He drained the mug and slammed it back onto the table. "Keep your eyes sharp though. Rum does not stop the Wardens."

Ryan nodded, letting the warmth and brief humour anchor him. For a moment he allowed himself to remember why he was here. Not the speeches or the broadcasts, not the clean words sent to distant ears. He thought of quiet roads, of cycling through open fields with nothing but wind and sun, of a life where the mud did not cling to everything he touched. That dream was thin, but it kept him moving.

A shout cut through the brief calm. A small fight had broken out between CFD soldiers and a squad of S2K. Words were thrown, hands followed, and Ryan flinched, remembering the fragile balance that kept the base operational. He took a deep breath and stood, embracing the rest of the warmth the run provided.

Whispered rumours circulated that CFD regiment leader Brano would soon arrive at the front, and the base was buzzing with preparations. Supplies were being shifted, sandbags restacked, watchtowers inspected. The calm before a storm.

Ryan stepped outside, surveying the outskirts of the base perimeter. Every shadow, every distant movement felt like a threat. He could see the first signs: the wagons on alert, soldiers checking their weapons, the faint glint of optics scanning the edge of the Viper's Pit.

And then the movement that made him straighten. Figures appeared on the ridge, too coordinated to be chance. The Wardens were coming.

Crab's eyes caught Ryan's. No words were needed. The rum forgotten, the exhaustion forgotten, he pulled his uniform tighter, readied his gear, and moved with the practiced efficiency of someone who had been doing this for years.

A radio left on a cargo box came to life. The broadcast would speak of Rockaway's secure foothold. It would not mention the counterattack forming at the edge of the ridge. It would not mention the worry in the eyes of soldiers who had survived so much. It would not mention that the fight, the real fight, was about to begin.

Ryan gripped his rifle. He would survive. He would build. He would endure. And he would watch Crab go out to meet the enemy.

The shadow of the Viper's Pit stretched before them. The fight was coming.



Chapter Four: The Mammon Delivery

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, reporting once more from the battlefield of the Viper's Pit.

After regrouping at Earl Crowley, the Colonial regiments pressed forward with renewed determination. The assault began with precision and purpose. Though the Wardens had fortified their relic base at Fleck Crossing, the resistance proved lighter than expected.

Within a short span, Colonial forces had stormed the fortifications, raised their banners over the battlements, and seized the position.

The capture of Fleck Crossing struck a crippling blow, cutting off a vital Warden logistical artery.

Among the day's most daring acts was the bold action of Froddo and Nighthawk. In the chaos of battle, they hijacked a Warden armoured car, turned its guns upon the enemy, and tore through their lines.

The secondary objective was clear: the capture of the Moltworth Relic Base. The fighting was fierce and costly, lasting long into the night. At last, united as one force, the C.F.D., S2K, and Ninety Eighth Regiments broke through.

Together they shattered Warden morale and stormed Moltworth. When the smoke cleared, the relic base lay firmly in Colonial hands.

Ryan Vance had never been happier or more exhausted to carry explosives. The hauler truck groaned under its load of shirts and wooden crates of Mammons. Pretzel, as steady and grizzled as ever, drove, hands white-knuckled around the wheel, while Ryan checked the straps and watched the slick, mud-slick road ahead. Unbelievably and against all odds, Pretzel had survived the sniper incident back in the Weathered Expanse, a detail that made Ryan respect his quiet competence all the more and hopefully he will one day share that tale.

The low growl of an engine cut through the quiet road ahead. A battered hauler came into view, brakes hissing as it rolled to a stop. From the cab stepped a man in a dusted trench coat, calm as if the war had paused for him alone. He leaned against the side of the truck, eyes hidden beneath the brim of his cap.

"From Sin," he said, offering Ryan a folded note.

Ryan didn't need the name. Everyone at the front knew that voice. Froddo.

Ryan unfolded it quickly:

"Report not what you see, but what they need to see". – Captain Sin

He folded it back up carefully and slipped it into his coat. Sin's reminder was a knife to the ribs of conscience. Not only was he a soldier, but he was also a correspondent, a conveyor of truth twisted into propaganda.

"I'll ride with you and Pretzel," Frodo said. "Just need to get these supplies to Moltworth. Heard whispers there's a Warden ambush ahead."

Ryan nodded, tension coiling in his chest. Frodo had been a bus driver before the war, ferrying the local community around his peaceful hometown. The quiet competence in his planning and the ease with which he read terrain spoke of that past life, humble and disciplined.

The three set off, tyres squelching in mud. They were barely an hour from the relic base when Frodo motioned them to pull over behind a fallen tree.

"Reports are right," Frodo said quietly. "Two-man squad ahead. Could be partisans looking to hit the line."

He turned to Ryan. "You and I will scout ahead. Pretzel stays with the hauler."

Ryan's stomach tightened. It had been weeks since he had been this close to combat. No radio could spin what he might see. But he nodded. Frodo was calm, ready, and armed.

The trees crowded close, the air thick with damp and the smell of rot. Mud dragged at their boots; branches snagged their sleeves. Then, there was movement. Too steady, too controlled. Ryan froze, rifle half-raised, every nerve locked on the shadows ahead.

Then they came. Two Wardens burst from behind a tree, knives drawn. Ryan had no time to think. He swung his rifle, felt it connect, but the second Warden leapt at him from the side. Hands and mud tangled as he struggled. Panic surged as he tried to roll free, but the man's weight started to press him down.

Frodo appeared in a flash, knife in hand. He moved like a dark shadow, precise and lethal. One quick, fluid motion and the Warden crumpled, a faint grin on Frodo's face. He whispered, "He didn't set his MPF order," then helped Ryan to his feet.

No time to dwell. The forest returned to its oppressive quiet, the scent of wet earth and fear lingering. Frodo started running past Ryan. "Let's get back to Pretzel. These supplies won't deliver themselves."

They returned to the hauler. Pretzel's eyes were calm yet alert, hands steady on the wheel. Ryan slid into the passenger seat, checking the crates.

"All good?" Pretzel asked. Ryan nodded.

They moved again, slowly, deliberately, the road slick and unforgiving. By the time they reached the Moltworth Relic Base, the first light of dusk was breaking through the mist.

Soldiers were already at work offloading shirts and stacking Mammons, each crate a vital link in the chain of survival.

Ryan watched the hauler empty, the supplies safely delivered. He breathed a quiet sigh. The battle had not been fought with grand gestures or medals today, but with mud, sweat, and vigilance. This was the truth the radio would never fully capture.

Froddo leaned against the side of the hauler, wiping mud from his hands, already talking quietly about the next run. Pretzel checked the straps and smiled faintly, the shadow of his sniper survival still evident in his eyes.

Ryan reached for his radio, thoughts already on Sin's note. Report not what you see, but what they need to see. He brought out his notebook and started writing.

The war would continue. The supply lines would keep moving. And they would endure.



Chapter Five: Fool's Run

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, bringing you the latest report from the frontlines of the Viper's Pit.

At dawn, Colonial forces advanced from the C.F.D. forward base at Rockaway, marching once again upon the Moltworth Relic Base, which had been lost the previous night.

Momentum gathered as the facility teams brought forward several armoured cars. With their arrival, Warden resistance was pressed back, and the Colonials gained fresh strength.

Superior communication and the tireless work of the medic squads tipped the balance in our favour. We welcome Harry, newly joined to the medical corps, whose service under fire saved many lives on the field.

The broadcast's final words faded beneath the thunder of real guns. The bunker shook with each shell that landed closer to the line. Dust fell from the ceiling in pale clouds that hung briefly before being swallowed by the smoke. Ryan Vance hunched over his field table, scribbling notes for after action reports while the shouts of wounded men echoed beyond the wall.

The report spoke of momentum and strength. Reality smelled of burnt oil, disinfectant, and the sour iron of blood.

Captain Sin was crouched beside a wounded infantryman, sleeves rolled to his elbows, his gloved hands slick with blood and iodine. Around him, the aid station was a chaos of shouted orders, rattling stretchers, and piles of plasma bags lit by lantern light. The air stank of sweat, iron, and antiseptic.

"Hold him steady," Sin muttered, voice calm but frayed at the edges. "That artery's shallow, not severed." He reached for a field dressing, pressing it into place with practiced precision. "Creaky, clamp that vein before it starts singing."

Creaky moved in without hesitation, the steel clamp clicking shut under his steady hand. His face was drawn, streaked with grime and fatigue, but his touch never faltered. A medic beside them called out for more bandages; another dragged a stretcher past, squealing over the mud-caked floorboards.

Sin didn't look up. "Keep the plasma flowing," he said quietly. "He's got a fighting chance yet."

For a moment, the din of the hospital blurred into background noise. Only the rhythm of work remained, clamp, tie, breathe. It was brutal, methodical mercy, the kind that left no room for doubt.

Creaky, steady as ever, worked beside him without hesitation. The veteran medic's face was lined, his eyes half hidden beneath the shadow of his helmet. "Got it. Pressure's holding."

The patient whimpered, then fell silent. Sin looked up briefly and met Ryan's gaze. "If you're done writing poetry, Vance, make yourself useful. Field kit's low. Sort through what's left and start logging plasma packs."

Ryan nodded, pushing away the notebook and pulling the battered medkit towards him. His hands moved automatically, checking supplies, counting what was missing, ignoring the distant gunfire.

Harry Illig, Sin's newest recruit, burst through the bunker door. His uniform still bearing its original stitching, his hands shaking with adrenaline. "Captain! They're calling for help up the line. A man down in the wire field. Looks like a C.F.D. engineers. They're caught between emplacements."

Sin didn't look up. "Tell them to hold. No one moves until I say it's clear."

Harry hesitated. "Sir, he'll bleed out."

"Then he'll bleed out quietly," Sin replied, his tone clipped. "We can't afford to lose another medic today. Not one."

Harry swallowed hard, then turned and looked towards Creaky. "It's one of ours, though. I can get them out."

Sin's voice cut through the room like a blade. "Illig! You step over that trench line without my order and you'll be joining them in the mud. Do you understand me?"

For a heartbeat, Harry froze. Then, without another word, he grabbed a medkit and sprinted out of the bunker.

"Damn fool," Sin muttered, slamming his fist against the crate beside him.

The sound of gunfire intensified outside. Ryan heard the shouts, the short, sharp cracks of rifles, and then, distantly, Harry's scream.

Creaky stood slowly, brushing dirt from his trousers. "He's just a boy, Captain. He doesn't know the difference between courage and stupidity yet."

Sin glared at him. "And you do?"

Creaky's reply was calm. "I've had time to learn it." He picked up his own kit.

"Creaky," Sin began, but the older man had already climbed the trench ladder, vanishing into the white smoke that drifted across the lip of the line.

Ryan's heart was thudding so hard it felt like it was shaking the bunker walls. He could hear more shouting, Harry's voice, faint and ragged.

He didn't think. He just moved. He grabbed a first aid pack, slung it over his shoulder, and followed Creaky up into the light.

The air hit him like a slap. The world outside was a storm of dust and fire. Bullets snapped overhead, whining like insects. The ground beyond the trench was a broken expanse of mud and bodies, where the earth itself seemed to bleed.

“Good to see you, stay low!” Creaky shouted, crawling forward.

They could see Harry about twenty metres out, slumped beside another fallen figure, Private Moose, a new recruit barely three weeks in. Blood soaked the front of Moose’s tunic, a dark stain spreading fast.

Ryan hit the mud and crawled. Every inch forward felt stolen from the earth itself. The muck clung to his sleeves, sticking at his hands, pulling him down as he dragged himself onward. A shot cracked past his ear, it was close enough that he felt its heat slice the air. He buried his face in the dirt, breath ragged, the reek of no-man’s land filling his lungs.

Creaky reached Harry first. The young medic was half-collapsed beside Moose, his sleeve soaked red, one hand still pressed against the wounded man’s chest. His breathing came in short, panicked bursts.

“Stay still, Harry,” Creaky ordered, dropping to his knees beside them. “You’re bleeding through.”

Harry tried to shake his head. “Moose... he’s hit bad, I can’t just..”

“Quiet now,” Creaky said, voice level but firm. He tore open a field dressing and pressed it hard to Harry’s arm, blood seeping between his fingers. “You did your part. Let me do mine.”

Ryan skidded in beside them, his kit spilling across the dirt. The air was thick with smoke and the hiss of incoming fire.

“Let’s move,” Creaky barked, not looking up. “You take Moose, I’ll keep Harry breathing.”

Another shell landed close enough to shake the ground beneath them. Dust and embers rained down, but the four of them stayed locked in the narrow world of torn uniforms, bloodied bandages, and stubborn will.

Ryan nodded, adrenaline flooding every nerve. He got his arms under Moose’s shoulders and began dragging him backwards, step by agonising step. Mud sucked at his legs, bullets cutting the air inches from his back. Moose groaned once, then went still.

They reached the last fifteen metres when a mortar landed nearby. The blast lifted Ryan off his feet and threw him into the mud. His ears rang; the world became a blur of sound and pain.

Through the ringing, he saw Creaky still moving, hauling Harry across the last few metres towards the trench. Ryan forced himself up, muscles screaming, and staggered the final distance with Moose limp in his arms.

Hands reached over the parapet. Someone shouted his name. Then he was falling backwards into the trench, landing hard beside Creaky and Harry.

Captain Sin was already there, shouting orders. “Bandages! Plasma! Move!” He was on his knees beside Harry in seconds, tearing open a field dressing with his teeth. “You’re a damn fool, Illig,” he muttered, but his hands never stopped working. “Next time you think about being a hero, think twice.”

Creaky collapsed against the wall, breathing hard. “He’ll live,” he said. “So will Moose, if we’re quick.”

Sin glanced at him, something softer in his eyes for a moment. Then he looked to Ryan. “You too, Vance. You’ve got more sense than this. What were you thinking?”

Ryan wiped the blood and mud from his face. “I wasn’t, sir. Someone had to help.”

Sin stared at him for a long moment, then gave a small, weary nod. “Fine. You helped. Now fetch the plasma before they both bleed out.”

The fighting died down hours later. The trench was a dim, echoing corridor of exhaustion. Ryan sat on an ammo crate, his uniform stiff with dried mud, watching as Sin finished securing a fresh bandage around Harry’s arm.

“Lucky bastard,” Sin murmured. “The bullet missed the bone. He’ll be able to hold a rifle again.”

Harry managed a weak smile. “Sorry, sir.”

Sin sighed. “Don’t apologise, Illig. Just learn.” He straightened and looked at Creaky. “You too. If you disobey a direct order again... Just make sure you bring me back my men alive again.”

