

Battle Earth: The Second Trilogy

Pages: 522

Publisher: Swordworks; 1 edition (August 1, 2013)

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

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Copyright © 2012 by Nick S. Thomas Published by Swordworks Books All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners. **Prologue** War had raged for little over nine months with the alien invaders before they were driven from Earth. In the pages of human history it had been a short war, but all that had witnessed it were left forever changed. The Ares research base on Mars was the first target. The Lunar colony, the largest human colony outside of Earth's atmosphere had been next. The survivors of the five hundred thousand Moon colonists had fled below ground to continue to wage a guerrilla war. Spain and North Africa had quickly fallen. France had been the bastion of Europe, but now lay in ruins. South America had fallen, and North America had barely held the line. Soldiers from all around the globe fought alongside one another to save their planet. Major Taylor's heroic defeat of the enemy leader Karadag had caused the enemy armies to flee the planet, but they were far from finished. The deaths of Captain Friday and so many other comrades weighed heavily on Chandra's Company, and no one could yet believe that the war could be over. The enemy army loomed over Earth from their retreat on the Lunar colony. Nobody knew their intentions, but it was clear they were not ready to leave. **Chapter 1** "To our fallen friends!" yelled Taylor. He lifted his glass above his head in a salute. The crowd around the table on which he was stood roared in appreciation as glasses clashed together. He lifted the container to his lips and threw back the beer so that it trickled out of the sides and down his chin. He wiped his mouth and looked around as he gazed at the festivities. Mitch could feel the fatigue in his drooping eyes. He wanted nothing more than to have it all stop and to settle down for some much needed rest. But the hard days of work were only broken up by hard partying. He staggered as he lowered himself down onto a stool and finally to the floor. Mitch landed hard and swayed a few steps over into Sergeant Silva who turned and smiled. "Easy there, Major," he jested. Mitch righted himself and took another swig from his beer. He turned to have Eli rush at him and launch her tongue down his throat. She tasted of Vodka and was drunker than him. Neither of them cared anymore for hiding their feelings and relationship. It was such common knowledge that nobody hassled them over it. "When are we going home?" she asked. He shook his head and

shrugged his shoulders in response. "Oh, come on, we gonna be here forever?" "What are you so desperate to get back to?" She looked at him puzzled. "Home, what else?" "I'm not sure I'd recognise it anymore," he mused. She shook her head, not understanding what he meant. "The war didn't reach our homes," she stated. "It's not that. It's us that have changed. Do we just go home and go back to our old lives?" "Why not? We've been here long enough. Long enough for a lifetime." He nodded to show he understood her, but he did not believe it. He caught a glimpse of Chandra approaching. She was pulling back a hood from her head, and her clothing was dripping wet. "Evening, Major!" called Eli. "I see you're making the most of the night," she replied. Eli raised her shot glass in salute as she turned and left them to their business. They could both see that she had arrived to address Taylor. "What is it?" he asked. "Our work will be done here tomorrow. The locals who are returning will take it from here. We have orders to pack up and leave by noon." "Where we heading?" "Help the clear up at Reims." "Christ, is this what we have become? Clearers and builders?" She dipped her head and sighed. As much as both of them had wanted to see an end to the fighting, it was a long way from the future they had expected. "France had some of the worst of it, you know that. It's our job to help return some normality to these people's lives. We'll do whatever we can to help." "All that fighting, all the death, the loss? How much more can be asked of us?" She hauled Mitch in close. "A damn sight more. This war isn't over. It won't be over until every one of those sons of bitches is dead. We'll continue to do everything that is expected of us and more." He nodded in agreement. Taylor felt some shame for having little compassion left for the civilians. They had become refugees, and their towns had been reduced to rubble while he still had a home to return to. But he could not help feel they had all given enough already. "I'm going to get a drink and enjoy the rest of the evening. Tomorrow we get a change of scenery, and that'll be a good thing. Keep it together for all of us, you hear?" Taylor looked away for a moment as he took another drink and turned back to Chandra. "We getting a lift to Reims?" "That's more like it," she replied. "I have already organised for trucks and some engineering vehicles to join us. Sergeant Dubois was most helpful in convincing the General as such. Taylor smiled as he turned and looked to the bar where the French Sergeant was sat. She was engulfed in conversation with Captain Jones whom she had her arm wrapped around. It brought a smile to his face to see the darkness that had grown in Jones being washed away. He was laughing for the first time in as long as either of them could remember. "You see that?" asked Chandra. "Amongst all this pain and suffering, and the near obliteration of our race, and yet that is hope. Humans will always seek to find some good in every situation, and it's something you should remember, Major." He nodded in agreement. All he ever wanted was to see an end to the war and be able to relax and enjoy the company of friends in peace, but in the back of his mind, he knew it was not to last. "You know I thought you'd like helping to clear and rebuild. It's a walk in the park after what we've been through." He turned and looked up into her eyes. He wondered for a moment if she really liked the peace they had won. She seemed anxious to get back to combat. "It's what we wanted, an end to it all. But it's not quite the triumphant celebrations I had envisaged. Toiling over desolate waste grounds that we have already bled over and lost so many good friends." "It won't last forever," she replied. "There's still a lot of work to be done." "Yeah, proper soldiering though." "The damn war's over, Major, can't you leave it be?" He slammed down his glass and turned away from Chandra. She was left speechless at the bar as she was handed a drink. *Can't blame him*, she thought. *He's had it tougher than most*. Taylor pushed his way through the troops to look for Eli, but he stopped as he recognised an old officer enter the bar in front of him. The face was just a little familiar, but he could not place it. The man must have been close to sixty but was in good shape. His face was scarred and weathered. He held himself high and proud. On the man's arm was the faded symbol of the Moon Defence Force. Either side of him stood younger men of the same army. He could already tell that they recognised him. "Fuck," he said under his breath. He remembered his first encounter with the enemy on the Moon colony, and the mission they had carried out. No MDF soldier would have fond memories of that time. Taylor had his orders, and that didn't involve assisting the colonists. "Major Taylor," he spat with a dour face. Mitch shook his head. He could already tell it was not a situation he needed right now. "How you doing, fellas?" he responded. "Still standing, no thanks to you." He remembered the man's commanding voice. Then it came

back to him, the MDF Commander Kelly, who he had met during the rescue of the Prime Minister. *Ah shit*, he thought. "Another time, alright?" he asked. Taylor took a few steps to go past them, but one of the MDF soldiers shuffled along to block his path. "Let him be!" Kelly ordered. The despondent soldier glared into Taylor's eyes before the Commander shouted his command a little louder. "Lieutenant Perera, step aside!" Taylor didn't remember ever meeting the younger officer, but he could see the hatred in the man's eyes. Perera moved aside and watched Mitch like a hawk as he avoided eye contact and shuffled on towards the restrooms. *Jeez*, thought Taylor. *Save the fucking world and they're still not happy*. As he stood relieving himself, he thought back to his last battle. The killing of Karadag should have been an event to celebrate for years to come, but it did not bring the satisfaction he sought. The doors swung open behind him, and he caught a glimpse of Jones staggering in to stand at the receptacle beside him. The Captain had a delirious grin on his face and was drunk enough to have forgotten the horrors he had seen for just a while. "We moving out?" he slurred. "That's right. To Reims." "They got better beer there?" Taylor chuckled. "Captain Reyes reckons he can score a few kegs of English ale for us. I told him you might be interested." Jones turned and looked in amazement. "No shit?" "Hey, if it can be done, I'll have it." "Feels could to kick back and enjoy life a bit, don't you think?" Taylor thought for a moment before mumbling in agreement. He couldn't think of a town or a country he even wanted to be. All he wanted was Eli and to leave it all behind. He loved the Company and all the friendship within it. But their faces reminded him every day of all those he would never see again. "The Major believes the Krycenaeanans are far from gone," said Taylor. "Ah fuck it, they're not here now, are they?" Taylor smiled. He'd never seen the British Captain be so vulgar and casual. It was a relief to see life return to his eyes. It made him wonder why he felt so down. Jones had been through all he had and worse, and yet was in a better place emotionally. "How do you do it?" asked Mitch. "What?" "Put all this behind you and move forward?" Jones grimaced as he thought back to his horrifying experience as a prisoner of the invaders. He tried to smile through it, but Taylor could see the pain still burning inside. "There's nothing else to do, is there? You can wallow in it all and become a head case like I did, or man the fuck up." Taylor's eyebrow lifted as he turned his head and looked at his old friend in surprise. For a moment he had sounded like the forever cool headed Captain Friday. It was a sad reminder of the loss of one good friend, but a pleasant experience to see the return of another. Jones stepped past and patted him on the back. "Come on, Mitch, this ain't half bad. War's over, and we can finally enjoy ourselves a little." Taylor finished up and strode over to the washbasins as Jones left the room. He cupped water from the tap and splashed it over his face. The cool clear water instantly gave him a wake up kick. He breathed in deeply as he tried to relax and settle down. For all the time he had wanted to see the war end, having to confront a new life of peace was more difficult than he expected. He walked past the drier and shook his hands off as he stepped back out into the bar. Within a few metres, he was once again stopped by one of the MDF servicemen. Lieutenant Perera stood before him with an angry face and a bottle held at its neck by his side. Taylor shook his head. He only wanted to return to Eli and enjoy the rest of the evening. "Come on, man, give me a break," Taylor snarled. "You were there when it all began. You were there and could have helped," replied Perera. "Where were you when our people were butchered, and we fled for our lives?" he spat. Taylor shook his head in astonishment. He couldn't help but feel that after everything he had done, he didn't owe the man anything. He looked down away from the Lieutenant's angry eyes and could not find any words to utter. "The deaths of our people are on you! You could have helped!" Mitch could feel the anger brewing inside as he was being condemned for not saving the lives of people he could never have helped. Perera stood tall in front of him and awaited an answer. Finally, Taylor looked up and stared into his eyes. A frown grew in his face as his tolerance of the man seeped away. "I have done everything in my power to save as many lives as possible. Why don't you take some fucking responsibility and stop acting like a pussy?" growled Taylor. Perera's face went red with anger, and he took a wild and uncontrolled hook for Mitch's face. The Major was a little dulled by the alcohol but no more so than the Lieutenant. He ducked under the strike and drove an uppercut into the man's stomach. As the man reeled in pain, he yanked him back upright and drove a push kick into his torso that threw Perera back across the room and tumbling into several other MDF soldiers. Before Taylor could marvel at