Creaky smiled faintly. “Aye, Captain. I’ll do my best.”

Sin turned away, rubbing at his eyes. “I’ll hold you to that.”

The trench settled into uneasy quiet, the kind that always came before something worse. Ryan sat by the radio, the wires trembling with static and distant voices.

He wrote a line, crossed it out, and stared at the blank page.

Beyond the trench, the wind was shifting. Somewhere out there, new orders were already moving, there would be bridges to be built and certainly men to be lost. And he knew, before dawn, they’d be marching again.



Chapter Six: Bridges

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, the voice of the Colonials, carrying to you the latest from the warfront in Viper's Pit.

The struggle for this Hex continues with ferocity. The Colonials and the Wardens clash in endless cycles of advance and retreat, each side testing the other's resolve.

The Blackthroat Town Base was lost to the Wardens. Yet already, Colonial forces are mustering, and all signs suggest it will soon be brought back into our control.

Meanwhile, on the river crossing by the bridges of the Twin Fangs, our soldiers have held fast. Against repeated Warden assaults, the bunker base stands, a symbol of Colonial strength and endurance.

The broadcast faded into static, its words dissolving into the cold night air. Ryan Vance sat near the collapsed bridge, a battered receiver resting beside him on a crate. The *Twin Fangs* was not a symbol of strength tonight. It was a graveyard of steel and water.

The two bridge spans jutted out from either bank like broken fangs, their iron teeth gnarled and blackened by shellfire. The river beneath was half frozen, the current dragging shattered planks and debris downstream. Every few minutes, a rifle shot cracked across the water, echoing between the cliffs that hemmed in the valley.

Ryan rubbed his gloved hands together, watching his breath curl in the moonlight. The cold here was a living thing, creeping through his coat and settling in his bones. Somewhere along the defensive line, he could hear laughter, the strained, brittle kind that comes from soldiers trying not to think too much.

Rumours passed down the trench line like contraband. Froddo, they said, had pulled off another miracle in the north, something called the Hydra Charge. No one quite knew what it was, but they swore it had blown an entire Warden armour column off the road. Ryan doubted half of it, but rumours like that were fuel. They kept men standing in the frost when everything else seemed lost.

A distant engine grumbled. Headlights swept across the frozen mud as a half-track pulled into the forward line. Soldiers straightened instinctively. Even before the man stepped out, Ryan knew who it was.

Commander Eddy.

He was taller than Ryan had imagined, broad-shouldered, wrapped in a heavy greatcoat scarred with soot. His eyes were sharp, clear despite the exhaustion etched into his face. He looked like a man who'd fought the war so long he'd begun to carry its weight in his posture.

“Private Vance,” he said as he approached, his tone even, low. “You’re the radio operator here?”

“Yes, sir,” Ryan replied, standing quickly.

Eddy gave a small nod. “Good. We’ll need contact with command once the engineers finish their survey.” He paused, looking out over the broken bridge. “We’ll have to rebuild it. They’ll want a push across within the week.”

Ryan followed his gaze. “That soon?”

Eddy’s expression didn’t change. “Command thinks this line is quiet.”

The two men stood in silence for a while, watching the river shift around the twisted metal. From here, the war looked like it had frozen solid, but the distant flashes on the horizon said otherwise.

“I came from the Heartlands,” Eddy said suddenly. “The Blemish.”

Ryan looked up. “I’ve heard it’s hell there.”

Eddy gave a grim smile. “Hell would be an improvement. At least hell has rules.”

He turned back toward the bridge. “Be glad you’re up here. The cold keeps the awareness fresh.”

Before Ryan could respond, a flare burst above the far bank, painting the world in white light. Figures moved in the fog, small shapes darting between the wreckage.

“Contact!” a voice shouted from the sandbag line.

Eddy moved instantly, his calm vanishing into command. “Positions! Hold your fire until they’re in the open!”

Ryan dropped beside the machine-gun nest, his hands shaking as he loaded a fresh belt. Across the river, the Wardens were advancing, dark shapes wading through the icy current, rifles raised above their heads.

“Bloody madmen,” Eddy muttered. Then louder: “Wait for it...”

The air was still but for the rush of the river. Ryan could see the Wardens’ breath in the cold, the ripples of water around their knees. When the first of them reached the twisted bridgework, Eddy gave the word.

“Now!”

The ridge exploded into light and noise. Rifles cracked, machine guns roared, and tracer fire stitched across the water. The first wave of Wardens fell, swallowed by the current, but more were coming crawling over the wreckage, using the broken beams for cover.

“Left flank! Keep the gap covered!” Eddy bellowed, moving between the firing lines. A mortar landed nearby, showering them with mud and ice. Ryan felt something sting his cheek but kept his hands on the trigger, the barrel glowing faintly in the cold air.

Another flare went up. The light caught the Wardens' faces as they struggled through the water, grey, desperate, determined. Ryan's rifle jammed. He cursed, fumbling to clear it. Eddy saw and stepped in front of him, firing short, measured bursts from his rifle.

"They'll keep coming," Eddy shouted over the noise. "This bridge means the river crossing. The river crossing means supply lines."

Ryan finally cleared the jam and fired again. Two Wardens dropped into the shallows. The cold water carried them away, silent and slow.

For a moment, the attack faltered. The firing eased, replaced by the sound of the river reclaiming its rhythm. The air was thick with smoke and the sharp smell of burnt oil.

Eddy crouched beside Ryan, reloading. "That'll be a probing force. Main push will come at dawn."

Ryan nodded, breathing hard. "Then we hold?"

Eddy gave a tired grin. "We always hold."

From across the river came another flash, muzzle fire, closer this time. The next assault was forming already.

Ryan checked his rifle again. The bridge shuddered under the concussive thump of another mortar strike. Splinters of metal clattered down around them.

"Commander," Ryan said, glancing toward the far bank, "they're not giving up."

"No," Eddy replied quietly, watching the shadows move through the smoke. "They never do."

A final flare burst high overhead, lighting the Twin Fangs in ghostly white. In the glare, Ryan could see them, figures climbing the ruined girders, bayonets glinting, water dripping from their uniforms.

"They're crossing," Eddy said, raising his rifle.

The cold air filled again with the crack of gunfire and the roar of the river as the Wardens surged forward, climbing over the teeth of the broken bridge, their silhouettes rising through the mist.



Chapter Seven: The Cost of Command

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, bringing you the latest news from the battlefields of Viper's Pit.

With a decisive push from the north led by the C.F.D. at Serenity's Blight, and the coordinated advance of S2K from Fort Viper, the town of Kirknell Victory Base is now firmly in Colonial hands.

For hours, the battle raged. Communication, discipline, and teamwork carried the day. The proud town of Kirknell has fallen to the Colonials. The banners of the Republic now rise above its rooftops, a symbol of order reclaimed from chaos.

Ryan Vance heard the transmission before he even saw the city. The voice of the announcer echoed faintly from a truck radio as he rolled into Kirknell's southern checkpoint, where the smoke still hung thick and the roads stank of cordite and oil. The report spoke of triumph, but what Ryan saw was exhaustion dressed as victory.

The streets were clogged with trucks, their engines idling, headlights cutting through the haze. Engineers shouted at drivers to keep the supply lines clear. A crane groaned as it lifted twisted beams from a collapsed bunker. The whole city was alive, breathing in fumes and shouting orders, every man and woman moving like a cog in a vast and weary machine.

Ryan parked the hauler beside a heap of spent shell casings and disembarked, stretching his back. His assignment was simple enough: fix a damaged ambulance that had been dragged in from the front line. He had repaired radios, turrets, even generators in the field. An ambulance could not be that different, he thought.

The vehicle waited for him under a tarpaulin by the field workshop. It looked like it had been dragged through hell. The side was caved in from shrapnel. The rear doors hung half open, their insides streaked with dried blood.

"Don't bother cursing at it," a voice called from behind the bonnet. "It can hear you, and it doesn't like being insulted."

Ryan turned to see a man in oil-stained fatigues, sleeves rolled to the elbow, beard thick with flecks of ash and dust. The rank and the stride made it obvious, this was Sergeant Renzaku.

"Sergeant Renzaku," Ryan greeted, setting down his kit. "They tell me this one's still got some life left."

"Aye," the mechanic grunted, wrenching a bolt loose with a violent twist. "But it's a stubborn thing. Been patched and unpatched more times than a veteran's trench boot. You're the new hand, eh? Vance, wasn't it?"

Ryan nodded and joined him. Together they prised open panels, replaced torn tubing, and bent the frame back into shape. The air inside the workshop was thick with the smell of metal and disinfectant. Outside, the noise of the city never stopped, hammers clanged, engines coughed, someone shouted for more fuel drums.

After an hour of labour, Renzaku leaned back and lit a cigarette. “You hear what they’re saying about Nighthawk?” he asked through the smoke.

Ryan kept his eyes on the ambulance’s engine bay. “Something about a shooting?”

Renzaku nodded. “Aye. Word is, he shot one of his own. CFD lad. Disobeyed a direct order. Some say it was confusion, others say it was rage. Command’ll dress it up as discipline, but it’s a crack, Vance. You can only patch so many cracks before the whole thing gives.”

Ryan felt a slow chill crawl down his neck. Commander Nighthawk, the hero of Fleck Crossing, the man who once hijacked a Warden armoured car, now whispered about as a killer of his own men. The same voice that Colonial Radio praised daily was now a ghost story in the trenches.

They worked in silence for a while. The rhythmic tapping of the tools blended with the distant thud of artillery somewhere beyond the hills. Finally, the ambulance’s engine coughed to life. Renzaku gave it a heavy slap on the bonnet.

“There,” he said with a tired grin. “Still runs. Like the rest of us, barely.”

Ryan smiled faintly. “Barely’ll do.”

They pushed the vehicle out into the open air. Around them, Kirknell Victory Base thrummed with life. Convoys rolled in from the South, each truck stacked with crates marked AMMO, PLASMA, and RIFLES. Medics hurried between tents. Engineers shouted over the growl of generators. It was chaos, but it was organised chaos, and for a fleeting moment Ryan felt proud of it. This was what victory looked like, grim, scarred, but alive.

Renzaku leaned against the side of the ambulance, watching the movement. “You know, before the war I fixed Motorcycles,” he said. “Same job, really. Keep the wheels turning, keep people moving. Only difference now is half of them don’t come back.”

Ryan didn’t answer. He thought of the reports he’d written, the broadcasts he’d shaped, and how they never mentioned the smell of oil, or the men like Renzaku who worked until their hands bled. Those details never made it to the airwaves, but they were the truth that held everything together.

As the day drew on, rumours began to ripple through the camp. There was talk of a new operation. Command wanted to push east, towards the Reaching Trail, a mountain pass that led straight to Fort Mac Conail. The engineers were already drawing plans for new bridges and bunkers. Every soldier in Kirknell seemed to sense it: the next big push was coming.

Ryan was helping Renzaku tighten a final clamp when a runner appeared, breathless and clutching a folded message slip. “Private Vance?” he asked.

Ryan took the note, unfolded it, and read:

Private Ryan Vance: You are assigned to the second forward unit for the assault on Fort Mac Conail. Report to Convoy Line C at 0400.

Renzaku saw the look on his face and gave a low whistle. “Fort Mac Conail, eh? That’s the sharp end. Keep your head down and stay in the moment.”

Ryan nodded and tucked the letter into his breast pocket and wiped the grease from his hands. He looked eastward. Beyond the city, the horizon flickered with the orange glow of distant fires. The wind carried the faint rumble of explosions from somewhere out there in the dark.

The radio continued to blare from an open truck nearby, the same voice still speaking of progress, of strength, of victory.

“Another step forward for the Colonials,” it said cheerfully. “Another victory in the long campaign for freedom.”

Ryan looked back at the rows of exhausted engineers, the endless trucks, the ambulance he’d just forced back to life. He knew better now. Victory wasn’t forward, it was just another direction to dig.

He drew one last breath of the smoke and iron, let it burn his lungs, and turned toward the convoy lines.

The city behind him was a victory.

The road ahead was a promise.

And both, he knew, would cost more men than anyone would ever dare to count.



Chapter Eight: Preparation Artillery

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, bringing you the voice of the Colonials, to the Colonials.

Colonial ingenuity continues to advance. The mighty 120mm artillery gun now rolls into position. The Javelin half track has been unlocked. And the Ixion tankette joins our arsenal.

These new machines are not merely tools, but symbols of progress. They represent the unbroken will of our people to endure and overcome.

And we bring good news from the supply lines. The infamous soldier Cheezy has returned to Colonial hands. After months behind Warden lines, his liberation has reignited our refinery network. Production of building materials has reached record levels. The front moves once more.

The streets of Kirknell thundered.

Engines growled, gears shrieked, and the ground itself seemed to pulse beneath the boots of every passing soldier. Trucks rumbled through the main square in endless convoys, each one piled with ammunition crates or fuel drums. Kirknell had become the beating heart of the Colonial advance, and the heart was running hot.

Private Ryan Vance wiped oil from his hands as the Rigger transport reversed towards the loading bay. Its rear gate dropped with a clatter. Inside, a small team of engineers were already shouting, dragging the heavy 120mm shells towards the waiting artillery line.

“Mind your fingers!” came a sharp voice.

Lance Corporal Skeleds stepped out from the shadow of the gun platform, his sleeves rolled to the elbow, his uniform dark with sweat. His eyes were hidden behind soot-streaked goggles, giving him the look of a man half-forged in smoke and fire.

Vance nodded to him. “You Skeleds?”

“Depends who’s asking,” the corporal replied, grinning faintly as he heaved another shell upright. “If you’re here to help, then yes. If you’re here to complain, then I’m off duty.”

Ryan gave a quiet laugh and took his place in the line. Shell after shell rolled down the wooden track, slamming into the Rigger’s hold. The work was slow and deafening every clang of metal another heartbeat closer to the assault.

“These beauties will talk today,” Skeleds said, patting the gun’s casing. “Mac Conail’s going to hear the whole choir.”

Ryan could already imagine it: the thunder of the opening barrage, the ground splitting beneath the fortress walls. He felt the familiar knot of fear twist in his stomach. Tomorrow, for the first time, he would be part of the front rather than behind it.

Across the square, medics were loading wounded men into a covered wagon. Ryan paused when he spotted a familiar face among them; Creaky, still smiling despite the sling around his arm, the fabric dark with old blood.

“Vance!” Creaky called, raising his good hand. “They tell me I’m getting a week’s rest, but we both know that’s a lie!”

Ryan managed a grin. “You’ll be back before the next broadcast, no doubt.”

“Not if I can help it,” Creaky shouted as the hauler doors closed with a heavy thud.

The engine roared, and he was gone, swallowed by the churn of trucks and shouting. The moment lingered, a brief reminder of how fragile everyone here was beneath the smoke and steel.

Skeleds glanced toward the departing hauler, then gave a short nod toward Ryan, the kind soldiers used instead of words.

“Come on, soldier. Those shells won’t load themselves.”

By evening, the artillery yard was alive with light and energy. Mechanics tuned the tankettes under canvas tarps, sparks flying from their welders’ torches. Crates of shells stood stacked like miniature towers, stencilled with bright warning signs. Everywhere Ryan looked, there was motion: engines primed, barrels elevated, orders shouted and answered.

From somewhere near the command post, the booming voice of a quartermaster echoed across the square. “Fuel trucks to the east line! Ammunition to column three! The assault starts at dawn, people, dawn!”

The word carried like a promise and a curse.

Skeleds sat on the gun platform, cleaning a rag across the long barrel. “You ever been in the first few waves, Vance?”

Ryan shook his head. “No.” however he was thinking back to his earlier medic duties and grimaced.

“Then you’re about to learn what noise really is,” Skeleds said, smiling without humour. “Once the battery starts, you don’t hear anything for a while. You just feel it. Every blast hits you through the bones.”

Night settled slowly over Kirknell. The lights of the refinery burned on the horizon, and the endless rattle of supply trucks continued through the dark. Somewhere in that labyrinth of fuel lines and chimneys, Major Cheezy was said to be working again, the man who had turned the tide of supply with nothing but grit and work ethic.

Ryan leaned against a crate, letting the cold air touch his sweat-slicked skin. He could smell cordite and diesel in everything. It was as if the whole town had turned into a living engine, its rhythm synced to the coming assault.

Tomorrow morning, the guns would wake the valley. Fort Mac Conail stood waiting in the distance, dark against the horizon.

Skeleds looked out that way and muttered, "They think the Wardens will break this time. They always say that."

Ryan nodded slowly. "And if they don't?"

"Then we keep firing," Skeleds said. "Until someone tells us to stop."

The two men stood in silence, watching the cranes lift another artillery piece into place. A steady wind came down from the north, cold and sharp, carrying with it the scent of frost and oil.

For a moment, Ryan thought of how far they had come, from muddy crossings and shattered bridges to this thunderous army of steel. The Colonials had never looked stronger.



Chapter Nine: Bunker Ambush

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, reporting the latest news from the front.

Viper's Pit is now fully secured. Colonial banners fly across the reclaimed Hexes, from the riverside bunkers of Blackthroat to the trenches of Serenity's Blight.

The great push now turns to Fort Mac Conail, the Warden bastion guarding the approach to the northern towns and the heartlands beyond.

The Fort must fall.

The bunker shuddered with every shell that struck near the ridge. Private Ryan Vance hunched over his portable radio, pencil between his fingers, as dirt showered from the roof above him. The air stank of oil and burnt insulation. Somewhere outside, a machine gun spat in rhythmic bursts, answered by distant artillery.

He reread the latest report he'd drafted for broadcast, bright words written in a dark place. *Viper's Pit secured. Colonial advance continuing. Morale high.*

The bunker door suddenly banged open, spilling in cold air and the roar of the front. Commander Brano strode through, his greatcoat caked with mud, his eyes burning with that rare mix of exhaustion and fire that only the top-end officers possessed.

"Vance," Brano said, voice raw from shouting over the gunfire. "You're coming with me." Ryan blinked, setting down his pad. "Sir, I've got to finish the transmissions for—"

"Forget the broadcast," Brano snapped. "We're hitting Fort Mac Conail from both sides at dawn. Nighthawk takes the southern push; I'm leading the northern advance. You'll handle comms for my column."

Ryan hesitated. "Sir, I'm no field—"

Brano cut him off with a look that ended the sentence. "You've got steady hands and a clear head. That's more than most of what's left to me. Pack what you can carry, we move before first light."

Outside, the front stretched across a churned landscape of craters and smoke. Trucks rolled in lines, laden with fuel drums and crates of ammunition. Engineers shouted over the roar of engines, their breath fogging in the cold air. The smell of burning fuel hung thick over the frostbitten soil.

They arrived at the northern encampment an hour later. Here, the preparations were feverish. Engineers were fitting flamethrower tanks, refuelling lines, and setting metal defences that snaked between the bunkers. The air shimmered faintly with heat from the trials.

“Meet Lance Corporal Depression,” Brano said, nodding toward a tall, narrow man crouched beside a flamer pack. The soldier glanced up, face streaked with soot, eyes unreadable.

“Just Depression,” he said, voice low and even. “Rank’s optional. Fire never cares about hierarchy.”

Ryan crouched beside him as he checked the pressure gauge, listening to the faint hiss of gas. “You’ve run one of these before?”

Depression gave a crooked half-smile. “Too many times. Burns bright, makes a lot of noise, and then it’s all dark again.”

Ryan huffed a quiet breath through his nose. “That’s cheerful.”

“Didn’t say it was,” Depression replied, tightening a valve with deliberate calm.

Their talk was cut short by a rising whine from the south, grenades, close and incoming. Then the first explosion tore through the camp.

A Warden raiding squad had slipped through the tree line, moving fast under the cover of smoke. The warden struck an RPG round straight in the side of a fuel truck, sending a sheet of flame high into the night. Men screamed, running for cover as shrapnel rattled against steel and flesh alike.

“Positions!” Brano roared, drawing his sidearm. Ryan dropped to his stomach, fumbling for his rifle. Depression rose slowly, the flamer pack strapped to his back, a hose in one hand like a coiled serpent.

A grenade landed near where Ryan was standing and he managed to kick it away, the blast still close enough to notice. His ears rang, his world shrinking to flashes of fire and dust. Through the haze he saw shapes, Wardens pushing forward, rifles raised.

Brano fired until his revolver clicked empty, then drew his knife and lunged at a soldier trying to flank Ryan. The shot that followed cracked the night. Brano staggered back, hit in the side, but he still shoved Ryan to the ground, shielding him from the second burst.

“Get down!” Brano growled, blood soaking his coat.

Depression swept forward, unleashing a jet of fire that turned the attacking Wardens into silhouettes wreathed in flame. He didn’t flinch, didn’t blink, just advanced until the air itself seemed to scream.

The last Warden was picked off, dropped his rifle and hit the floor. The gunfire faded, replaced by the hiss of steam and the low groans of the wounded.

Ryan dropped beside Brano, pressing down on the wound. “You’re bleeding.”

Brano hissed through his teeth. “It’s nothing. Seen worse shaving.”

He nodded toward the line. “Keep those comms steady. If we lose contact, we lose the push.”

The medics hauled him up, and he waved them off with one hand, already barking new orders as they carried him out of sight.

Depression knelt beside a burning truck, wiping ash from his face. “He’s a stubborn one,” he muttered. “Might live just to annoy us.”

Ryan didn’t answer. The fire reflected in his eyes, flickering like the last light of reason. Somewhere to the north-west, the guns began again; deep, rolling thunder that shook the frozen ground. The first wave was already moving on Fort Mac Conail.

Depression crouched beside him, watching the fire die down to embers. He was preparing to leave for the second assault regrouping. “Looks like the fort’s still hungry,” he muttered.

Ryan exhaled, the breath trembling in the cold. “Then we’d better feed it.”

Depression gave a tired half-smile. “Figures you’d say that.” He checked the fuel line on his flamer pack, the faint hiss cutting through the distant roar of artillery.

Ryan slung his rifle onto his back and looked north, where the sky pulsed orange beyond the ridge. The fort was waiting. The war was calling again.

Together, they left the ruined bunker behind, two silhouettes walking into the smoke heading to the meeting point.



Chapter Ten: The Defence of Kirknell

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

*This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, broadcasting under duress from Kirknell City.
The situation remains critical but contained.*

Fort Mac Conail remains contested.

Colonial forces have withdrawn to prepared defensive positions inside Kirknell.

The fight continues. Hold fast, Colonials. Hold fast.

The words echoed across the battered city walls, carried by the crackling field speakers that still worked. The first wave assaults had failed to crack Fort Mac Conail and the forces were pushed back to the major city Kirknell. Private Ryan Vance set the radio handset back on its rest and listened to the distant thump of artillery. The air smelled of burnt metal and damp earth. The war had now come to Kirknell's gates, and for the first time in weeks, it was not a place of triumph or construction, it was a fortress under siege.

The sky was grey and bruised, low clouds hanging like smoke. Trucks clattered through the narrow streets, bringing ammunition and wounded in equal measure. Engineers screamed for sandbags, medics shouted for plasma, and the dull rhythm of artillery pounded like a clock marking the potential end of all things.

"Private!" a voice called. "You with the radio gear! Up here, we're getting pushed hard!"

Ryan ducked instinctively as a mortar shell burst nearby, showering him with dust. He reached the top of the wall and saw the front, a churned landscape of mud, shattered trees, and smoke. The Wardens were coming in waves, their rifles flashing from the ruins of old houses beyond the bridge.

A young soldier was crouched beside the parapet, loading a belt into the mounted machine gun. His hands were shaking, but his jaw was set with stubborn resolve. He looked no older than twenty.

"Private Clue," he said quickly, nodding to Ryan. "You the radio man?"

"Vance," Ryan replied, taking position beside him. "What's your situation?"

"Thin," Clue said. "We've got two men down, no medic, and the Wardens are trying to crawl up the riverbank. We hold this position or the gate's gone."

Ryan unslung his rifle. "Then we hold."

The battle came to them in short, savage bursts. The machine gun roared, spitting light into the dusk. Clue leaned into it, firing short, precise bursts. The smell of smoke filled the air, and the recoil shuddered through the parapet. Ryan fired when he could, his shots hitting targets some flying awry. Every few seconds he adjusted the frequency dial on his radio, trying to call for support and reinforcement. Static was the only reply.

A shell hit somewhere close behind, and the shockwave threw both men to the ground. Dust rained from the stonework. Ryan blinked through the haze, ears ringing. When he looked up, Clue was already back at the gun.

“They’re advancing!” Clue shouted. “They’re bloody advancing, at least a squad of ten!”

Through the smoke, Ryan saw them, dark shapes wading through waist-deep water, rifles held high, desperate to reach the broken wall. The machine gun’s barrel glowed red. Clue kept firing until the feed ran dry. He cursed, reloading with frantic hands. Ryan handed him another belt.

The Wardens made it halfway. Grenades arced through the air, exploding against the stone. Shrapnel whined like hornets. Ryan ducked, then looked up just in time to see Clue stand up and grab a flare pistol. Clue fired it into the darkness to mark the target, then leapt down from the wall to grab a fallen comrade’s rifle.

“Clue! Get back!” Ryan shouted.

But Clue didn’t hear, or maybe he did and ignored it. He ran through the smoke, firing into the oncoming figures. The flare’s red light threw everything into wild contrast. The was mud, metal, blood, and motion. Then it faded, and Clue vanished into the chaos.

Minutes, or maybe seconds, passed. Ryan didn’t know how long. The attack slowed. Reinforcements arrived, dragging a heavy machine gun into place. The Wardens fell back across the river, leaving bodies and debris in the shallows. The ramparts were scarred but holding.

Ryan stumbled down the steps, his ears still ringing. The city streets were chaos again, runners shouting orders, medics carrying stretchers, engines revving as trucks repositioned. He followed the flow to the main medical tent, where a light flickered weakly against the canvas walls.

Inside, Captain Sin was bent over a stretcher. His sleeves were rolled up, hands slick with blood. Another medic passed him a syringe, but Sin waved it away. Ryan froze when he saw the patient.

It was Clue.

The young soldier’s face was pale beneath the grime, his uniform shredded and soaked. Sin was pressing hard on a wound near the ribs, muttering under his breath.

“Come on, lad, come on. You made it over the wall, you can make it through this.”

Another pulse of blood seeped through the bandage. Sin shook his head, grabbed a plasma pack, tried again. Ryan stepped forward, uncertain what to do with his hands.

“Can I..” he began, but Sin’s glare stopped him.

“Just keep out of the way, Vance.”

Ryan watched in silence as Sin worked, relentless but knowing. After a long moment, the medic stopped. The tent seemed to hold its breath. Sin exhaled slowly, resting a hand on Clue’s shoulder.

“Time of death, 03:47,” he said softly.

Outside, the guns were still thundering in the distance. The war did not pause.

Ryan stood motionless as Sin turned away, already shouting for more plasma, more bandages, more hands. Another wounded man was dragged in to take Clue’s place on the stretcher. Ryan stepped back out into the cold air, the world beyond the tent eerily still in contrast to the chaos inside.

He pulled out his notebook and began to write notes.

“This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio. Kirknell stands. The Wardens have been repelled. Colonial courage will always endure.”

He stopped the writing, lowering the pencil. In the distance, flashes lit the horizon where Fort Mac Conail still burned. The truth was simpler, heavier.

Kirknell stood, yes, but only just.

He looked back toward the medic tent, where Captain Sin’s silhouette moved behind the canvas, and for a moment, Ryan felt the weight of every word he had ever broadcast.

Tomorrow, the Wardens would come again.

And he would be there, writing another victory that no longer felt like one.



Chapter Eleven: Guard Duty

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, broadcasting once more from the heart of Viper's Pit.

The war continues, fierce and unrelenting. Reports across all fronts estimate the number of fallen at more than six hundred thousand.

Each life given, each name marked, is a testament to our cause.

But amidst the hardship, progress is made. We are proud to announce the promotion of Froddo to Head Logistical Officer.

His tireless work across the supply lines has earned him this rank. To all soldiers: keep your factories running, your queues filled, and your spirit unbroken.

From Kirknell to the northern frontier, the Colonials endure.

The transmission ended with its usual static crackle. Ryan Vance leaned back on his wooden stool inside the cramped bunker, the dim light of a flickering oil lamp dancing across his notebook. The radio continued in the background relaying the war's latest news, as though reluctant to go silent.

Six hundred thousand dead.

He had typed the figure into the day's report before the broadcast went out, watching it lose its weight the moment it became a statistic.

Ryan rubbed his forehead and lit a cigarette from the lamp flame. Outside, the cold wind howled down the ruined streets of Kirknell. The smell of burnt oil and singed fabric hung in the air, a reminder of the last assault.

"Guard duty," Captain Sin had told him earlier that morning, handing over the slip. "You've earned it."