his work, he felt a sharp pain as a punch connected with the side of his jaw. He stumbled a few paces before regaining his balance. Kelly stood there with his guard up and firmly ready to defend his colleague. "Get 'em!" shouted Monty. The bar burst into action as a melee erupted. Taylor was rushed by two of the Moon soldiers who came between him and Kelly and tackled him to the ground. He struggled to get them off but was trapped under their weight. He punched up into the flank of one to soften him up, and the man yelped in pain but did not move. He lifted his knee and smashed it into the same man's chest that made him gasp for air. The other punched him hard in the face. His head bounced off the ground, and his vision blurred for a moment. He gritted his teeth and thrust upward, striking the man on the edge of his chin. His head recoiled backwards but quickly recovered. Taylor struggled to get free but could not get out of the grasp of the two men who stubbornly refused to move, no matter how much he softened them up. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jones rush across the room and launch one of the men across the room with a brutal kick. Mitch cut down with a knife hand to the other man's collar, quickly incapacitated him. Jones hauled Mitch to his feet, and they looked around for their next targets. "Can't take you anywhere," Jones smiled. Over a dozen soldiers were engaged in an all out battle across the bar with others joining in as it spread. Jones turned to face off against an incoming bunch as Taylor squared up against his next opponent. The MDF soldier before him was a woman, a fact that made him hesitate for a moment. She saw the opening and jabbed him hard to the face, and blood burst from his nose. He turned back with a smile as the blood gleamed on his teeth, her feistiness amusing him. The woman thrust another strike forwards, but Taylor voided it and took a hold on her arm, wrenching her forward. As she was launched off her feet towards him, he drove a knee into her stomach and quickly followed it with a left to the jaw that knocked her to the ground. He looked up with a smile to revel in the destruction but was met with a snooker cue being wrapped around his face. Taylor staggered back and tripped over the woman's body, landing hard on his back. The cue had snapped and splintered off. The impact had been taken on his left cheek and side of his head, momentarily disorientating him. He got to his feet and took a wild swing at another soldier that sent them both off balance and the other man flat on his face to the floor. He turned around and swayed to one side causing him to stagger and fall into a table. He could feel blood trickling down his face and more than a little dizzy. Sirens rang out from outside the building, quickly followed by the cries of the Military Police as they rushed into the complex with stun batons. He ducked under a strike from one of the batons and hit the officer with an uppercut to his gut. The man folded and collapsed down. Taylor turned to face another but was hit full force in the back of the knee by a baton. The Major stumbled to get to his feet but was thrust with one of the electrified batons and pushed to the ground. He remembered shaking from the voltage before being struck in the head and knocked unconscious. * * *

Taylor awoke in a small pool of his own blood and saliva. He was face down on a hard concrete floor. He rolled onto his side and rubbed his eyes as he tried to regain composure and focus. As he began to get his sight back, he could make out cell bars a metre in front. It was a grim reminder of his incarceration, and he leapt up to his feet. He turned to see several other bloodied soldiers sharing the cell with him. He recognised the brothers, Monty and Blinker. Opposite them were sat Commander Kelly and three of his troops. They looked up at him but showed no aggression. Despite the pain in his body, he felt remarkably sober. He must have been out for some time. "How you doing, Major?" asked Blinker. Taylor turned away from the Commander to look at the two friendly faces. "Still standing, how long we been here?" "Few hours," replied Monty. "Guess they aren't too keen on a little friendly disagreement?" The two brothers chuckled. "You got us in here, Major," muttered Kelly. "Think you can get us back out?" Taylor turned around to see that the MDF Commander was not joking. Blood had dried where it had poured from the man's mouth. He was stern and confident but not confrontational. "It was your boy that started this. Striking a superior officer, that's a serious offence." "Ah, hell, what does it matter anymore? We just need to get out of this shithole." "It matters to me. We have given everything in this war, and I don't appreciate having the efforts of my Company brought into question by an officer who wasn't even here." Kelly nodded in agreement. "Look, I get it. I have seen the reports. I know what you and your people have done." "No, you don't," interrupted Taylor. "You weren't there. You think you can have any

idea of what we went through by reading a few notes?" Kelly nodded in agreement once again. "I get it, Major, I really do. We cannot know what you went through, but we didn't sit this war out either. We were prisoners in our own colony. We had nowhere to run. We were waking up every day and expecting it to be our last. Do you know what it feels like to live within a siege? When you know that if the defences fail, everyone dies. Every soldier, every civilian, all the children." Kelly stopped for a minute to take in a deep breath and calm him. "Our war was no walk in the park is all I am saying." "I never said it wasn't, but I didn't look for a fight back there," snapped Taylor. Taylor turned and paced back across the room. "I am not saying what Lieutenant Perera did was right. I'm just saying that under such extreme pressure, we don't always make the best decisions. We've lost our home colony and a great deal of our friends. I will discipline him appropriately." Taylor strolled over to Monty and took a seat beside him on the hard and uncomfortable bench that ran the length of the wall. "You should know that I never wanted to leave your colony back then. I wanted to help you, but I had no choice." Kelly sighed. "I know. None of us could have foreseen this was the way it was gonna go. Who could have known we would ever have to face such an enemy in our lifetimes? Hell, in our history?" "We made it though, didn't we?" replied Taylor. "We're still standing." "True, but many aren't. All we ever wanted was to be left alone on our colony. We thought the threat upon us came from Earth, from corporations and governments wanting to muscle in on what we had. Never could we have imagined that we'd have to flee our homes." "You really like it up there that much? Living in artificial environments?" "It was our land. Few Earthers ever understood." "No, I get it. A man will defend what is his to the very end, no matter how little it may seem in the face of others. But now you have a chance to rebuild your community here on Earth. Hell, there's certainly some space going free." "It's not a pleasant thought to be filling a space where a population has been exterminated," he replied. The cell went silent as they all thought about it for a moment. "By that thought, we'd never live anywhere. Humans have butchered each other for as long as we have lived, and wherever you are, you stand over bloodied ground." "Maybe that's why we liked the Moon. We started from afresh," replied Kelly. Doors opened down the corridor and footsteps approached. Moments later, Commander Phillips appeared with an MP on either side. No one in the cell uttered a word. "Major Taylor, it seems you are adamant to get back behind bars. Commander Kelly, I was surprised to see your name on the list of those detained during this disturbance." "It was a soldier's disagreement, nothing more." "I trust it has now been resolved?" The two officers nodded in agreement. "Good. We have seen enough conflict over the last year, so how about we work together from now on? I can put this down to a little too much drink and a one off incident, but Gentlemen, do not let it happen again. The French authorities are trying to rebuild their country, and the last thing they need is trouble. You're all here to help rebuild, not destroy what's left." "Understood, Sir," replied Taylor. "Major Chandra informs me that you are moving out at noon. I have procured release for all of you, on the condition that you will all return immediately to your billets and sleep off this silliness." "Much appreciated, Sir. You won't see any more trouble from us." "See that I don't." The MPs stepped forward and opened the doors of the cell. The soldiers sat on both sides of the room sighed as they stood up and worked their aching muscles and joints. Kelly stood before Taylor. "We don't blame you for not helping us. You have become famous for your deeds down here to save Earth, but you can't help some of my lads feeling a little put out." "I was only following orders," replied Taylor. Kelly nodded. "I know. Sometimes orders are the best thing to do, but not the right thing. I know you have some experience of this." Taylor smiled in response, and Phillips laughed at the sentiment. Taylor had breached his orders more than any man could ever expect to get away with. "You look after yourself, Major," said Kelly as he strolled out of the cell. "Go home, Major, enjoy what sleep you can get before dawn." *Home?* He wasn't sure he had one any longer. The company of Eli seemed to be the comfort and security a home might offer, and it was the best thing he could hope for. He stepped forwards and out of the cell. In the corridor, he found the other doors open and the rest of the troops being released. Eli stood awaiting him with a bruised jaw. "You just couldn't stay out of it, could you?" he asked. She smiled in response. "Hey, it's been years. After the battles we've been through, it was nice to have a fair fight for a change." He threw his arm over her shoulder, and she wrapped hers around his waist. He winced as he felt new