Ryan was not sure "earned" was the right word. He stepped outside, rifle slung over his shoulder, and walked through the half-collapsed street to the northern barricade where he would spend the night.

The world beyond the walls was still. Frozen puddles reflected the pale light of the moon, and the river that curled around Kirknell glimmered faintly, sluggish but not frozen. The war had slowed, but it had not stopped.

A soldier was already there, leaning against the sandbags, smoke curling from his mouth.

“Private Vance, I presume?”

Ryan nodded. “That’s me. You must be Sergeant Faraday.”

His uniform was muddied and frayed, his eyes dark with sleeplessness. “You can drop the rank. No one gives a damn about titles out here.”

Ryan joined him by the sandbags. They shared a silence broken only by the wind and the low hum of the generator somewhere behind them.

“You from the south?” Faraday asked.

“Rockaway base,” Ryan said.

Faraday gave a low whistle. “Heard it was hell out there.”

“It was.” Ryan flicked ash into the dirt. “Everywhere’s hell these days.”

The sergeant offered him a cigarette. They smoked in quiet camaraderie, two figures silhouetted against the ruined skyline.

“They say Froddo’s been made Head Logistical Officer,” Faraday muttered.

Ryan gave a dry laugh. “I heard.”

“You know him?”

“Worked with him once,” Ryan said. “He saved my life. Mad as they come, but clever. If anyone can keep the supply lines alive in this mess, it’s him.”

Faraday nodded slowly. “Six hundred thousand dead across the board, and the army’s still running. Unsure what keeps us going.”

Ryan did not reply. He was thinking of the names behind those numbers, the convoys that never returned, the medics buried beneath collapsed bunkers, the endless churn of trucks and bodies.

The night stretched on. Frost formed on their rifles and the barrels of the sandbagged machine gun. Occasionally, the ground trembled with distant artillery.

Then, from the dark fields beyond the wire, came movement.

“Hold on,” Faraday whispered, lowering his cigarette. “You see that?”

Ryan squinted. Figures, five, maybe six, moving low and fast through the mist.

“Wardens,” Faraday hissed. “Recon or raiders.”

Ryan slung his rifle off his shoulder. “Orders?”

“Fire when I do.”

The first shot came from the fog, a sharp crack that sent dust spilling from the sandbags. Faraday ducked, shouting, "Contact, north perimeter!"

Ryan fired into the dark, muzzle flash lighting his face in staccato bursts. The air filled with the smell of powder and the sounds of bullets ripped through the air.

The Wardens advanced, shadows darting through the wire. One of them lobbed a grenade; it landed short, exploding with a flash that deafened Ryan for a moment.

"Keep them off the ramp!" Faraday yelled, slamming a new magazine into his rifle.

Ryan fired again, catching one of the attackers in the shoulder. The man fell, his weapon clattering across the dirt. But more were coming, too many.

They were being flanked.

Faraday cursed. "We're going to get overrun!"

Then, through the noise, Ryan heard it, a mechanical growl, heavy and rising. Headlights cut through the fog.

A truck burst from the rear line, skidding to a halt beside them. On the back of a flatbed, a push gun swung round, its barrel glowing faintly red.

"Get down!" someone shouted.

The gun opened fire, the roar deafening and endless. The Wardens scattered, their assault breaking under the sheer weight of firepower. The air filled with dust and metal, and then, silence.

When the smoke cleared, Ryan saw the gunner jump down from the truck, face smeared with grease.

Lance Corporal Skeleds.

"You two all right?" he called out.

"Never better," Faraday muttered, wiping grime from his face.

Ryan looked around. The ground beyond the barricade was littered with dark shapes. The night was quiet again, save for the engine rumble of the truck.

Faraday leaned back against the sandbags, breathing hard. "Quiet night, eh?"

Ryan gave a tired smile. "Always is."

They shared a laugh that was half relief, half disbelief.

As the adrenaline faded, Ryan glanced back toward the bunker where his notebook sat waiting. He would have to write the report soon.

Kirknell remains secure. Enemy raid repelled. Minimal losses.

It would sound clean and decisive on the broadcast, but he could already hear the static between the words, the truth that none of them could speak.

Six hundred thousand dead and counting.

A courier arrived not long after, boots muddy and eyes wide. "Orders from HQ," he said breathlessly. "Frodo's supply columns are inbound. Preparations for the renewed offensive north."

Faraday exhaled smoke through his nose. "There it is. The calm before the next storm."

Ryan nodded, watching the faint glow of dawn creep over the ruins of Kirknell. The war was not over. It had only stopped to reload.



Chapter Twelve: Navy Commander

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, bringing you news from the bastion of Kirknell. Stability holds across the front. Our forces stand united against renewed Warden aggression.

The defence of the city remains a model of Colonial discipline, thanks to the tireless work of our officers and the unbroken resolve of our soldiers.

Preparations continue for the next push south. Hold fast, Colonials, every trench, every wall, and every bullet keeps the Viper's Pit in our hands.

The static faded from the speakers, leaving behind the low hum of generators and the muffled sound of distant artillery. Private Ryan Vance put down his pencil, rubbing his temples. Stability, the broadcast said. But stability in Kirknell meant the kind of quiet that came before a storm.

He stepped out of the bunker and into the sharp afternoon chill. The streets of Kirknell were alive with the rhythm of rebuilding. Engineers shouted measurements across half-built barricades. Trucks rumbled through the avenues, their engines whining under the weight of fuel drums and artillery shells. From the ramparts, spotters called out bearings while gunners adjusted the angles of their push guns.

And there, standing near the command post, Ryan saw a familiar face.

"Harry," he called, a smile breaking through the fatigue.

The young man turned, now wearing the crisp insignia of an officer. The bandage that had once wrapped his arm was gone, replaced by a firm posture and a hardened look. He grinned when he saw Ryan.

"Vance. Thought you'd have been reassigned to some cushy radio post by now."

Ryan shook his head. "No such luck. I'm still writing the lies that keep us moving."

Harry laughed softly. "Well, you can write this one truth: the city's still ours. For now."

They walked together along the inner wall. Below them, the streets moved like clockwork, convoys, medics, and engineers all working in grim harmony. Ryan noticed Harry's new authority, the way men saluted as he passed. It was strange to think that not long ago, Harry had been the eager private charging into no man's land to pull Moose out of the mud.

"You're running the defensive shifts now?" Ryan asked.

Harry nodded, lighting a cigarette. "Most of them. Captain Sin's been helping coordinate the medical lines. I handle the wall schedules, gun crews, and the east gate rotation. I used to think being shot was the worst part of this war. Turns out it's paperwork."

Ryan smirked. "I'll trade you. You can have my radio reports, and I'll take your shift log."

"Deal," Harry said with a chuckle, exhaling smoke into the cold air. "At least you don't have to listen to Command arguing about which unit gets the next batch of push gun rounds."

The laughter faded when a voice called from behind them.

"Officers talking paperwork while the world burns? Never thought I'd see the day."

They turned to see a man striding toward them, his uniform immaculate, his boots polished despite the mud. The cap on his head bore the naval insignia, an anchor entwined with a serpent. He had a pipe clenched between his teeth and an easy grin that seemed completely out of place among the war-torn ruins.

"Navy Commander Stephan," Harry greeted, half smiling. "Didn't expect to see you this far from the river."

"Ah, Lieutenant Illig now, isn't it?" Stephan said, shaking his hand warmly.

"Congratulations, lad. They told me you were the one keeping Kirknell standing. Thought I'd come see the miracle myself."

Ryan had heard of Stephan, a rare visitor from the naval logistics corps, known for his cheer and his constant supply of tobacco. The man exuded calm, as if he were still standing on a deck watching gulls instead of sitting in a war zone.

"Commander," Ryan said, offering a salute.

Stephan nodded, puffing his pipe. "At ease, soldier. You must be the one writing all those charming reports for the radio. Fine work. Makes even the bloodiest of weeks sound positively civilised."

"Just doing my part," Ryan replied dryly.

"Good man. We're working on naval logistics now, river supply, bridge reinforcement, ferrying munitions up from the south. You'd think after months of fighting, someone would've remembered that boats float faster than boots march."

Harry laughed, the sound easing the tension in the air. Stephan continued to ramble about tugboats, river depths, and the smell of saltwater until for a moment, it felt as if the war was a distant story. The man's strange energy made the world seem less heavy.

But it didn't last.

The distant artillery rolled across the valley, followed by a dull, rising whine. Spotters shouted from the wall, binoculars raised. Ryan turned toward the horizon. Smoke was rising in the distance, thick and grey, spreading along the ridgelines.

“Movement?” Harry called.

“Multiple armour signatures,” a scout replied. “North-east road. They’re moving fast.”

Stephan lowered his pipe, the smile fading. “Wardens.”

The air changed in an instant. Orders were shouted, sirens began to wail. Soldiers scrambled into position. The push guns were manned, ammunition belts unfurled. Ryan’s pulse quickened.

Harry was already moving, shouting instructions to the gun crews. “Get those charges ready! Clear the east road, move, move!”

Ryan sprinted to his radio post, fumbling with the receiver. “Kirknell Command, this is Vance. Confirmed tank movement approaching from the north-east. At least a platoon-sized element. Repeat, armour inbound.”

The response was brief, crackling through static. “Acknowledged. All units to stations. Reinforcements en route.”

From the far end of the street, the roar of engines grew louder. The first shells struck, shaking the walls and showering dust across the defenders. Men ducked, cursing as explosions tore through the outer barricades.

“Get those guns firing!” Harry shouted, pulling Ryan down behind the sandbags as another blast tore open the cobbled road.

Ryan could see them now, shapes moving through the smoke, the unmistakable bulk of Warden tanks grinding forward. The defenders opened fire, push guns barking, tracers streaking the sky. The noise was deafening.

And then, through the chaos, Ryan saw him.

Private “Suffering” Crab in the turret of one of the three Colonial tanks that roared down the main avenue. The machine was battered, streaked with soot, but still alive. Crab caught Ryan’s eye for just a second as the tank rolled past. No words were exchanged, just a brief nod, a shared understanding that whatever came next, this was the line they had to hold. Crab ducked back down and closed the hatch.

The Colonial tanks met the Wardens head-on at the city gate. The clash was like thunder. Fire streaked across the darkening sky.

Ryan turned back to Harry and Stephan, their faces lit by the glow of the explosions.

“Guess the night shift’s started early,” Harry said grimly, chambering a new magazine.

Stephan smiled faintly, tightening his coat. “Well, gentlemen, let’s make sure the city still stands come dawn.”

The walls shook again, a low rumble rolling through the bunker floor. Ryan steadied his notes, listening to Command’s clipped voices over the static.

Reports, numbers, positions, all of it blurring into the same grey noise.

He looked toward the slit window where smoke and sunset mixed into the same colour. Somewhere beyond that haze, men were still fighting for ground already lost a dozen times before.

Kirknell would hold, they said. Ryan wasn’t sure what that meant anymore, holding, surviving, or simply refusing to stop.

He keyed the transmitter and spoke into the static. “Quick response force required at Kirknell. Please send assistance.”



Chapter Thirteen: Tanks

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

*This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, reporting from the heart of Kirknell.
The Wardens launched a mighty assault upon Kirknell, driving forward with no fewer
than ten armoured tanks.*

*What they met was not weakness, but the unbreakable wall of Colonial resolve.
Colonial communication and coordination proved supreme.*

Ryan Vance was already inside the cramped hull of a CFD regiment tank, sweating under the weight of his rucksack, next to him, a stack of shells that was soon to be used. Lieutenant Ronin, calm and unshakable, manoeuvred the vehicle over the uneven ground. Sergeant Renzaku, perched above the breech, shouted over the roar of the engine and the thunder of distant explosions, "Feed me, Vance! Keep those shells coming!"

Ryan shoved a shell into the breech, his arms shaking from the exertion. The tank shuddered as Ronin fired a round into a Warden armour column, the recoil shaking the entire crew. Outside, the field was chaos, smoke rising from burning vehicles, flashes of artillery illuminating mud-spattered soldiers scrambling to cover.

The formation moved forward, seven Colonial tanks against fourteen for the Wardens. The odds against them were certainly not in their favour. Ryan's heart pounded with every engine whine, every distant explosion, every scream that cut through the battlefield. He caught a glimpse of Private Crab's tank ahead, leading the flank.

A sudden roar tore through the air, a sound deeper and heavier than anything Ryan had heard before. One of the Warden tanks had locked onto Crab's position. There was no warning, just the crack of the cannon and a white-hot flash.

The blast hit like a hammer. Earth and shrapnel erupted skyward. For an instant, Ryan saw Crab silhouetted in the firelight, mid-motion, shouting something that was lost to the noise, and then an internal explosion with just a plume of black smoke rising where he had stood.

Ryan's stomach turned. The smell of burning fuel and soil hit his lungs, and he felt the sting of grit against his face. Suffering was gone, just like that.

Ronin's hand tightened around the controls, jaw set hard.
"Keep moving!" he shouted over the din. "We can't stop! Not now!"

Ryan shoved shells into the breech again, his movements almost robotic. The tank rocked from near misses, and every turn of the turret was met with whistling shells. Renzaku barked coordinates to Ronin while Ryan fed him shells, the three moving as one in the shaking metal box.

Smoke and fire blurred the battlefield. Explosions knocked mud and debris over the treads of their tank. Ryan could feel the heat of a near-miss, the hull shook as a Warden round hit the ground beside them. They returned fire, tracking two enemy tanks that were attempting to flank their left.

Minutes stretched into an eternity. Ryan's forearms burned, sweat dripping into his eyes, and he barely noticed the cries over the radio. He could hear Nighthawk's distant voice, cackling over a broadcast, but the reality of the front was terrifyingly close.

Another shot slammed into the rear plate. Sparks flew. The engine coughed, the treads rattled, but Ronin kept moving forward. "We're not dying today, Vance! Keep feeding them shells!"

The Wardens advanced in waves, but each time they tried to push, Colonial coordination stopped them. Renzaku's aim never wavered, Ronin's driving precise despite the chaos, and Ryan's arms pumped like pistons. The world was a blur of fire and metal, of shouts, explosions, and the occasional crunch of earth under tracks.

The Warden line finally broke. What had been a relentless wall of armour and fire turned into a shattering retreat. The Colonial tanks pushed forward one last time, their treads grinding over twisted wrecks and craters before the order came through: pull back to Kirknell.

Ryan's Spatha was one of only three still running. The others burned behind them, black plumes marking the price of victory. The battered column crawled across the torn fields, engines coughing, plates rattling with every jolt.

As Kirknell's walls rose from the smoke, a surge of noise met them, the steady roar of Colonial guns covering the retreat. Explosions streaked the dusk sky, and the thunder of the city's defences drowned out the dying fight in the fields beyond.

Ryan's tank clattered through the shattered gates. Sparks flared from the underside as the treads scraped over rubble. Inside, the crew said nothing, only the sound of the engine filled the cramped space, uneven but alive.

Ryan exhaled slowly, the first clean breath he'd taken in hours. They had made it back. Barely.

Inside, Ronin leaned back, exhausted, while Renzaku wiped soot and grime from his face. Ryan's hands shook as he set down the last round. Outside, the stench of burnt armour and scorched earth hung thick. They had survived, but at a terrible cost.

“Crab’s gone,” Ronin muttered, voice low, almost lost in the din. “We all knew the odds. But he died like he fought.”

“And he fought like he drank” Renzaku smiled.

Ryan nodded, swallowing hard. The city was still standing. Kirknell had survived. But the War for Viper’s Pit was far from over.

And somewhere, over the radio crackle, the official broadcast continued, lauding Colonial resolve. Ryan listened, silent, carrying the weight of survival and loss. The propaganda could celebrate heroes, but it could not mend the emptiness left behind in the muddy fields outside Kirknell.



Chapter Fourteen: Into The Heartlands

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, reporting from the battered streets of The Blemish.

The conflict rages still, and casualties have now exceeded eight hundred thousand. Each loss is a story, each soldier a testament to courage and sacrifice.

Colonial forces hold fast, and today, our brave members continue to stem the tide against relentless Warden assaults.

The war never truly stopped, but in the Heartlands, it felt as though the world had taken a moment to breathe. The convoy rolled out from Kirknell at first light, the rumble of its engines rising above the distant calls of waking birds. Private Ryan Vance sat in the back of a supply hauler, wedged between stacked crates of ammunition, bandages, and tin rations. The smell of oil and damp canvas mixed with the faint scent of soil carried on the morning air.

Across from him sat Corporal Dimeng, a small notebook balanced on his knee. He tapped his pencil against the metal side panel in a slow, rhythmic pattern. At first, Ryan thought it was idle habit, but after a few minutes he realised Dimeng was working in Morse.

"You never stop thinking, do you?" Ryan asked, his voice rough from the cold air.

Dimeng smiled faintly. "Thinking is a habit. It keeps me from worrying about the things I cannot control."

Ryan gave a short laugh. "Seems like a full-time occupation in this war."

"It is," Dimeng replied lightly, his eyes still on the notebook. "But even chaos has its rhythm. Morse code is like that. People think it is just dots and dashes, but it is more like a heartbeat. The gaps between the signals are as important as the messages themselves."

Ryan leaned back against a crate. "I just see orders. Usually the kind that make me carry things heavier than I should."

"That is the point," Dimeng said with a grin. "The code is there to make sure you know which heavy things to carry."

Ryan smiled despite himself. Dimeng had that effect on people. He was sharp but never cruel, and his humour softened the edges of every hard day.

The convoy wound its way out of the city and into open countryside. The Heartlands stretched before them, a vast expanse of flat farmland marked by long hedgerows and half rebuilt barns. The winter light caught the fields in a dull gold sheen, and in the distance, windmills turned slowly against the grey sky.

It was the first time Ryan had seen this much unbroken land in months. It felt clean, honest, and far from the shellfire that haunted the front.

Dimeng lowered his notebook and looked out over the fields. "Beautiful, is it not? This is what they are fighting for, even if most forget."

Ryan nodded. "Hard to remember that when you are knee deep in mud."

The convoy rattled along a dirt road lined with frost rimmed fences. A train passed nearby on an elevated track, carriages packed with crates stamped with the Colonial crest. Steam poured from its sides, trailing across the pale sky like a banner.

A few hours later, they reached the outskirts of the Heartlands facility. The air grew warmer as they approached the forges. The complex was a sprawling mass of rail sidings, cranes, and chimneys, all bound together by the constant rhythm of work. Sparks leapt into the air as welders sealed armour plates. Mechanics shouted orders over the clatter of steel. It was a living thing, this place, a great metal heart keeping the front alive.

A stocky man in an oil stained coat emerged from behind a crate of engine parts. His hair was wild, his face streaked with soot, and his grin wide. Ryan recognised him from reports. This was Wigz, the man who kept the Colonial armour running.

"Well now," Wigz called, his voice booming over the noise of the yard. "They said the convoy would arrive before lunch, and here it is. You brought me gifts, I hope."

Dimeng jumped down first, smiling. "If you mean fuel, parts, and half the command's patience, then yes."

Wigz laughed, wiping his hands on a rag. "Dimeng, the genius himself. They tell me you are the one who can read between the dashes." Wigz gave a loud chuckle.

Dimeng tilted his head slightly, his eyes glinting with quiet amusement

Ryan climbed down behind Dimeng and looked around. Everywhere he turned, soldiers and engineers worked side by side, building, repairing, and testing the armour that would soon return to the front. Tanks were lined in neat rows, their plating newly forged and painted in dull grey. Young technicians climbed over them, tightening bolts and checking valves.

Wigz gestured toward the assembly line with pride. “This is where the war is kept alive. Not out there in the trenches, but here. These machines, these men and women, they keep it all turning.”

Ryan nodded. “Looks like you have everything running smooth.”

“Smooth,” Wigz repeated with a smirk. “You must be new to logistics. Nothing runs smooth, not really. It runs because enough of us refuse to let it stop.”

The men shared a brief laugh before Wigz was called away by one of his engineers.

Dimeng leaned against a crate, watching the workers. “It is easy to forget, is it not? How much effort goes into keeping a single tank rolling.”

Ryan took a sip from his canteen. “And how quickly one shell can undo it all.”

Dimeng glanced at him, the faint smile returning. “That is why we keep building. If destruction is inevitable, creation must be stubborn.”

They spent the afternoon unloading crates and sorting manifests, the kind of steady work that almost felt like peace. Voices rose and fell through the depot yard, small jokes, clatter of tools, the smell of oil and dust instead of smoke. For a few hours, no one talked about the front.

Out in the sun, the weather felt almost ironic despite what all these soldiers had been through. Two majors were arguing over railway lines and the future placements of logistical lines. Ryan knew from their voices it was both Major Ultravires and Major Homestead. The argument was broken by laughter when a young mechanic nearly dropped a fuel drum, his curse echoing through the yard.

By dusk, the convoy was forming again, headlights cutting through the dim. The air tasted of rust and evening rain.

Dimeng closed his ledger with a quiet snap.

“Next stop’s The Blemish,” Ryan said, tightening the straps on his pack. “They say the fighting never really stopped there.”

Dimeng’s gaze followed the faint red smear of sunset across the horizon. “Fighting never stops,” he said. “It just changes its name.”

Ryan glanced at him, half-smiling. “And what do they call it out here?”

“Hell,” Dimeng replied.

They climbed back into the hauler as the convoy engines roared to life. The road ahead was long and narrow, cutting through fields that were already dark with frost. As they drove, the lights of the Heartlands faded behind them, replaced by the faint rumble of artillery carried on the wind.

The Blemish waited beyond the hills, its smoke already visible against the setting sun.

Dimeng rested his notebook on his lap, eyes fixed on the horizon. “We will get them through this,” he murmured, almost to himself.

Ryan nodded. “We always do.”

And the convoy rolled onward, leaving the warmth of the Heartlands for the shadow of the burning city beyond.



Chapter Fifteen: The Blemish

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, reporting on the battles of the South and the Viper's Pit.

The Blemish in the South has weathered an overwhelming Warden onslaught.

The defenders were ground down to zero supplies. Yet, when all seemed lost, a handful of daring logistical convoys broke through.

Supplies arrived just in time, and with them, faith was restored. The Blemish survives another day.

By the time the convoy reached the outskirts of The Blemish, the light had turned a deep grey and the sky hung heavy with smoke. The city spread before them in winding streets and narrow alleys, its stonework blackened by weeks of shelling. The cobbled roads were cracked, and every few yards a crater marked where an artillery shell had struck. Once, The Blemish had been the pride of the Colonials, a place of trade and learning. Now it was a scar on the landscape, alive only with the sound of gunfire and the cry of wounded men.

Private Ryan Vance and Corporal Dimeng were given a simple task. They were to repair the radio receivers scattered throughout the city to keep communications running between the forward defences and the command centre. Without those lines, the front would fall silent, and silence in war was more dangerous than any shell.

The two men moved through the ruins on foot, carrying their equipment packs across streets littered with broken glass and torn fabric. Every sound seemed amplified in the quiet intervals between bombardments. Somewhere nearby, a lone flamer operator released a burst of fire that lit the walls orange before vanishing again into the smoke.

They found the first receiver beside a half collapsed tram stop. The steel casing was twisted, wires exposed like veins. Dimeng knelt without hesitation, hands steady as he began to reattach the cables. Ryan watched the street, rifle in hand, eyes tracing every flicker of movement.

"Nearly done," Dimeng murmured, not looking up. His voice was calm, measured, as though the world around them were not falling apart. Sparks leapt briefly as he joined the final wire, and the faint hiss of static filled the air. The receiver flickered to life, weak but alive.

"Signal restored," Dimeng said softly. There was the faintest trace of pride in his tone.

They moved to the next receiver, deeper into the ruined quarter where the smoke grew thicker. The cobbles were slick with soot and rain, and the air carried the sour tang of burnt fuel. Overhead, the sound of artillery started to rumble again. The Wardens were starting to break through.

Dimeng kept his focus. His pencil was tucked behind his ear, and his notebook, the one filled with coded transmissions and strange notations, was wedged into his jacket pocket. He worked on the second receiver with a kind of quiet grace that made Ryan forget, for a moment, the danger that pressed in on them. It then pinged to life.

The third receiver sat near the base of a bombed out church. Its tower leaned against the skyline like a broken finger. Dimeng crouched by the wiring while Ryan kept watch from the entrance, scanning the distant rooftops. For a few moments, it seemed as though the bombardment had shifted elsewhere. The silence that followed was almost peaceful.

“I got it!” Dimeng exclaimed.

Then the ground shook.

A shell screamed overhead and struck somewhere behind them. The explosion tore through the air with a deafening crack. Ryan hit the ground as debris rained down around him. He felt the shockwave slam into his chest and the sting of dust fill his lungs.

When he looked up, the church doorway was gone, replaced by a smoking heap of stone and splintered wood. Dimeng lay beside the still working receiver, his notebook half buried in ash. Shrapnel had caught him across the chest, tearing through his uniform. His hands still clutched the tools he had been using only moments before.

Ryan crawled to his side, his breath ragged. The receiver crackled faintly besides them, finally working. Dimeng’s eyes flickered open.

No words came, only a faint sound that might have been a breath. Slowly, he lifted one hand and placed the notebook into Ryan’s palm. His fingers lingered for a moment, then fell still.

For a long time, Ryan stayed there, the noise of the battle in the city still lingering. The notebook still unopened, its edges smudged with grease and soot.

He didn’t open it. He didn’t need to. The line was holding, the signal steady, Dimeng’s work already done.

When the smoke began to thin, Ryan rose. The Blemish stretched behind him, broken but breathing.

He found the transport point where gathering soldiers were loading in to a hauler back to Kirknell, he only took the rifle, Dimeng's notebook tucked away in to his rucksack.

The road to Kirknell cut through fields of ash, the wind carrying the faint scent of rain and burnt soil.



Chapter Sixteen: Between Loss and Fire

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, transmitting once more from the steadfast heart of Kirknell.

Our engineers rebuild by day and our partisans strike by night. The Wardens thought the city broken, but the fire of Colonial resolve burns brighter than ever.

Reports confirm that a daring sabotage mission has crippled a key Warden bunker to the north.

Every spark of defiance lights the fire of freedom. Remember, soldiers: secrecy is victory, and every action echoes in eternity.

The words still hung in the air as the broadcast clicked off, replaced by the faint hum of static. Private Ryan Vance sat in the back of a lorry, his rifle resting across his knees.

Outside, Kirknell was half-shadow and smoke. The city was surviving, but only just. Every street bore the scars of bombardment. Rubble filled the gutters, windows gaped open like blackened eyes, and the smell of oil, ash, and cold earth was everywhere. Soldiers moved in tired lines through the mist, carrying crates, repairing sandbag walls, and muttering about the next assault that never seemed far away.

Captain Sin stood by the vehicle's tailgate, a cigarette between his fingers. The wind kept threatening to snuff it out, but he didn't seem to care. He was watching the horizon, where the hills beyond Kirknell rolled towards enemy country.

"There's a Warden bunker about six miles north," Sin said without turning. "They've been using it to harass our supply runs. Nothing heavy, but enough to keep the roads dangerous. Command wants it gone."

Ryan nodded, though he felt his stomach sink. "A partisan strike?"

"Not official," Sin replied. "We need you small, fast, deniable. You'll go with Moss-chops. He knows the ground."

At the mention of the infamous partisan, Ryan almost smiled. Moss-chops had earned his nickname from the thick matted beard that seemed permanently soaked in smoke. He appeared a moment later, hefting a crate of fuel canisters with ease, his hands wrapped in blackened bandages.

"Evening, Private Vance," Moss-chops grunted. "Heard you're with me today."

"My first time," Ryan answered, managing a weak grin.

Moss-chops chuckled, dropping the crate into the lorry with a heavy thud. “You’ll fit right in tonight. We’re going to warm the Wardens up on this cold night.”

Sin watched them both with his usual calm detachment. “Get it done quietly. No medals for this one.” He stubbed out the cigarette on the edge of the truck. “And, Vance, if you come back, make sure it’s before dawn.”

The night swallowed them whole. The road out of Kirknell was little more than a scar of broken cobbles and dirt, winding through the black fields that once fed the city. The jeep could not risk its engine this close to the front, so they went on foot, the silence broken only by the crunch of boots and the whisper of wind through barbed wire.

Ryan carried his rifle and a satchel of small incendiary charges. Moss-chops took most of the weight, including two heavy fuel drums strapped to a trolley that groaned with every step. He moved with the ease of a man who had done this a hundred times before.

They stopped once, on a ridge overlooking the valley. Below, faint orange pinpricks marked the Warden outpost, a squat bunker ringed by trenches and sandbags. The air reeked faintly of cordite and burning diesel.

Moss-chops knelt and studied the pattern of light and shadow. “Two sentries at the north wall, another at the radio mast. They rotate every thirty minutes.”

Ryan nodded. “When’s the changeover?”