bruises on his flank where someone must have kicked him on the ground after he'd been knocked unconscious. "You okay?" she asked. "This? It's nothing." She didn't press him any further. Taylor had been through far worse beatings and didn't need to be reminded of it. The bloodied soldiers staggered back to their billets. It was a pleasant reminder of some of the good nights out they had enjoyed before the war had begun, but the locals didn't seem to agree. Civilians continued to pour into the country day and night. Vehicles rolled past that were packed to the roof while others walked back to their homes. "What are they even going home to?" asked Eli. "Whatever is left, it's still their homes, where else are they supposed to go?" replied Taylor. Police sirens rang out as MPs tried to weave through the heavy traffic and clogged paths. Many roads were still not clear of debris, and some no longer existed. Much travelling had to be done by military vehicles and the few civilian cross country vehicles that could be mustered. "Think we'll be here much longer?" Taylor sighed. "I guess not." She stopped him and looked in surprise. "You don't want to go home?" Taylor shook his head. "This has become home, more so than ever. Does going home mean returning to lives we no longer know, and leaving behind so many we now call friends? Returning from where we came is not going home." "Well that's pretty fucking cynical." Taylor shrugged his shoulders. He could not help but feel disassociated with his old life. Victory had not been anything like he had hoped for. He knew he should be thankful for escaping any charges that night, but it was little relief. His head was swollen, and his worn and faded uniform soaked in fresh blood of his own. None of them spoke anymore on their return. Mitch kicked open the door of his temporary shelter and stumbled inside with Eli close behind. He winced as he pulled off his uniform. He was tired of the pain he felt physically and emotionally. Eli came close and wrapped her arms around him, but he had little care for it. He brushed her aside and climbed into bed. She could see the sadness in his eyes and did not pursue it. They lay side-by-side for a few moments until she realised neither were ready to sleep. "Karadag..." she said. "What of him?" "We never discussed him." "What is there to say? We left the bastard in a pool of his own blood." "I know. What I meant was, there must surely be more like him? We have many Generals and many heroes in our armies." Taylor stopped and thought for a moment. They had been so focused on taking down the enemy leader that the idea of others had passed him by. It was a depressing thought as he realised she was bound to be right. "Maybe, but armies of Earth used to be led by Kings, so maybe he was the same. When Alexander the Great died, his armies scattered to the wind. Same as Genghis Khan." "That's wishful thinking," she muttered. "Have we not suffered enough against them? Maybe they want this war to be over as much as we do?" They both fell silent as they thought on that concept. It was hard to imagine that the Krycenaean could ever live in peace. "Makes you think, doesn't it? If they exist, what else is in the universe? Are there whole other worlds?" "That have already been conquered or obliterated by the Krycenaean?" asked Taylor. "Or something bigger and meaner?" she responded. "All we ever wanted to do was reach the stars, and look where it has gotten us. Had we not gone to the Moon, to Mars, maybe they would never have found us," mused Taylor. "And maybe they would have found us just the same, and they would have found a far less capable opponent. We survived this war by the skin of our teeth. We survived it because the human race always strives for more and better. What happened to you Mitch? Since the fighting ended, you've become a shell of your former self. Isn't this the peace you wanted?" He grunted and lay silent. "What more can we ask for?" she insisted. "I can think of a lot. For this war to have never happened." "And I am sure all that have seen such days they wished they had not, but we made it through." She knew she wasn't getting through to him. She went silent and cuddled into his side in the hope of giving him some comfort. There was little time left until dawn, and as much as dire thoughts plagued Taylor's mind, he eventually succumbed to his exhaustion. **Chapter 2** Taylor awoke with a blistering headache and looked across to see an empty bed. They worked hard every day to help restore some normality to the region, but it felt like a never-ending job. It was only broken up by an ever more tiring series of parties and intoxication. He sighed as he crawled out of bed and sat up. A cold breeze swept in from where the door was ajar. The snow of winter had already begun to set even in the busy streets. All of Eli's gear was gone, including her Reitech suit. "Ah shit," he muttered. He pulled on his gear and stepped out into the daylight. Most of the Company were sat under a dining shelter enjoying their

breakfast. "Hey, Major!" shouted Silva. The Sergeant beckoned for Mitch to join him. Taylor strode over and could see that Jones, Chandra and Yorath all sat together. A seat was left empty with a full plate of food placed next to it. "Much appreciated," shouted Taylor as he took his seat among them. "We're heading out in thirty minutes," replied Chandra. "Thought we had work to finish up here?" "We did, but Command wants to clear the path west. Those who survived and fled want their homes back, and we've got refugee camps backed up hundreds of miles. The locals are taking here, and we're moving forward to Reims ahead of schedule." "Great, quicker the better." "It shouldn't be long now. A few more weeks work, and the rebuilding should be able to get started." "What then?" he asked. "We're soldiers. We'll find a new battle to fight." "You think they'll send us to the Moon?" "Fucking 'ey!" yelled Silva. "How can they not?" replied Chandra. "We have a hostile army waiting on our doorstep." *If only they could return to whatever hole they came from,* thought Taylor. "You don't seem convinced, Major? I'd have thought you of all people would want to see this through?" asked Chandra. He nodded, but she could see he was not at all happy. "What is it?" He looked up at her as he chewed a mouthful of food and thought. "I want to see an end to the war, certainly. I'd just like to see it without losing anymore friends." The table went silent. It was the one subject all thought about and avoided discussing. Taylor looked up at their faces, realising that he wasn't being the officer they needed him to be. He felt shallow and selfish for having broken the mood. "Ahh, don't listen to me. My head's spinning, and I didn't really sleep. I'm rambling." "It's in all of our thoughts, but look at them," Chandra said as she pointed to the rest of the troops enjoying their meal and larking about. "They need what morale they have. Thinking what might become of us serves nobody any good." "I know," he replied. He already regretted voicing his bleak emotions so publically. He rubbed his weary eyes and looked up with a smile. "I just need a coffee and all will be well," he replied. The post war conditions had led to stagnation and a time of uncertainty. They were rebuilding while the enemy still loomed over them. They finished up as the trucks arrived to take them onwards. Chandra looked to Silva. "Sergeant, get them loaded up." He nodded in acknowledgement as he leaped to his feet, bellowing his orders that echoed around the area for all to hear. Chandra got to her feet and followed Taylor so she may talk to him alone. "You okay?" she asked. He turned and smiled but winced as it hurt his bruised face. "Just a rough night, is all." "I can't tell whether it's peace you want or more war," she replied. "Either would be better than this, just to know where we stood." She nodded in agreement as they strode to the lead vehicle. Taylor approached to see that Eli stood there, ushering the troops aboard. She smiled at seeing him, and it was a welcome sight after the grim manner he'd previously been in. They climbed aboard and were on the move within minutes. It was a tedious journey to get out of the town as the drivers fought through the traffic and chaos, but they soon hit the open road. They were once again travelling in open country that showed no sign of the war that had passed it by. Farmhouses were deserted, and the trails of tracked vehicles through many of the fields were the only sign of the recent conflict. The snow was already beginning to cover over such sights. "What's our job in Reims?" asked Taylor. "Same as usual. We are to clear all roads and repair where necessary." "Engineers work," he replied. "Sure, but there are too few of them to work alone, and these Reitech suits surely make light work of the job. Plenty of civilians have already managed to get back, but many of the access roads are still a mess. We'll be working to the west and the road to Paris. Even the name of the city conjured up a wealth of images they all wanted to forget. It was noon when they finally arrived in the city. Few soldiers were to be seen amongst the ruins. Many of the allied armies had quickly returned to their native lands after the enemy's retreat. Much of the city lay in ruins, and few had managed to get anywhere near the centre. A single policeman ushered their vehicles down a rubble-strewn road until they could go no further. Taylor and Chandra leapt out from the trucks to survey the scene and gasped at the sight before them. "Shit, this isn't going to be a quick job," shouted Taylor. Two tower blocks had collapsed into the road in front them, and the rubble more than ten storeys high. "We're gonna need help, lots of it," replied Chandra. The policeman strode up beside them and patted them on the back. "Good to have you here." Chandra turned to him. "We're happy to help, but we can't do it alone. We've got engineers and a few vehicles on their way to assist, but more than anything, we need manpower." "What do you suggest I do?" he replied. "The people returning from the east,

they want their homes back, do they not?" The man nodded. "Then I suggest you send them our way to lend a hand. We need the roads cleared and access and communication links restored." "I'll do what I can." "Not good enough. I want all physically able men and women between sixteen and sixty that arrive at this city to report immediately to work detail here," growled Chandra. The policeman looked uncomfortable and shied away, but she paced forward and grabbed the sleeve of his jacket. "Look, this work has to get done. I don't want to be here anymore than the rest of my troops. This isn't my country. We've fought and bled over these lands so that these people could return. Show some God damn back bone and get them to lend a hand." The man looked past the Major to the rest of the troops who stood beside the trucks silently watching him. He could see the disdain in their faces. "You will get no pity from us. We have been here from the day this war started and are still working. Get to it!" she shouted. The officer turned and stepped slowly away towards the crossroads where they had first met him. Chandra looked at Taylor with an expression of utter shock and astonishment. "You'd think we were an occupying army by the welcome we're getting here." "These people are broken. We know we have homes to go back to, what do they have? They've been blasted back to the stone age," replied Taylor. Chandra sighed. "Still no excuse for slacking and bloody rudeness after all we have done for them." Taylor stepped up close and whispered in her ear. "Take it easy on these people. They may not have had to fight on the frontline, but they've lost everything." "Not their lives," she snapped. "Plenty have. We still have no idea how many millions died in these lands." She took a deep breath as she calmed herself and took in his words of wisdom. "When did you become the cool headed prophet?" "When the fighting stopped. These people aren't soldiers. They aren't under your command, and they have lost all but their lives. We need their help, but the last thing they need is abuse." She smiled. "How you have come on, Major, so where has the marine gone that would have kicked their arses into action?" She stepped past Taylor and patted him on the shoulder as a thank you for putting things back into perspective. The Company still stood silently awaiting her command. They looked miserable and tired, despite the fact that work had not yet started. "This is one of the main roads to Paris. We fought and bled over that city once and have given everything we had to get it back! This wreckage stands as much as a barrier to us as an enemy army. Would you stand here and let it tower over us in defiance? Leaving this country to ruin is to accept defeat. Every street we clear, and every town that is re-inhabited, is a victory over our enemy!" She could hear footsteps grow nearer and turned to see a dozen men and women stroll up to her, throwing down their luggage at the side of the road. They looked up at the huge job before them and stood proud and ready. She nodded in gratitude and turned back to the troops. "This barrier mocks us all and all the friends we have lost, let's tear it down!" A few cheers rang out, but they were far from enthusiastic as they stepped up to the rubble and began their work. The Reitech suits provided an immense boost in strength and stamina for such labour, but it was still gruelling and mind numbing work. The troops slogged for hours, long after the civilians had lain down to rest. Finally, as the sun began to lower in the sky and cast long shadows, and the temperatures began to plummet, Chandra called them all to a halt. She and Taylor peered around to see the results of their work. They had cut a noticeable path to the west, but the mound of rubble appeared to have altered little. "We need some heavy gear in here, diggers and trucks. All this crap has to go somewhere," stated Taylor. "I am promised that the engineers are on their way, and that we will have everything we need." They took up refuge in the nearby empty buildings for the night, alongside the growing number of civilians who were arriving to assist them. There was no alcohol that night. No parties and brawls. They were all growing tired of such activities and appreciated a quiet night of rest. In the morning, Taylor and Chandra climbed to the top of one of the nearest intact buildings, along with several others of the Company who chose to join them. It was a vantage point no one had seen since the war had ended. There were few aerial craft available to them and just as few tall structures still standing and stable to get a viewpoint. "My God, can this even be called a city any longer?" asked Eli. "Makes you wonder if they'd be better off leaving this place be and build afresh." "No, we rebuild, like humanity always has done after such times," replied Chandra. She looked out past the vast debris they had been clearing and sighed as she squinted to see where it ended. "We could be months clearing this," spat Taylor. "Not once we've got the gear we need," she replied. "I want you

to take a look ahead wherever this road continues. We're getting more help all the time, and we'll soon be stepping on each other's toes. See if you can find a way through. If we can get teams to the other side and perhaps air lift a few vehicles over there, with the right help, we could halve the time this'll take." Taylor turned back to Eli. "Sergeant, I want you and three volunteers ready to move in ten." She acknowledged and quickly rushed off to assemble the others down at the ground. He turned back to Chandra as she placed a hand on his shoulder. "And be careful. We've got unstable structures, maybe unexploded ordnance, as well as the potential for remaining enemy forces, looters and all sorts. Don't forget Amiens." He sighed as he thought back to the betrayal that still remained as a bitter experience that caused a bitter hatred of the civilian population; it would not soon be forgotten. "I've got it, we'll find a way through. How long till you can get that air support?" "I'm still working on it, but by the end of the day or morning at the latest." "Great, nice of them to rush." "This isn't a unique scene. Most of the French towns and cities that were fought over are reduced to rubble. We'll be slogging through them for months." She went silent as they both looked out once more at the desolate and apocalyptic looking landscape. "Enough, we have work to do. Remember to keep in radio contact." Taylor smiled. "Yeah, nice to have that back. I'd almost forgotten what it was like to have personal radios." "Our equipment developers must find a way to get around that jamming for when this war continues. For now, let's just be thankful to have it all back." They turned and left the rooftop, taking just a last glance at the shocking sight as they trooped down towards the mountain of work which lay before them. Chandra was pleased to see that the rest of the Company and the civilians who had joined them had already begun work. They were running rubble out of the area in the troop transports that had taken them there. "Count yourself lucky, Major. You go exploring while we slave on." Taylor smiled, and she couldn't have been more accurate. He was aching to get ahead onto something more interesting. The fact that what waited for them the other side was the same work was something he tried to ignore and forget. He turned to see that Parker was waiting with three marines at a side alley that was still in tact. "Alright, let's get moving." He paced forwards to lead them and looked back just once to see Chandra step forward and get stuck in with the manual labour they had been reduced to. "You know where this leads, Sergeant?" he asked. "I've got maps of the area, but they are only part of the puzzle. This should be a good start for us." "We could just use our boosters and go across the rooftops," shouted Williams. Taylor nodded and sighed at the same time. "It's appealing certainly, but if only we can make it, that doesn't help." "If we just had some damn birds in the air, we could sort this problem in no time," replied Clark. Taylor stopped and turned back to them with a stern face. "We're using old tech and tactics, I get it. Look around you. Maybe last year we had access to whatever we wanted and needed, but that just ain't the case anymore. It's not exactly glamorous work, but at least nobody is shooting at us. Now, can we carry on with a little less bitching?" A large aircraft burst across the sky, sending vibrations through the ground. For a moment they all flinched. They had become accustomed to expecting anything above them to be enemy craft. They relaxed as they saw a friendly transport plane rush over the city at remarkably low altitude. Taylor relaxed and righted himself. As he began to speak, Lam leapt forward and pushed him aside, and the others scattered. A chunk of concrete almost the size of a car crashed down between them. Taylor pushed Lam off him and looked around with a panic to see if Parker was okay. They had all scattered with just a metre or two between them, and a crushing and immediate death. He patted Lam on the shoulder. "Thanks," he snarled. "Bloody flyboys!" yelled Parker. Taylor tapped his intercom. "Chandra, this is Taylor, over." "Already on it, Major. We have a few light injuries here, but everyone is okay. What is your status, over?" "Near miss, but we're all okay, over." "Time for someone to get a grilling. Good luck, over and out." Taylor turned back to the other four marines who looked distinctly unimpressed. "Fucking idiots," snapped Lam. "As if it wasn't enough that we had an advanced alien race trying to make us extinct, our own bloody people are trying to kill us," replied Taylor. "I'm sure they were on an urgent mission to bring General Schulz his afternoon snack," Parker grinned. "Alright, let's get moving." They wandered for hours through side streets and derelict buildings, trying to find a safe route through, and marking their waypoints as they went. "Can't we just use the city ring road?" asked Lam. "No, it's bumper to bumper with abandoned cars, and a hell of a way to have to walk it. The