“Twenty-five minutes,” Moss-chops said, checking his pocket watch. “Long enough for a brew.”

He produced a small tin mug from his kit and poured a measure of whisky from a battered flask. Ryan hesitated, then accepted when Moss-chops offered it across. The liquor burned his throat and spread a false warmth through his chest.

“To the ghosts of The Blemish,” Moss-chops said quietly.

Ryan raised his mug. “And to those still holding the line.”

They drank in silence, the faint crackle of the bunker’s fires drifting up from below. For a moment, the war felt distant.

When the guards changed, they moved.

The fog had rolled in thick and low, swallowing sound and shape alike. Moss-chops crept down the slope first, guiding the trolley through the grass. Ryan followed, every heartbeat thudding in his ears. The Warden voices were muffled, their torchlight hazy in the mist.

They reached the outer wall without challenge. Moss-chops crouched by a steel fuel tank, his hands working fast and sure as he connected the incendiary fuses. "Light when ready," he whispered.

Ryan struck the match with trembling fingers. The sulphur hissed, and for an instant, their faces glowed orange in the dark. Moss-chops grinned like a devil. "Run."

They did.

The explosion tore through the bunker with a roar that shattered the fog. Flames leapt high, licking across each connected line, consuming the wooden struts and ammunition crates. The blaze had taken and was causing irreparable damage at lightning speed, being taken across the way by the wind.

Wardens shouted, a dozen, maybe more. Shouts erupted, wild and scattered. Torchlight lit up through the smoke, stitching the night areas of brightness.

"Down!" Moss-chops bellowed, shoving Ryan behind a mound of earth.

The two colonial partisans opened fire in bursts, just enough to keep the enemy guessing. Then Moss-chops saw movement, a cluster of Wardens flanking from the east. He grabbed Ryan by the shoulder. "They're circling us. Get back to Kirknell. Now!"

"I'm not leaving you!"

"You are. Someone's got to tell command it worked. I have more work to do, I'll find my own way back. Good luck!"

He pushed Ryan hard towards the treeline. Another explosion from the bunker lit the scene like day. In the glare, Ryan saw Moss-chops standing tall, rifle raised, firing slow, deliberate shots into the advancing shapes.

Ryan hesitated, throat dry, every instinct screaming to stay. But Moss-chops turned once, shouted over the roar, "Go, lad! Go!"

Ryan ran.

He plunged into the woods, stumbling through mud and roots, the sounds of battle fading behind him. Smoke rolled through the trees like a living thing. He looked back, the fire was spreading out of control. Somewhere far off, a single burst of gunfire echoed, then nothing.

It was near dawn when Ryan saw Kirknell again. The city loomed pale and broken against the grey horizon, its chimneys still coughing the smoke of war. He was covered in mud, his uniform torn, his breath raw in his chest.

Captain Sin was waiting at the checkpoint, coat collar turned up against the chill. He watched Ryan approach, his expression unreadable.

“Mission complete,” Ryan managed between gasps.

Sin studied him for a long moment, then nodded once. “Good work.”

Ryan wanted to speak, to tell him about Moss-chops, about the fire and the gunfire and the last defiant stand. But the words caught in his throat. Sin placed a hand on his shoulder, a brief gesture that said everything and nothing, then turned away.

As Ryan climbed into the lorry for the ride back through the city, he looked north. A faint pillar of smoke still rose from the direction of the Warden bunker, curling black against the pale morning sky.

He closed his eyes. The radio would call it a victory. They would say the enemy base was destroyed, that no Colonials were lost.

As the truck rumbled through the ruins of Kirknell, Ryan thought only of the man who had stayed behind, the last light in the fog, burning until the dawn came.



Chapter Seventeen: Operation Rekindle

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

C.F.D. Radio – Special Report

*This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, bringing you a report on a momentous event:
Operation Rekindle.*

*It had been too long since the men and women of the C.F.D. stood together as one unit,
united under one banner and one goal upon the front line.*

*From Earl's Crowley, the assault force rolled out with power and precision. Six Spathas,
one Ranseur, two Javelins, a mighty Argonaut, a fuel tanker, and even a flame tank
advanced as one iron phalanx. On their path, every town and Warden fortification would
feel the fire of Colonial vengeance.*

*The Wardens responded with quick-response forces and armoured tanks of their own.
But their defences, though strong, could not withstand the tide. The operation smashed
through entrenched positions, devastating walls, bunkers, and stockpiles.*

This was no mere push, this was a storm.

*Even our top-ranking official, EddySeven, was present on the field, his presence lending
resolve to all around him. Commander Brano, despite the bounty on his head, marched
boldly with his men. And Commander Nighthawk himself was seen at the front, rallying
alongside Depression and Fabi. The head of our navy, Commander Stephan, left the sea
to shoulder a rifle, his battle cries ringing over the din of war.*

*We salute Zazolik, who carried the banner forward, and Leinski, fighting shoulder to
shoulder with his comrades*

*Let it also be remembered that just days before, Moose and his comrades struck at the
enemy's heart, destroying a 120mm artillery piece and pallets upon pallets of shells.
That bold strike weakened the Wardens, paving the way for Operation Rekindle's
triumph.*

*The fighting was fierce. There were moments when death swept across the lines at a
staggering rate, reports suggest over one hundred deaths an hour at the height of the
clash. With the war now in its twenty third day, the casualty total has climbed beyond
one million, two hundred and fifty thousand. Yet through the blood and the sacrifice, the
Colonials endured.*

Operation Rekindle was more than an assault. It was a statement. It showed the Wardens, and the world, that the C.F.D. can still rise as one, united, coordinated, and unstoppable. Ground was gained. Damage was done. And Colonial pride blazed across the battlefield.

A fantastic operation, fought with community, teamwork, and grit. The C.F.D. has written another glorious page into its history. Let the Wardens tremble, for when we march as one, there is nothing that can stop us.

Stay proud, stay strong, and above all, stay Colonial.

The voice of the radio faded into the sound of engines.

Ryan Vance sat in the back of a hauler, the words of the broadcast lingering in the static. Outside, the night over Earl's Crowley was alive with light and motion, searchlights sweeping through the haze, convoys stretching to the horizon. The air throbbed with the rhythm of engines and the faint, metallic scent of rain on hot steel.

He glanced across at the men beside him: tired faces beneath soot-streaked helmets, eyes fixed on the darkness ahead. Some smoked in silence; others muttered quiet prayers. The world felt suspended, a single breath before the plunge.

Across from him sat Commander Stephan, naval blues traded for Colonial khaki. He still carried his sea-born swagger, that faint smirk that refused to die. A cigar clung to his lip, glowing like an ember.

"Back when I was on the water," Stephan said, his voice cutting through the rattle of the hauler, "you could see the waves coming. Out here, the sea's made of fire."

Ryan smiled faintly. "You still talk like a sailor."

"Old habits," Stephan replied, tapping ash from his cigar. "But we'll sail through this yet. They're calling it Rekindle. I'd call it a bloody miracle if half of us see sundown."

The hauler jerked forward. The convoy rolled out, six Spathas leading the way, followed by the hulking Ranaosaur, its engine growling like an animal. Behind them, the Argonaut moved with slow majesty, its cannon tracking the horizon. Infantry clung to the sides, rifles glinting in the dim light.

The order passed down the line: *Push west through the town. Torch White Chapel. Strike Lochan's Birth.*

Ryan could hear it in every engine's rhythm, the collective heartbeat of the Colonials.

As they passed the outskirts of Earl's Crowley, the terrain began to change. Trees gave way to open marsh, their roots churned to black mud by weeks of shellfire. The air shimmered with heat from the tank exhausts. Every kilometre was marked by wrecks, burnt-out haulers, crumpled artillery pieces, the skeletons of what had come before.

The Wardens were waiting.

The first shells came screaming down before dawn, lighting the plain in bursts of white and blue. The Spathas answered instantly, their guns roaring in rhythm. The sky itself seemed to tear open.

Ryan leapt from the hauler, hitting the ground hard, already moving. “Ammo run!” he shouted over the din. Other regiment members followed, hauling crates through the mud. The noise became a living thing.

A Spatha ahead took a direct hit. The explosion bloomed orange, scattering armour plates and men alike. Ryan ducked behind the wreck, covering his head as fragments hissed past. A soldier dragged a wounded driver from the smoking hatch. The man’s uniform was on fire. He screamed once before going limp.

“Hold the line!” Ryan shouted, forcing his voice through the chaos.

Every tank, every soldier, every engineer moved like a single, furious machine. Ryan’s hauler became a lifeline, shuttling shells, bandages, and hope across fields that had forgotten what peace looked like.

Commander Brano’s voice crackled over the field radio, sharp and calm: “Advance by in time. Do not break formation.”

Then Depression’s flamers hit the trenches. The hiss of igniting fuel was followed by screams that rose above even the guns. Leaving nothing but embers and ash.

By mid-morning, the Colonials had smashed through weeks of Warden defenses. The abandoned Warden dead left in their wake.

The streets were madness. Every doorway hid a rifle. Spathas fired point-blank into fortified windows. Infantry dashed from cover to cover, tossing grenades into basements.

The Argonaut thundered past a small colonial squad, carrying commanders from other regiments up to the frontline to give more orders.

Through it all, Commander Stephan strode forward with his rifle in hand, cigar clenched tight, shouting encouragement as if leading a parade rather than a war. His laughter cut through the chaos, defiant, absurd, alive.

By noon, White-Chapel was ash.

But the push did not stop. The convoy rolled on towards Lochan’s Birth, the last Warden bastion.

The land here was churned into mud and wire. The Wardens fought like wolves cornered, their artillery pounding the Colonials with precision. The air was thick with smoke and grit.

Ryan found himself beside the Javelin crews, feeding ammunition to the gunner as fast as his arms would move. The bullets ripping through enemy lines. Then a counter-barrage landed close, earth and fire erupted around them. One man was torn apart by shrapnel another's leg vanished below the knee. Ryan dragged him behind the hauler, blood soaking the dirt.

"Hold on," he said, wrapping a bandage around the now stump that remained. The soldier looked at him, eyes wide, and whispered something lost in the hellfire.

A shadow moved through the smoke, Commander Nighthawk himself, pistol raised, shouting for men to rally. Behind him came Depression with his flamethrower, sweeping the trench line clean.

Ryan rose and fired until his rifle clicked empty.

When the final Warden was finished off, the last of the Warden defences broke, the battlefield went quiet for the first time in hours.

Ryan sat against a shattered wall, his body shaking with exhaustion. His uniform was black with soot, his hands streaked with another man's blood.

From his belt, the field radio hissed, faint, distorted, familiar.

"Operation Rekindle... a triumph of unity and coordination... Colonial pride blazes across the battlefield..."

Commander Stephan limped into view, his sleeve torn, his face streaked with grime. He held out a dented flask. "We did it, Vance," he said softly. "The fire's been rekindled."

Ryan took the flask, staring at the horizon, a skyline of smoke, flame, and silence.

"Yeah," he murmured. "And it'll never go out again."

The two men sat there a while longer, listening to the echo of engines and the wind stirring the ashes. For all the noise, all the victory, what remained was the same, the slow, relentless burn of a world that refused to die quietly.



Chapter Eighteen: Evacuate!

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, bringing word of both loss and resolve from the front.

The town of Kirknell has at last fallen. After wave upon wave of Warden attacks, its walls could not endure. For days, our soldiers fought tooth and nail, standing against artillery, tanks, and endless infantry. In the end, the sheer weight of the onslaught broke through.

Commander Nighthawk and his men did all they could. His leadership was steadfast, his resolve unshaken. Though the town is lost, his command and the gallantry of our soldiers will be remembered with honour.

For their bravery, medals shall be struck and awarded as the "Kirknell Vigil Award." To have held for so long, against such odds, is itself a victory of spirit. Let every Colonial who stood at Kirknell wear that name with pride.

Yes, comrades, the Colonials are now on the back foot. The Wardens push hard, and for the moment, we give ground. But let none mistake this for defeat. Now is the time to band together. To fight not as scattered regiments, but as one unified front.

The record is clear: since the C.F.D. took to the field, the Colonials have not lost a war. And though the map may tell a grim tale, though rumours of defeat may spread, the truth remains, we always find a way. We rise from the ashes. We fight back from the brink. And we will do so again.

Even now, a new battle plan is being drawn. High Command is setting the pieces in place, and when the time comes, the Colonials will strike with renewed fury. The Wardens may laugh today, but tomorrow, it will be their turn to weep.

Remember this, Colonials: the fight is not over. It never is. Every bunker dug, every rifle fired, every shirt delivered matters. Do your part. Encourage your comrades. Stand together. For it is unity, not numbers, that wins wars.

Let Kirknell be not a tomb, but a torch, a flame that lights the way to our resurgence. The Wardens think us broken, but they are wrong. The Colonials endure. The Colonials adapt. The Colonials shall prevail.

Stay strong. Stay vigilant. And above all, Stay Colonial.

The voice faded into static.

Outside the hauler, Kirknell was burning.

Private Ryan Vance gripped the edge of the truck bed as the city rose ahead of him, black smoke curling against the night sky. The smell hit first, burning oil, blood, and the faint sweetness of something chemical. The air shimmered with heat. Kirknell, once the fortress of the Colonials, was now a furnace.

“Hold tight!” shouted the driver, wrenching the wheel to avoid a crater. The hauler jolted violently, bouncing over rubble. The sound of shelling was constant, distant but never ending, like thunder trapped in a metal drum.

Ryan leapt off before the truck had stopped, landing hard on the cobbled street. He shouldered his rifle and sprinted towards the defensive line. Through the smoke he saw familiar figures, CFD insignias barely visible under grime and dust. Every face was drawn and hollow.

He recognised Moose, crouched beside a shattered push-gun, trying to jury-rig its barrel back into place. A shell whined overhead and detonated somewhere beyond the wall, shaking the ground beneath their boots. Moose gave a grin that looked more like defiance than humour.

“Didn’t think you’d come back to this hell, Vance!” he shouted.

“Didn’t have a choice,” Ryan yelled back, dropping beside him. “Captain Sin’s orders.”

Moose’s reply was drowned by another explosion. When the dust cleared, Ryan saw what had been a medic’s post reduced to twisted metal and scattered stretchers. The few survivors inside were dragging the wounded out into the street.

A cluster of Wardens broke through the outer barricade, their blue uniforms flickering in the firelight. The Colonials opened up instantly, rifles cracked, machine guns stuttered, men shouted and fell.

Ryan leaned from behind the shattered wall and dropped two Wardens moving through the smoke. Beside him, Private Hiram, still too fresh to have lost the shine in his eyes, pulled the pin on a grenade and lobbed it over the rubble.