civilians who fled in a panic clogged the roads solid and had to leave on foot. First thing we have to do is establish a straight route through towards Paris." They continued on through the blown windows of a shop front and into another alleyway. They reached a mound of bricks that had collapsed in from a small explosion. Mitch lifted his Mappad and studied it carefully. "Access here could open up the route we need. It may be worth clearing." He noticed a roof access ladder that was still intact just a few metres back. "Make a start on it. I'll head to the roof and see what the situation is up ahead, make sure it's worth our time." He strode over and placed his hands on the bars of the ladder. "You know you could jump it," muttered Eli. "True, but call me old fashioned, I like to do some of the work myself." He began to climb the ladder and felt less than his body weight as the suit propelled him quickly to the roof. As he neared the top, he felt one of the rusted metal steps buckle under the weight of him and all his gear. He took a firm grasp with his hands on the rungs and hoisted himself up without incident. Mitch looked down from the roof to see he had climbed eight storeys while the others had only just begun to start working. The cool icy wind hit his face from the exposed rooftop. Many of the structures around the building were at least partially still standing, but he could see several collapsed skyscrapers dotted across the city. He looked down again to the rubble blocking their path. He nodded as he realised that they could clear the way with an hour's labour. Morbid curiosity overcame the Major, and he turned and strolled across the rooftop, looking out across the rest of the devastation. Just as he reached the centre of the roof, he felt the floor under his feet shake. Before he could respond, it gave way beneath him. Taylor collapsed through a gaping hole that he had created and quickly crashed into the next floor down. The weight and bulk of his body and equipment made him to smash through the floor. Black ash and dust filled his throat and chest as he continued to descend through floor after floor. The entire internals of the structure had been destroyed by fire. The weak floors were providing just enough cushioning to slow his fall but enough to hurt like hell. Finally, after he broke through the fourth floor, he landed hard on a solid surface, and the wind was taken out of him. His back plate took the worst of the impact, but it jolted his body. His ass went numb from the landing, and his helmet lashed against the ground, stunning him for a moment. He shook his head to clear the dust, but it only served to clog his windpipe further as a soot cloud arose around him. As he regained his composure, he could hear the faint sounds of his comrades shouting and calling for him. He tapped his intercom, but it did nothing. The impact had destroyed it. He reached for his rifle that had been slung on his back, only to realise it was long gone. He looked up through the breach he had created and saw the smashed weapon hung by its broken sling on the sixth floor. "Shit," he muttered. Taylor sat up and tried to wipe his eyes with his hands, but they were just as dirty as his face. His gear was so coated in the black soot that he blended in with almost perfect camouflage to the ruined structure. He looked around at his surroundings, but there was little to see but more debris and black walls in what used to be an office compound. A faint mechanical sound rang out to his other side, and Taylor snapped his head around just in time to see the wall cave in just ten metres away. His heart stopped as he recognised the towering height of what was coming through the breach when part of the floor above collapsed between them. A single Mech was visible through the falling dust. "Shit," he whispered. Taylor rolled over several times to his side until he came up against a desk that hid him from the creature's view. *Where the fuck did that come from?* He reached down for the pistol he always carried, but it was nowhere to be found; another item lost during his fall. His eyes grew wide at the realisation that he was in real trouble. Looking down, he could see that all he had on him was a single frag grenade and his Assegai. He took a deep breath and held it as he listened intently all round him. The creature stepped slowly around and had clearly not discovered his position yet. He peered out over the top of a workstation just enough to get a glance of what he faced. The creature was almost as filthy as him. Its armour had been damaged through fighting, but not enough to impede its ability. He could still hear the cries of his comrades outside, and he prayed they would stop. Just as he thought it, they did. *Please no*, he thought. He hoped they were onto the situation rather than silenced by any of the creature's allies. He could hear the steps of the huge creature growing nearer and knew he was running out of time and space. He slowly crawled along the table edge until he could turn a corner and be out of sight. Taylor could hear that he had turned the bend just a few seconds before he would have

been found. He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself, realising he had no choice but to take on the beast in close combat. They were too close for the grenade to be used without a serious risk of hurting himself. The explosion would be more than capable of tearing through most of the room. His sweaty hand reached for the hilt of his Assegai, and he slowly drew it from its sheath. The heavy steps of the creature stomped closer; almost in tune with his heart that was now calm. He had accepted what he must do, and the fear was draining away. His back was against an office divider, and he was down on one knee. His head was turned awaiting the sight of the beast. The barrel of its huge weapon came around the corner first, and he knew it was his opportunity to strike. Taylor leapt up and thrust his Assegai forwards. The creature tried to turn its hulking weapon around, but the Assegai punctured into the main body of the cannon. The alien responded by striking him to the chest with a forceful push, launching him two metres back and onto the top of a desk. He looked up just in time to see the cannon being trained on him. The creature pulled the trigger, but the weapon did nothing. He smiled in relief; his strike had disabled the fearful thing. The angry creature threw it down and rushed towards him. The hulking beast was twice his bulk, and like a rhino bearing down on him. He rolled off the table just in time as it crushed it before him. Taylor ducked under a swing from the creature and thrust up against the clumsy Mech into its rib area. It spasmed in pain as the Assegai was forced in all the way to its hilt. He tore it out as thick blue blood spewed out from the punctured armour. He could see the energy fade in the beast, and it dropped down on one leg. He spun the Assegai around, and took it in both hands above his head with the dripping tip pointing to the ground. The beast tried with all its energy to reach for him, but he thrust down into its faceplate with all his force. The cutting torch style tip needed little pressure to penetrate the thick armour, but it made Taylor feel better to release his anger. The beast went immediately limp and slumped backwards. He wrenched the Assegai from the corpse, and thick blood clung to the entire length of the blade. "Fucking disgusting," he exclaimed as he spat on the body of his vanquished foe. He stood and peered at the lifeless hulk with some satisfaction. Weeks of slogging labour had made him forget how much he enjoyed killing. A thunderous drone rang out from an adjoining room, and he turned just in time to see the thin wall smashed through by three armed aliens. They trained their weapons on him before he had a moment to react. He stood tall and stared them down, for he did not want to die cowered down in a hole. "Alien scum," he spat. A massive explosion erupted before him and at the feet of the creatures, and the Mechs collapsed through a vast hole. Dust and debris showered Taylor. He turned away as the smoke once again filled his lungs. He looked in surprise at the breach as gunfire erupted in the floor below. Automatic weapon fire from his comrades tore the creatures apart. The Major paced forward and looked down through the gaping hole, just in time to see the last rounds puncture the aliens' armour and render them lifeless. He watched as Eli stepped up and laid a boot on a beast's body before firing a final round through its faceplate. She looked up and smiled as she made out the dusty silhouette of Taylor. "Thought we'd lost you there for a minute!" "Outstanding," he replied. Taylor leapt through the breach and used just a fraction of boost to soften his landing. "Let's get the hell out of this shithole." "I figure we've blown our way in this far, we might as well use this to work round that blocked alley." "Lead the way, Sergeant," he replied. Ten minutes later they were huddled behind a solid foundation wall. "Fire in the hole!" Parker shouted. She lifted an arming device and punched down the trigger. A small explosion rang out, and they turned to see that a two metre wide hole had been punched through the outer wall and out into an open shopping street. "We're in business," said Taylor. They strode out into the daylight. At the far end of the road, they could see the rubble pile blocking the main street that Chandra was trying to clear. "Alright, we've done it. Send the route back to Major Chandra. How long do you figure it'll take to walk the distance?" he asked. "I figure about twenty-five minutes, now we've got a clear route." Parker stopped and looked at Taylor and the state he was in. The thick black soot and dust clung to every part of his body and equipment. She suddenly burst into laughter at the sight of him. He looked down at the mess, thought back to the near death experience, and could do nothing but laugh as well. "You lot saved my ass back there. Another second, and I was a goner." "Nothing you haven't done for us, Major," replied Lam. "We were wrong to think this was over. The enemy didn't surrender, and they didn't sign any treaty. We've

been walking around as if they were gone for good," mused Eli. Taylor lifted up his hands, looking at the congealed blue blood staining them and running down the metal forearm bars of his exoskeleton. He had lost the stomach for war so quickly, but in just one small action, he was reminded of the bloodlust they had all built in the war. "Guess we need to find you a weapon, Sir," said Clark. The Major looked down at his hands once again and suddenly felt naked at the realisation that he was without a gun. "Reiter won't be happy you lost his toys," joked Parker. "We came way too close today. We're trying to rebuild this country before we've even finished fighting." He lifted his hand to activate his comms unit, and then remembered it had been destroyed on impact. "Get Chandra back on the line. It's time we took this seriously and got some troops up ahead of the work. I want these lands purged of the infection of these Krycenaean bastards!"

Chapter 3 Taylor had arrived back at their staging ground for just a few seconds when a jeep roared into view as if an urgent message was to be delivered. It was a sight they had gotten used to under the enemy jamming systems. He paced up beside Chandra who had also turned to find the meaning of such urgency. "What do you think they need us for now? Another heap of shit I'm sure," whispered Taylor. She turned and looked at the filthy Major. "You met some resistance, I hear?" Taylor turned with a puzzled expression. "You don't seem surprised?" "It was bound to happen soon enough. The real question is were those Mechs stranded here, or were they stationed here?" The jeep slid to a halt, and the driver leapt out to address them. "I guess we're about to find out," replied Taylor. The German Sergeant quickly saluted and immediately blurted out his message. "Ma'am, your presence is urgently requested." "By whom?" she calmly responded. "General Schulz. He wants Major Taylor also." Taylor's eyes widened at the prospect. He couldn't imagine any reason why Schulz would want to see him, other than incarcerating him once more. Schulz had tried to ease the conflict between them, but Taylor firmly believed it was only to ensure the morale of the troops stayed high. She nodded in agreement and turned to Captain Jones. "Get a party together to start work the other side of this blockade, but I want you to personally scour the buildings. Be prepared for ambush. Take Yorath's platoon with you, but be certain to leave protection at both sites." "You expect more trouble?" he asked. "Most certainly. We've got lazy since we drove their forces back. Let's keep everyone safe. This country has a chance to rebuild, so let's not allow anything to get in the way of that, not least our own negligence." She turned back to the driver. "You ready?" The man nodded and ushered them quickly into his vehicle. The two Majors sat in the back of the jeep as they tore through the streets. There was little traffic going east. As the wind rushed through the open topped vehicle and they hit the open road, the two of them were able to speak without their driver listening in. "I don't like this at all. Schulz has fucked us before, what makes you think he's honourable enough to trust?" asked Taylor. "He isn't. He may be a bastard, but he isn't stupid. Now that the fighting is over, he'll have the whole of your Marine Corps on his arse if he dares touch you. Think what your President would have to say if he learnt that one of its greatest heroes was being arrested?" "It didn't stop the bastard before." "We were at war. Times have changed," she replied. "You told me the war wasn't over." She smiled. "True, it's merely on hold." They arrived at a temporary air base on the eastern edge of France that had been established since the war had ended. It was a hive of activity as vehicles came and went between the multitude of fighters and transport craft lined across the strip. They pulled up beside a concrete structure that had only the letters 'HQ' upon it. Outside were military police guards who wore impeccable white webbing over their perfectly pressed uniforms. Taylor and Chandra leapt off the vehicle under the gaze of the guards who looked at their filthy uniforms with disgust. Taylor glared back at them and could not resist a taunt. "Those rifles look as clean as a whistle, ever fired them?" The two men stared back, and he could see they were desperate to confront him. One of them who wore sergeant's stripes moved a single pace forward and saw the Major's rank crowns hidden beneath the black soot that still coated him. The Sergeant hesitated and stepped back into position. Taylor grinned in satisfaction. "Enough taunting them, we've got real work to do." She knew her comments would only infuriate the MPs further, which served to entertain Taylor. "Please, follow me!" shouted the driver as he rushed into the HQ building. They followed him through and into a room with a large planning table and a dozen high-ranking officers sat about it. They all wore their service dress and were belittled by the two filthy officers in their bulky armour

and exoskeletons. "How dare you step into our presence in such a state!" declared Dupont. Taylor shot a wicked glance back at the General and stood defiantly before him. "You'll excuse our attire, for we were informed we were to get to you with all haste. Nor do we currently possess any uniforms besides these. As combat troops, we only carry what we need," explained Chandra. Dupont was infuriated by what she was insinuating but knew it was worded in such a way that he could do nothing in return. He spun around to address Schulz who was sat calmly at the head of the table. "Will you suffer these filthy soldiers here?" he asked. Schulz launched his chair backwards as he shot up to his feet. "Will you shut up!" he yelled. Taylor smiled as he saw the shock in Dupont's face, and the man's shoulders slump as he was humiliated before them all. *That's right, you son of a bitch*, thought Taylor. Dupont went silent and lay back with a smirk. Schulz sighed as he sat back down and pulled his chair into the table. He took look around the room and took one last deep breath before he addressed them all. "Tensions have been high. There have been some hot headed actions and enough scorn and bitterness to last a lifetime. This is war, so let us not forget that all of us here are on the same side." He paused for a moment for his words to settle in. Taylor, for the first time since he had met the General, began to understand his position. Schulz wasn't an inherently bad person, far from it. He was a plotter and a thinker, and a man who saw the big picture; and had no time to fret over one soldier's single death. Taylor sometimes wished he could have commanded some of the battles in the war but also saw the toll it took. "Soldiers and civilians alike are slaving every day to try and clear roads, and get this country back on its feet. Major Chandra, you are probably not aware that we have had substantial resources put into Paris. The capital is an important symbol for this world, and it must be operational as quickly as possible." "Is there much left of it?" muttered Taylor. Schulz heard his quiet words and stopped to address the question. "Enough that it is, and always will be, Paris. The two of you are more than aware of what the enemy were doing with the former capital." "Actually, Sir, we may have seen a lot, but we understood little of it." "Exactly so. The city has been deemed safe, and what is left of the government is already being re-instated there. The leaders of many of the key armies of the world are assembling there to witness first hand the sights which you yourselves uncovered." "To what end, Sir?" she asked. Taylor could see that Dupont was desperate to leap to his feet and shoot them down in flames, but he held his tongue in the knowledge he would only receive a second ridiculing. "What your reports described was deeply disturbing. Experts from around the world have been let into the site in the last few weeks, and we all hope they have some answers. I would like both of you to join us on this journey. Perhaps you can shed more light on whatever was going on there." Taylor turned to Chandra, and she could see in his eyes that he didn't want to go. She also knew that Schulz was making a determined effort to repair the relationship with her Company, and specifically with Mitch. "What about our unit, Sir?" "Captain Jones will be more than capable of managing. I am sending an infantry company with a detachment of engineers to assist them. They'll be arriving this evening." "Thank you, Sir. We'd be more than happy to accompany you to Paris, but I cannot promise that we'll be any assistance in understanding what is there." * *

* Jones paced cautiously along a roadside, looking in every window and alcove as he passed. Abandoned cars still littered the roads. Some were burnt out wrecks, while others seemed to have past through the conflict like a time capsule. Brick dust and other grime covered every visible surface, and huge craters were still littering the streets. "Need to get those bloody engineers here, and get these holes filled in!" Monty shouted. Jones stopped and turned to watch his unit pass through the rubble and debris of the city. He shook his head in astonishment. It was hard to believe that it could ever return to its former glory. He caught a glimmer of light in the distance as light reflected off a moving object. The Captain quickly lifted his binoculars. His body went taut at the thought they were not alone. He panned around to find the source of the light, and then finally down to the street ahead could see Yorath and his unit coming out from a side alley up ahead. He let go of the binoculars and let them rest on his chest as he peered around at all the derelict structures around them. He hoped friendly forces were the source of the glimmer, but he doubted they were so lucky. Just as he felt his shoulders relax, an explosion ripped through the street in the distance, and the ground shook beneath them. Jones instinctively leapt for cover and tumbled across the road. He ran over broken glass before landing back on one knee beside an upturned

police cruiser. His heart sunk, as he already knew that yet another comrade and friend would be dead. He prayed for it not to be the case, but it was unavoidable. Jones took a deep breath and raised himself up high enough to peer over the vehicle down towards Yorath's unit. There were no screams or sounds of gunfire. The apocalyptic street was once more silent as all of the soldiers in it froze beside their cover. They awaited the onslaught of an enemy barrage or ambush, but it never came. "Come in Yorath, report," he whispered. Static came over his mic and the sound of breathing as the Lieutenant tried to find the words to tell him. "We've, we've got two down." "What is their status?" "One wounded, and he'll make it. The other is gone." Jones shook his head in anger. "We made it through. This is bullshit," whispered Jones to himself. He looked up and all around for some signs of the enemy, but he already speculated that it was a planted explosive of some sort. "Any indication of enemies in the vicinity?" he asked. "None." Jones stood up from behind the car and walked casually towards Yorath's platoon. Jones' unit followed after him, though more cautiously. They reached the scene of the explosion and could see Private Nichols had been torn apart by the blast and killed instantly. *At least there's enough left for a funeral. It's more than most have got these last months*, thought Jones. A few metres away, the medic was attending to the other casualty. Jones could see the wounds were only superficial from shrapnel. The man's body armour showed deep scrapes and scars where the cuirass had saved his life. He was more stunned that hurt. "Shit, this isn't how it's supposed to have gone," whispered Jones. He spoke under his breath so that others wouldn't hear, but he did not have such luck. Yorath got to his feet and stepped up beside the Captain. "What are we even still doing here? Haven't we given enough for this country? We should go home, and let their own people sort this mess out. I didn't see civilians rushing forward to help fight this war, so why should we do all the work?" he asked. Jones winced at the fact the Lieutenant had made his despondent words loud enough for many around them to hear. Charlie leaned in close and whispered to Yorath. "I'll remind you that you are an officer in the British Army, not some loud mouthed thug. Look at them, all of them. Their morale is low enough as it is. Last thing they need is an officer inciting insubordination in their ranks. We'll leave when we're ordered to." "And when will that be?" snapped Yorath. "When there aren't enough of us left to be what is deemed effective?" "Don't give me this shit. You think doing a little hard labour is tough? Try being a prisoner of those bastards!" Yorath went quiet. He was shamed into silence by the Captain, who he knew in his heart he should support and respect. Jones turned and walked over to the wounded man and knelt down beside him. "You'll be just fine." The man nodded in gratitude, staring at the body of his friend who had not been so lucky. "We won't be able to get vehicles out here for a while, and it seems any assistance in the air is too much to ask right now. My platoon will continue to scour the area for enemy combatants and devices. Yorath, you will return to base with the wounded and take some rest." The Lieutenant smiled at the sympathy Jones was showing them, but he could not feel any better about their situation. Rest was all very well, but they would only have to return to the same wastelands afterwards. Jones stood up and stepped towards the blast area. He stood for a moment carefully studying it. "Look at the damage, and remember what it sounded like. That wasn't an enemy weapon. There must be unexploded ordnance in the area. Nichols must have triggered it somehow." "Great, blown up by our own bombs," replied Monty. "You remember the battle we fought in this city. Half the time we couldn't tell where the lines were anymore and fire was coming in all over. This won't be the last time we get bitten by our own bombs." "They need to get teams over here to deal with this shit," growled Blinker. "Half the country is this way, so they're gonna be spread thin. For now we must tread a little lighter. Be alert. Just because this was one of ours, it doesn't mean the enemy haven't planted mines and other devices." Jones stood and watched with sadness as the body of Nichols was whisked away, and Yorath's platoon trundled wearily back to the work site that in that moment was their home. "I can't believe he made it all the way through this war only to be killed now. I saw him take a pulse to the chest and keep fighting in Ramstein. Poor bastard," Blinker continued. Jones lifted his weapon and gave it a quick check before turning to his unit. He could see in their faces they were tired of it all. They didn't want to continue on their days to meet the same fate as Nichols. He did not blame them. He wanted revenge against the invaders, but it was the one thing they could not get. "Major Taylor nearly lost his life because these buildings weren't