The blasts lit the street in white fire, shrapnel whining through the dust. Hiram turned back, fumbling for another grenade.

A single crack split the air.

Hiram jerked once and sat down hard against the rubble, confusion flickering across his face before the light left his eyes.

Ryan grabbed him, dragging him into cover, kneeling beside him as the firefight raged on. The boy stared past him at the darkening sky, chest still, hands slack. Ryan didn't need to check for a pulse. The sniper had been clean.

"Medic!" Ryan called out instinctively, though he already knew it was too late.

A booming voice came from behind him, calm, clipped, but urgent. It was Captain Iranicus.

"Leave him, Vance. He has gone, there is nothing we can do now for him. We still have to hold this inner gate."

Ryan rose, forcing himself forward. Iranicus stood at the barricade, trench coat torn and blackened. His sidearm hung at his belt, but in his hands, he carried a field radio, barking orders to scattered units. Behind him, Creaky worked with Captain Sin and a small team, setting up an impromptu field hospital for a place to store the wounded.

"They're pouring in through the east breach," Iranicus said. "Nighthawk's men are holding for now, but not for long. We need to get the wounded out before we are surrounded."

Ryan helped load the injured onto the back of a transport truck. The air was filled with the screams of artillery and the shouts of men calling for ammunition. Each sound merged into a single overwhelming roar.

As they worked, another barrage struck. A shell tore through the far wall, sending a shockwave that threw Ryan to the ground. Dust and debris rained down. When he looked up, Moose was gone only a crater remained where he had stood seconds before.

"Move!" Iranicus shouted, pulling Ryan to his feet. "We're falling back to the square!"

They retreated through the streets, darting between the ruins. The once-proud avenues of Kirknell were unrecognisable, craters, smouldering vehicles, the dead lining the curbs. The banner of the Colonials lay trampled in the mud, its green fabric blackened and torn.

At the main square, Commander Nighthawk stood in the open, face streaked with blood, shouting orders over the chaos. His pistol fired in short bursts as he waved new arrivals into position. Ryan saw Commander Stephan too, rallying stragglers near the fountain, his naval greens long since soaked in dirt and ash. The sight of him still alive lifted something deep inside Ryan, however briefly.

Then came the tanks.

The Wardens rolled through the east gate, their cannons lighting up the ruins. Each shell ripped another section of the city apart. Iranicus called for artillery support, but the reply was static. The Colonial line broke.

“Fall back!” Nighthawk bellowed. “All units, fall back south!”

Ryan stumbled through the smoke, half-blind, dragging yet another wounded comrade. Around him, the last defenders of Kirknell fought house to house, refusing to yield. Flames climbed higher, painting the night orange.

He glanced back once and saw Nighthawk, still standing on the steps of the courthouse, pistol still loaded and still raised, shouting defiance into the firestorm.

Then the hauler appeared, battered, riddled with holes, but moving. Creaky waved him over, helping him throw the wounded man into the back. Captain Iranicus, having been hit, climbed aboard. There was blood seeping through the bandage at his shoulder.

As they drove south, Ryan looked back at the city. Kirknell burned, every street an inferno. Above the crackle of fire, the radio on the dashboard buzzed to life, replaying the earlier broadcast, that same confident voice talking about honour, medals, and unity.

“Let Kirknell be not a tomb, but a torch...”

Ryan stared at the horizon where the flames licked the clouds. His hands were shaking, his uniform black with soot and ash.

He turned to Iranicus, his voice hoarse. “A torch, they said.”

The captain looked back at the city, his eyes dark. “Then it’s burning bright enough,” he replied quietly.

The hauler rolled into the night, carrying the survivors north, the radio’s hollow words still echoing against the hum of the dying city.



Chapter Nineteen: Reclaim

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, bringing word of hope and resolve to every Colonial soldier on the front.

Kirknell, once lost, is now the focus of a daring reclamation.

Today, every trench, every barricade, and every street echoes with the determination of the Colonials and the C.F.D.

End of Transmission.

Private Ryan Vance sat in the back of a rattling hauler, his hands gripping the edge of the crate he perched on. The smell of fuel stretched over the cab, mixing with the faint tang of gunpowder that had been baked into the city for weeks. Ahead, the convoy stretched like a metallic serpent: Heavy tanks and other supporting armour escorted fuel trucks rolled forward in unbroken lines, each vehicle bristling with weapons or carrying the weight of hope.

Beside him, Froddo barked orders into a comms headset, coordinating the supply chain that would keep the armoured advance alive. Pretzel crouched over a map, adjusting timings for fuel convoys to intersect with the assault squads. Across from them, Naval Officer Stephan leaned back, a tobacco pipe clamped between his teeth. Even here, under the looming threat of Warden artillery, he managed a smile.

“Remember, lads,” Stephan said, voice cutting through the drone of the engines, “we go in as one and take back what is ours!”

Ryan nodded, his mind already racing through the list of supplies he had to ferry to the tanks and infantry squads. Ahead, Skeleds’ artillery units were rolling into position, the rumble of treads like distant thunder. He caught sight of Faraday moving along the flank, rallying small groups of new recruits, Mike Powell, Franjo, and the one they simply called Africa, checking rifles, loading flamethrowers, and bracing for the inevitable.

The first Warden resistance appeared almost immediately. Sniper fire crackled from the rooftops, cutting across streets strewn with rubble and burning wreckage. Explosions tore through barricades, throwing dust and debris into the convoy’s path. Ryan leapt down from the hauler, going to give infantry support to a Spatha that was pinned from enemy rockets and anti-tank rounds.

Renzaku and Ronin worked with methodical precision. Ronin manoeuvred the treads with the smoothness of a conductor leading an orchestra, while Renzaku fired round after round into the streets where Warden infantry scrambled for cover.

Beside them, Creaky and Toasty moved from soldier to soldier, patching wounds, hauling the injured behind walls, and muttering quiet words of reassurance. Even in chaos, their calm was a tether to sanity.

And then, as if fate had chosen a cruel hand, Ryan saw Stephan sprinting across the rubble to direct a team clearing a blocked intersection. A Warden ambush caught him off guard. Gunfire then ripped through the air. Ryan and Creaky sprinted across open ground to get to the fallen commander. Working together, they started dragging their fellow officer behind a shattered wall.

“No, no, stay with me!” Creaky shouted, but Stephan’s eyes, bright even under blood and soot, met Ryan’s briefly. A faint smile. A nod of courage. Then a cough, and he went still.

Ryan’s stomach twisted. The city was still alive with the sound of tanks firing, infantry charging, grenades exploding, and flamethrowers hissing. He looked around: Franjo and Mike Powell were advancing through a side alley, Africa covering a rooftop with his weapon, and Faraday signalling a flank push. The front was a living, writhing entity of chaos.

Hours passed in an unbroken blur. Spathas roared down streets, their cannons shaking walls and sending Warden infantry scattering. Skeleds’ artillery rumbled behind them, sending shells crashing through barricades and fortified buildings. Froddo coordinated the convoys like a maestro, ensuring that fuel, munitions, and reinforcements arrived just when they were needed.

But the losses were stark. Stephan’s body, now carried by medics behind the lines, was a heavy reminder of the cost. Ryan swallowed hard, the acrid taste of gunpowder mixing with the bile of grief.

“Keep moving,” Faraday said quietly, his voice calm despite the chaos. “We honour them by finishing this.”

And so, they did. The Colonial assault pressed on, clearing streets, alleys, and barricades. Tanks fired, flamethrowers purged entrenched positions, and infantry moved in deadly synchrony. Every soldier, every recruit, every officer was a cog in a relentless machine of liberation.

The central square loomed. The Wardens had made their last stand in a ruined cathedral, infantry positioned among collapsed pillars and smoking pews.

Captain Sin rallied the troops, shouting orders that cut through the din like a blade. Ryan moved with him, hauling shells and checking communications, taking a mental note for C.F.D. Radio.

With a final push, explosions ripped through the cathedral, Warden infantry scattered, and the remaining survivors were taken as prisoner. The square was and city was now in Colonial hands.

Ryan sank against a wall, exhausted, soot-streaked, and shaking. He looked around at the cost: bodies strewn across the cobbles, tanks smoking, streets reduced to ruin. Even though Kirknell had been reclaimed, it had cost the colonials dearly.

Creaky knelt beside Stephan's fallen body one last time, whispering a farewell. Ryan placed a hand on his shoulder. "He wouldn't have wanted it to stop us."

Ryan checked his radio, scribbling notes for the official broadcast. Every fallen comrade, every heroic action, every bit of chaos would be recorded. For now, the city stood, smoke rising into a bruised sky, and the CFD had reclaimed a foothold for the Colonials.

And as the sun dipped behind the ruined spires, Ryan Vance allowed himself a brief, shaky breath. The bastion that is Kirknell had been reclaimed, but the war was far from over.



Chapter Twenty: Down and Out

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, bringing you the latest from the front as the war reaches its sixtieth day.

It has been nothing short of a bloodbath. Across all fronts, over 3.1 million soldiers have fallen, Colonials and Wardens alike.

Each life paid into the great ledger of war, each sacrifice echoing across the shattered fields of Caoiva.

Yet from the carnage, hope rises. Our momentum now carrying us forward into the Reaching Trail.

The Wardens tremble as the initiative once again lies with us.

Ryan Vance rode in the back of a supply hauler, crates of shells stacked high around him. The engine vibrated through the metal floor as the convoy advanced. Outside, the night over Earl's Crowley was broken only by distant flashes of artillery and the eerie glow of burning fields. Smoke drifted across the scarred horizon, carrying with it the metallic stench of gunfire and destruction.

Inside the hauler, the men of the Colonial Frontline Defence rode in a tight, uneasy silence. Exhaust fumes mixed with the smell of oil, and every jolt of the engine rattled through the benches. Froddo sat by the cab door, one hand braced on the frame, shouting over the growl of the engine.

"Keep those crates steady!"

"They're steadier than your driving," Pretzel muttered.

Africa snorted, but the brief laughter vanished as an enemy shell crashed somewhere close, shaking dust from the roof of the hauler.

The convoy lurched to a halt. Ahead, a Spatha tank thundered past, treads tearing through the cratered road as if chewing the earth itself. Ryan jumped down from the hauler, boots sinking into cold mud.

He and Pretzel grabbed the ammunition crates and began hauling them through the smoke-choked dark toward the nearest tank. Lieutenant Ronin seen from the opened commander hatch, motioning frantically.

"Move! Bring them in!"

Ryan shouldered the next crate, muscles burning with each step. He passed it up the line to Renzaku, who was half-buried in spent casings.

“Still breathing?” Ryan yelled over the roar.

Renzaku managed a tight grin. “For now!”

Then the stopped convoy erupted into chaos. Warden patrols suddenly burst from the ruins nearby, rifles spitting fire.

It was an ambush.

Grenades rolled across the ground, exploding against rubble and broken walls. Ryan ducked behind a wrecked lorry as a wall crumbled beside him. The air was thick with dust and death.

Then Ryan saw Creaky pinned down behind the twisted frame of a collapsed bunker, bullets chewing through the dirt around him. A Warden machine gun pinned the street in a storm of fire. Creaky was shouting into his radio calling for support, but the signal was drowned out by the chaos.

Captain Sin was already moving. He threw himself against the side of the ruined building near to Creaky, rifle raised.

“Creaky, you’re boxed in!” he yelled over the din.

“Can’t move! They’ve got me sighted!”

“Then move when I tell you!” Sin barked back. He leaned out, rifle steady, and unleashed a volley that cracked down the street, forcing the Wardens to duck. “Now! Go!”

Creaky bolted from cover, sprinting low through smoke and debris as Sin kept firing, measured, controlled bursts to draw their fire. For a few seconds, it worked. Then one of the Warden gunners adjusted, and a single shot found its mark.

Sin jerked back, the rifle falling from his grip. He slid down the side of the tank, breath escaping in a sharp gasp.

Creaky shot in to where the firing came from and bought enough time to grab the wounded captain back in to cover.

Blood was quickly pooling beneath Sin, he tried to speak, his hand gripping Creaky’s sleeve. “That’s it... good lad... keep your head down,” he murmured, the words faint and scattered.

Creaky shook his head, pressing his hand to the wound. “You stupid bastard, you should’ve stayed back.”

Sin smiled faintly, eyes dimming. “It’s all on you now,” he whispered. A final breath left him, and his hand fell still.

For a moment, the battlefield seemed to hold its breath. Ryan, watching from across the street, felt something inside him go cold, another friend, another medic, gone to the dirt. Then, with a clenched jaw, he turned back to his post and kept firing. There was no time to grieve. Not yet.

“Keep these tanks moving!” Froddo roared from behind the tanks. “No one stops!” Ryan forced himself to move, feeling every motion burn through his shoulders.

The convoy became an inferno. Warden infantry advanced through the smoke, their rifles roaring. The armour fired back, tearing the wardens apart at point-blank range.

Infantry fought in the ruins, each doorway and trench a private war.

Toasty worked relentlessly among the fallen, dragging the wounded behind cover. “Hold still, you’re fine,” he muttered again, voice calm but hoarse. Blood slicked his gloves, the cobbles running red beneath him.

“Flamers on the left!” Faraday’s voice cut through the chaos.

“I see them!” Africa shouted, squeezing off rounds.

“Keep that side clear!” Froddo ordered. “If they block our haulers, we’re finished!” Franjo and Mike Powell swept through the side streets, clearing pockets of resistance and keeping the supply lines open.

Hours blurred into moments. The Warden counterattacks came in waves, disciplined, merciless, but the Colonials held. Commander Brano’s voice crackled over the comms, cold and steady.

“Push forward. Keep pressure on their flank.”

His calm in the storm anchored them all.

By late afternoon, the convoy was secured. Fires burned through the ruins, turning the sky a dirty crimson. The acrid air stung Ryan’s eyes. He leaned against the charred remains of a wall, lungs aching, hands black with soot.

Captain Sin was gone. The victory felt hollow another line held, another man lost.

Creaky limped over, dust streaked across his face, his rifle hanging loose from one hand. He stopped beside Ryan without a word. Together they watched the smoke curl above the shattered street, drifting slow and grey into the night.

After a long moment, Creaky spoke. “He pulled them off me,” he said, voice barely above a breath. “Stayed in it long enough for me to get out.”

Ryan didn’t look away from the horizon. “Yeah,” he murmured.

Creaky gave a worn, crooked smile. “When this is over... I’ll drink to him.”

Ryan's jaw tightened. "Make it a strong one."