cleared. What happens when a family comes home to discover one of the creatures among them? They'll get torn apart. We won this victory, let's see it through!" yelled Jones. It was hard to motivate fatigued veteran soldiers to continue in both a menial and dangerous task. He continually questioned their duty and responsibility to the country himself, but he was a stickler for orders. "We've got work to do, let's move out!" * * * Taylor peered out of the window as their craft banked to encircle the centre of Paris. There was no need to still be in the air for any reason but to gain an aerial view of the devastation and work that went on below. Many of the high-ranking officers around them gasped at the sight below. Taylor had no physical response at all. Inside, he felt pain soar through his body. The sight of the obliterated city was a constant reminder of old wounds, injuries that had for all intensive purposes had time to recover. "I never thought we'd make it to this day," whispered Chandra. "To see a beautiful city in ruin?" replied Taylor. "No, to see it reborn. Only a few months ago we couldn't bring a halt to their advances, and now look where we are." "With a bunch of desk jockey assholes going to revel in their glorious victory." Chandra smiled. Dupont had been listening in from the row behind them, but they hadn't noticed his presence. The General's face was of hate and scorn, but he dared not take the fight to Taylor at that time. He plotted and schemed while better men and women fought and died. From the window, it was clear that resources had been poured into Paris. They could see thousands of construction vehicles at work. Two cranes were already put to work on the Eiffel Tower, rebuilding the iconic symbol of France. "So this is why we aren't getting any help." As he said the words, they saw two large transport craft land in the centre of the city. "Paris was a bastion of hope for us all. To rebuild it is the ultimate act of defiance to the enemy." "I thought that was going to the Moon and kicking their asses?" "All in good time." A few minutes later, their craft put down on a landing zone with the wing of fighters that were attached as a protection detail. As they stepped out onto the tarmac, they were greeted by a host of officers and politicians in all manner of uniforms and insignia. The French President and Prime Minister were at the centre of the party which Schulz and Dupont headed to. "Major Taylor." Mitch turned at the stern manner in which his name was called. General White stood to his flank with several other US officers. A broad smile stretched across his face as he looked down at Taylor's scruffy uniform that had only received the quickest of brush downs. "Your presentation seems to have gone rather downhill since coming this side of the pond," he jested. Taylor reached out and shook White's hand. "Damn good to see you again, Sir." "I have to say you were sorely missed during the last few months." "You seemed to manage just fine, Sir." "Please follow this way!" called Schulz. The General led the French leaders towards the monstrous enemy structures which Taylor and Chandra were all too familiar with. "So this is where you killed the bastard?" asked White. "Not alone, Sir. The Company under the command of Major Chandra here excelled themselves." White shook her hand and nodded in gratitude. "I believe we have met in previous years." "Yes, Sir." "Taylor under your command? Times have changed!" They were led to the site where they had previously seen humans incubated for as far as the eye could see. As they stepped from the corridor out into the vast hall, they gasped at the sight of the equipment once again. The humans, or what appeared to be humans, had long gone, but the chambers remained. Schulz stopped the column and addressed them before the alien technology. "From the reports of Major Chandra and her Company, we know that these chambers were occupied up until the enemy retreat. Our best experts so far believe that the humans within them were being used either as some power or food source, or potentially for experimental purposes. We certainly know that they were keen to establish creative ways to end our race." Chandra looked down at the bulkheads and walls that still bore the scorch marks from their battle. It still didn't feel real that they had won. "How did we ever do it?" she asked Taylor. "What?" "Win. In the opening months of the war, we faced extinction. How did we ever turn it around?" "We aren't the only soldiers to have turned the tide in great battles and wars." "If it had been you that had landed here on foreign soil and been forced out with such losses, would you let it go? Would you return to your home world and forget?" Taylor contemplated the question for a moment before realizing that he only had one answer. "I'd want payback." "Even as the aggressor?" "Sure. Only a coward would turn tail and run." She nodded in agreement. "Then this war isn't over. Maybe it can never be over." Schulz's voice echoed around the hall as he led on the party through the enemy facility. Taylor and Chandra remained

silent as they both pondered her realization. Then Mitch looked up and his eyes grew wider and mouth drier as he recognized where they were heading. "This is where we took down Karadag." "You know I have been dying to see this spot," muttered White. "Where mere humans killed a titan." The General patted Mitch on the back. "He was a formidable opponent. I never thought I'd see the day when a war could be decided in single combat." "It wasn't, Sir. Sergeant Parker was by my side. No one soldier could have beaten that bastard. I can still barely believe that we managed it." "You did your country and the world the greatest service here. No one should forget that. You will be honoured appropriately in time." "Honoured?" The General looked puzzled. "The only honour I would ask is to go home, or somewhere I could call home." White smiled but was also surprised at his words. The group came to a standstill as Schulz turned and stood triumphantly at the place where Karadag fell. His blood still stained the metal floor, but his body was long gone; whisked away by the enemy as they fled from the planet. "This is where it all happened, where the creature known as Karadag met his end at the hands of the 2nd Inter-Allied under the command of these two fine officers!" shouted Schulz as he beckoned towards the two of them. Cheers and fierce clapping rang out as all attention was on Chandra and Taylor. Mitch noticed neither of them was mentioned by name, but he didn't let it bother him. As far as he was concerned, the victory belonged to all who contributed to the war effort. Attention soon focused on the German General, and White turned back to Taylor. "I hear they're still keeping you busy here, Major." "Clean up work," he replied. "And a little more than that. You nearly got yourself killed earlier today," Chandra added. "Go on," continued White. "Found a few stragglers in Reims, nothing we couldn't handle." "Yes, I have been hearing more about pockets of enemy forces. There is chatter about assembling a few hunting teams to sort them out. Your names have been floating about as you're more than suited to the task." Taylor's eyes lit up. He was all for helping the civilian population, but their lives had ground to a monotonous halt. The near death experience earlier now felt like a spark of excitement in their tedious lives. "Sounds like our kind of work." "Good. Now, those cells, or chambers we saw just now. What the hell do you propose they were doing there?" Taylor sighed at the thought of it as Chandra stepped in. "We've thought and talked it over almost every day since, Sir, but it's only speculation." "Well, go on then, speculate." "I believe they were being readied as an army against us. I wouldn't like to say if they were captured humans, or some kind of cloned or genetically created beings. It's clear we have given the enemy a much harder fight than they could have imagined." White nodded in agreement. He wasn't shocked at all by the theory as she continued on. "We outnumbered them in every major engagement, and once we had started to modify their own technology, they were overwhelmed. Despite everything we had developed, they were still better soldier for soldier. What they needed more than anything was manpower." "Based on the number of incubation chambers, if they had gotten those people into combat, the war could have gone very differently," whispered White. "I won't lie to you, we were having a rough time of it back home. Germany would have quickly fallen, and the joint armies that fought across France and over the Rhine would have been encircled within weeks. It's a damn miracle what you pulled off." "How many of those incubation cells are there?" Taylor asked. "From what I understand, five hundred thousand or more. That's a lot of manpower." "We need to know what they were planning," mused Taylor. "Can't we just be happy we won?" asked Chandra. "To lower our guard so soon after a narrow victory would be foolish indeed," replied White. The next hour was filled with questions for the two Majors that neither could answer. They were quizzed as if they were intelligence officers, when all they did was fight. After an exhausting grilling by the Command staff, they were finally allowed to leave aboard another plane. The two of them slumped into the comfortable seats of a luxury civilian transport, sighing in relief as they finally laid to rest. The plane could seat fifty, but only five were aboard. Few would choose to leave the recovering capitol for the ruins of Reims. "What was the point of it all?" asked Taylor. "We've got to do our best to understand our enemy," she replied. "I understand that, but they have experts for that. Our job is to fight." "Schulz wanted to revel in his victory. Word is spreading of your defeat of Karadag, but many still do not believe it. There's no body as proof, no video footage, just the word of one gung ho marine who is hated by Command, and claims to have slain a monster with only the aid and confirmation of his girlfriend. Would you believe it?" Taylor smiled. "You should have been there. I