Silence settled again, heavy but understood.

Faraday slid down beside them, hands still shaking as he sparked a cigarette. He exhaled a thin plume of smoke toward the ruined street.

"We held the line," he said quietly. "He'll be happy we did that."

Frodo joined him, hands still streaked with grease and blood. "Something worth bleeding for."

As dusk fell, the smoke began to clear. The silence was deafening after hours of carnage. Ryan looked out across the convoy, somewhere beyond the haze, Kirknell still held.

He thought of the road that had brought him here, the convoys, the fallen, the comrades still fighting on other fronts. Each one a thread in a tapestry of survival.

"Let's get the wounded moved," Ryan said quietly. "Sin wouldn't want us standing about."

Creaky nodded. "Aye. We keep going."

Together they turned back toward the haulers, ready to carry on the fight, weary, bloodied, but still unbroken.



Chapter Twenty One: The King of the Hill

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, bringing you a special report on one of the defining moments of this campaign,

The King of the Hill Encampment in Reaching Trail.

A determined band of Colonial Frontline Defence members ascended a hill and began their stand. Under a rag-tag command, they turned a simple encampment into a fortress.

The Wardens would come and come they did.

The hilltop was a storm of sandbags, trenches and hastily built barricades. Artillery guns crouched like predators, flamethrowers hissed from hidden positions, and stacks of supply crates formed makeshift walls. Smoke hung low over the earth, mingling with the sharp scent of burnt fuel and the metallic tang of blood.

Creaky moved with steady precision, directing the operation known as Greenblood. Medics ran between the trenches, hauling stretchers and ferrying the wounded down the slope to the waiting ambulances. Every life saved kept the defensive line from breaking.

“Keep those shirts moving!” Creaky shouted above the thunder of shells. “If they stop breathing, keep them on the line until they are in the trucks. No one dies up here unless I say so!”

Toasty ducked under a burst of gunfire, dragging a soldier with a leg wound towards cover. “You are not exactly making it easy, boss!” he called out.

Creaky managed a weary grin. “War is not meant to be easy, lad, yet some of the hardest challenges yields the greatest success.”

Froddo’s bus came roaring up the hill, coated in mud and smoke, its engine screaming in protest. He leaned from the window, laughing like a man half mad. “Make way for public transport, you miserable lot!”

A shell landed close, flipping a jeep and showering the bus with debris. Froddo swerved, swore and thundered through a line of soldiers trying to dive for cover. The screams came too late. When the bus ground to a halt, its front was streaked with blood. More casualty cogs in the machine that is this war.

On the far side of the slope, Nighthawk had equipped a lunair, the choice weapon of the commander. “Let us see what this beauty still has in her, someone load me some TREMOLAS!” he said, laughing through the smoke.

Ronin shouted, "You planning on living through this one, Hawk?"

Nighthawk laughed aloud. "Never been much good at planning, I prefer charging forward into the chaos!"

Two Warden tanks then both turned their guns on him. The fired shots struck together. Fire burst from the impact, the Nighthawk vanishing in a bloom of smoke and flame.

Ryan bowed his head. "He went out the only way he knew how, fast and loud."

Commander Brano stood in the command tent, jaw clenched tight. Orders had kept him from the front, and every explosion seemed to mock him.

"I should be out there," he growled, slamming a fist against a radio crate.

Eddy gave a dry chuckle. "If you were, who would shout at us to keep us moving?"

Brano shot him a glare but said nothing. Instead, he bent over the map laid across the crate. "Fine. Then we hold this hill, every inch of it. They will have to dig us out bone by bone. We keep this encampment alive!"

In the trenches near the foot of the hill, Twins Flocky and Croki fought like a well-rehearsed team.

"Left side is light!" Croki called out.

"Got it," Flocky replied, squeezing off a shot. A Warden dropped instantly. "That is one less."

Croki grinned. "We are getting good at this."

"Do not jinx it."

Their laughter was swallowed by another explosion, but when the dust cleared, they were still alive and laughing.

Further up, Buckethead and Skeleds worked the artillery, sweat streaking through the grime on their faces.

"Target range, four hundred meters, same azimuth!" Buckethead shouted.

Skeleds adjusted the sight and fired. The shell screamed across the field and struck a Warden tank dead on. Through the haze they watched it roll backwards, smoke trailing from its hull.

Skeleds laughed. "They are running! They are actually running!"

Ryan moved through the confusion, hauling crates, checking rifles and helping medics drag the wounded from the line. Every muscle in his body ached, but he pushed on.

He found Creaky crouched behind a sandbag wall, wiping blood from his hands. "How bad are things here?" Ryan asked, looking at the wounded soldier Creaky was patching up.

"Bad enough," Creaky replied. "But he will pull through." He looked up at Ryan, eyes tired but steady. "You have done good work today. Keep your head down and stay positive."

Ryan managed a faint grin. "I will do my best."

Hours blurred into a rhythm of fire and smoke. The Wardens came repeatedly, but the Colonials met each assault with equal fury. Toasty patched wounds beneath falling shells. Creaky kept the medics moving. Ronin and Eddy fired until their ammo ran dry.

As the sun began to sink, the enemy's assault faltered. One final barrage, one last push, and the Wardens broke.

Ryan stood on the ridge, the sky turning brass behind the smoke. The field below was chaos: burning vehicles, retreating soldiers, and the dead scattered among the living.

He breathed out slowly. "We did it."

Creaky stepped beside him, leaning on his rifle. "Aye," he said quietly. "For now."

Ryan nodded, adjusting the straps on his pack. "Last push," he murmured. "Do not fail us now."

Above them, the Colonial banner fluttered in the smoky wind, scorched but unbroken. The hill, battered and bloodied, belonged to them.

For the first time in weeks, victory felt close enough to touch.



Chapter Twenty-Two: Final Days

C.F.D. Frontline Radio - War Report, Charlie Shard War 16

This is Colonial Frontline Defence Radio, broadcasting our last report from the war front.

After sixty-five days and seven hours of the fiercest fighting this land has ever seen, the war is over. The Colonials have claimed victory.

Our forces surged in the final weeks with a flurry of decisive pushes and demolitions upon the victory towns.

Across the map from The Moors to the Nevish Line, the C.F.D. fought in full force.

Leaving but echoes of our triumph in every hex.

Stay proud, stay united, and above all; Stay Colonial.

The war was finally over.

The last guns had fallen silent along the Nevish Line, and the air was still for the first time in months. The sound of engines had faded, replaced by wind sweeping across empty fields and the soft chatter of men who no longer needed to shout over gunfire.

The remnants of the Colonial Frontline Defence gathered in what had once been a Warden supply yard. Now it was a camp of laughter, music and exhaustion. Someone had found a crate of rations that had survived the shelling. Someone else had tuned a radio, playing a faint, crackling broadcast that kept repeating the same message *"The war is over. The Colonials are victorious."*

Ryan Vance sat on the back step of an old truck, boots off, staring at the horizon where the sun burned gold through the drifting smoke. His hands were still black with soot. His mind, for once, was quiet.

Creaky approached with two tin mugs of tea, steam trailing into the cold air.

"You look like a man who still doesn't believe it," he said, passing one to Ryan.

Ryan let out a tired laugh. "Feels strange without shells going off. Quiet enough I can almost hear myself think."

"That's why they call you Mind," Creaky said, easing down beside him.

Ryan blinked. "Mind?"

Creaky smirked. "You've been called worse. Brano started the nickname. Said you were the only one who could make sense of the madness and give us the positivity to keep going... Said someone here had to think before the rest of us did."

Ryan stared into the tea, watching the faint ripple of its surface. The name settled over him slowly, not a title, not rank, but something earned in the spaces no one talked about.

A man who thought before he shot.

A man who carried the weight after everyone else walked away.

A man who remembered.

He nodded, a quiet acceptance. "Mind," he repeated, almost to himself. The word felt heavy, steady, a shape that fit.

Creaky bumped his shoulder lightly. "Told you. It suits you."

A few metres away, Froddo and Faraday were arguing cheerfully over who had driven through more explosions. Toasty was checking over his dwindling medical kit as though unable to believe it was finally quiet. Buckethead and Skeleds had found an old tarpaulin, now repurposed as a tablecloth beneath their mess tins.

Pretzel and Africa were playing cards with what remained of the deck, half the suits missing, the rest smudged with oil. Ronin and Eddy were cleaning their rifles one last time, though both knew they would likely never fire them again.

Commander Brano stepped up onto the back of a tank, waving for attention. The chatter fell to silence.

"I will not make a speech," he began, though his tone betrayed that he was about to. "But I will say this. The C.F.D. stood because of every single one of you. Not because of rank. Not because of orders. Because of the people who refused to fall when everything else did."

He paused, eyes sweeping over the gathered soldiers. "We have built something greater than victory here. Remember that when you go home. Remember those who are not here to share this moment."

He raised a battered flask. "To the fallen, to the living, and to whatever comes next."

"To the C.F.D.!" the crowd roared back.

For a while, no one spoke. The fire crackled, the stars began to appear, and the sound of laughter slowly returned, not forced, not defiant, but real.

Later, as the camp drifted into the first easy sleep in what felt like years, Ryan walked alone to the edge of the hill overlooking the valley. The world below was scarred but still. Burnt forests, broken roads, rusting armour, all silent now. For the first time, he could imagine a different kind of movement through that landscape.

The promise he had once made to himself, that when the war was done, he would ride again. No maps, no orders, no command, just the open road and the wind on his face.

Creaky joined him, hands in his pockets. "Thinking again, Mind?"

Ryan smiled faintly. "Trying to remember what peace sounds like."

“Best not get used to it too much,” Creaky said softly. “Men like us, we are never too far from the next fight.”

Ryan nodded. “Maybe. But until then...” He looked out over the dark horizon. “Until then, I will ride.”

At dawn, the convoy rolled out, engines growling softly as the survivors began their journey home. The C.F.D. flag lifted once in the cold morning wind, wavering like a farewell before it tore free and drifted east across the empty fields.

Ryan swung a leg over a bicycle he found abandoned, the frame a little dented, its paint long gone. The chain hesitated, then clicked back into place, catching its rhythm.

He pushed off and began to pedal down the slope, weaving through burnt-out trucks and the husks of barricades, following the quiet road that ran toward the horizon.

Behind him, the others stood and watched until he was nothing more than a distant figure against the rising sun.

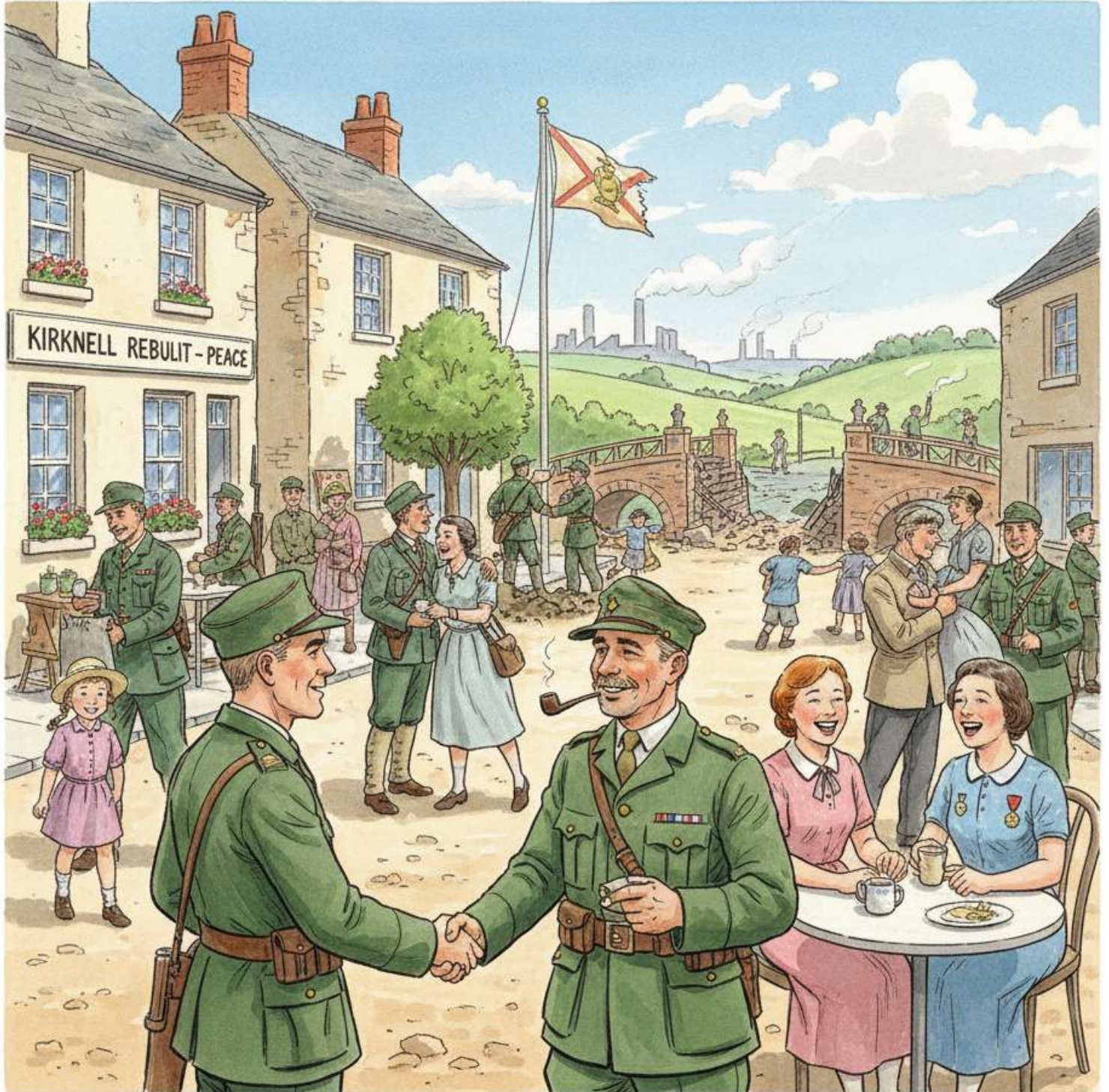
Creaky let out a breath. “There goes Mind.”

Brano nodded once, the gesture slow and certain. “He’s earned whatever peace he finds.”

The sun climbed over the fields, lighting the scars of the land with a fragile warmth.

For the first time in a long while, the world felt still wounded, uncertain, but finally, unmistakably, at peace.

For now.



Note From Author

Thank You C.F.D. For the unpredictability and adventures.

Sin x

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