still can't believe we managed it." The two went silent as the craft lifted off and headed back to the only home they knew. "You heard White. Taskforces are being created to hunt down the remaining forces, and we're right at the top of the list." "Because of our reputation, or because certain individuals are still hoping they can get me killed before this is over?" "Both I should think. The Company is restless. They need something to occupy their minds. We aren't talking about a meat grinder here. Hunting a handful of Mechs with the numbers and firepower we have should be exactly what we need." "Agreed." "Captain Jones." "What of him?" "I wasn't there when you all took on Karadag as you have just mentioned, and your report did not reflect it, but I know Jones went wild. He has had a death wish. Do you believe he is over it?" "Back then I would have said no, but you saw him with Dubois. He's a changed man, and back to his old self." "You believe it could all change overnight?" "You'd be amazed what the love of a good woman can do." "I'll take your word for it. I agree, though. I thought we'd lost him for good. On that note, we'll be getting our orders regarding this new matter tomorrow, and I'm sure that Command will be keen to get us in the field ASAP. I've seen enough drunken exploits to last a lifetime. Take it easy tonight, and rest up for the morning." Taylor trundled back to his billet. He felt like a week had been crammed into the day, and he was once again left in the lurch, awaiting some news of what they were to do. He opened the door on the popup shelter to find Eli comfortably asleep inside. It wasn't quite the coming home to his own house experience but was an appealing sight, nonetheless. As he pulled off his equipment and clothing, she rolled over and slowly came to. A smile came over her face as she watched him take his shirt off and reveal his toned but scarred body. "Hey, stranger," she whispered. "I thought you'd be out having a drink." "I figured we've done enough damage," she laughed. He sat down on the edge of the bed as she got up to hold him. She ran her hands softly over his body. His arms and legs were bruised and scraped from his fall, and he winced in pain as he found so many muscles and bones to be throbbing. "How much more of this do you think you can survive?" she asked. "I'm still standing, aren't I?" "Just about." He turned to see if she was truly worried for him but quickly realized she was merely having fun. His own mortality was always something that prayed on his mind. "How are we still alive?" he asked. "All the crazy shit we've done, and made it through?" "Our training, skills, common sense, and a heap load of luck." Taylor sighed. "That's reassuring." He lay down and took a deep breath as he settled in comfortably beneath the sheets, and Eli huddled up next to him. "You almost died today," she whispered. "Remember the rules, never go anywhere alone. Just because the enemy is in retreat, doesn't mean it's over. None of us are safe." He nodded in agreement. He kicked himself for being so reckless, but without such a visible enemy to fight, it was hard not to try and move on from it all. He felt an immense feeling of satisfaction rush through his body that almost made him shiver. *All the drinking and partying we have done, and this feels a whole world better.* Taylor drifted into a calm and tranquil sleep as if he'd been waiting for it for months. **Chapter 4** Taylor awoke early and feeling fresh, unlike the previous few weeks when his head throbbed. He was up and out of bed in a flash. His ripped and filthy uniform from the day before was gone, and a fresh pristine replacement lay in its place. Parker was already gone, and he could only assume she was responsible for the service. As he pulled on his clothing, he could hear Silva shouting outside, calling the Company to attention. He rushed to the door as he buttoned his shirt just in time to see a jeep pull up with Commander Phillips on board. The road they had set up in was largely covered by a huge shelter that span the full width to the buildings either side. Mess tables filled the shelter, but a roadway had been maintained through the centre where the officer's vehicle arrived. Phillips leapt from the vehicle with a smile as he approached Chandra. Taylor quickly hopped to her side and seemed to be the last soldier to awake. "Didn't think we'd be seeing you anytime soon, Sir," she pondered. "No, but Command has a new job for your Company, and they have placed me in command of this part of the operation." "Search and destroy?" asked Taylor. Phillips nodded with a surprised expression. "We were in for quite a surprise yesterday, Sir. It's clear there is still some fighting to be done here." "Well, it's nice to hear you're up to speed, Major," he snapped. Taylor could see it bothered the Commander that he clearly already knew their orders before they had been relayed. He had passed on General White's news to Chandra as well, but she saw fit not to put the Commander out of place by saying so. A few minutes later, they were sat at one of the

tables, discussing the planned operations as trucks continued to roll through the huge shelter and carrying debris away. "There have been a number of incidents in previously occupied territories, unfortunate encounters. Some have involved allied troops and been dealt with to varying degrees of success. However, other situations have occurred where civilians have stumbled upon the enemy and no mercy has been shown. The last thing we need is the civilian population living in fear of the monsters hiding in their own backyard." "Have there been many fatalities?" asked Chandra. "A few. Media links are still poor, and that's saved it from becoming a widespread epidemic. However, that situation can't last forever. We need these pockets of resistance cleared quickly." "How many are we talking?" asked Taylor. "Quite honestly, we have no idea. We don't know if these are enemy soldiers who got left behind during their hasty retreat, or if they were planted specifically. All we know is it is seriously hindering our efforts. Clean up crews have to be protected at all times, and that is a logistical nightmare. We've also lost a number of soldiers because of these encounters." "And we're expected to do this all alone?" asked Chandra. "No, a taskforce is being assembled in each country. Mostly they'll be taken from native forces, but the French military is weak and spread thin. Your Company has a thorough grasp of warfare in this land and is more than up to the task." "We gonna get the resources we need?" asked Taylor. "I have been given the authority to provide any and all assistance required." Taylor smiled in surprise. "Wow, looks like we really are getting out of this shithole." "Out of the frying pan and all that," whispered Chandra. "What is the strength of this Company?" asked Phillips. "One hundred and twenty three," she replied. "Far from full strength, but more than suitable for this new task." They stopped as two of the Company delivered mugs of tea and coffee to them. The heater modules kept them all from freezing, but a hot drink was always welcome when you looked out at the weather conditions which were rapidly worsening. "We'll need transport and more than a few jeeps," stated Taylor. "Already en route. General White has attached three copters to you for the duration of this taskforce. Lieutenant Rains and his comrades are en route as we speak. They'll be putting down in the Parc de Champagne shortly. It's just south of here and will become your staging ground for now." "What about this place?" "A Gendarmerie detachment will be arriving within the hour to relieve you. Chandra, I want you to assemble the Company and move out. You'll have to make your way to the Parc on foot, but once you're there, you'll have everything you need." Forty-five minutes later they were once again traipsing through the war torn streets, but this time with a newfound enthusiasm. They reached the Parc by noon to find the three copters had already arrived, along with several support craft and transports. Marines guarded the perimeter of the site and made it most welcoming. The corporal on the main entrance through a stone wall saluted as they approached. "As you were!" shouted Chandra. "Ma'am, it's an honour to work alongside the Immortals." She shrugged at the name. It never sat comfortably with her after seeing the deaths of so many friends. She nodded as a greeting and continued past the man towards where Eddie was sat with his feet up and a cup of coffee. He looked more relaxed than ever as he lifted his mug, and a huge smile expanded across his face when he saw the two Majors approaching. "Still alive and kicking!" he yelled. "Same to you, how you been?" asked Taylor. "Ah, you know, got my feathers burnt a few times, but I'm alive to tell the tale. Word is we're on hunting duty, that right?" "You got it," replied Taylor. "Command gives us intel. We respond immediately with a ground assault, supported by artillery and/or air support where needed," Chandra added. "There may Mechs left in this neck of the woods?" "Enough," replied Taylor. Chandra felt the vibration of a message being received on her Mappad. She pulled it from her webbing. The two men were watching and waiting impatiently for news until she looked up at them in surprise. "This is it, our first co-ordinates." "Christ, they aren't hanging around." "We can rest our feet on the boats," she replied and turned to Eddie. "You lot ready to roll?" "Yes, Ma'am," he replied with a smile. "Then get moving, we're wheels up in five." She turned back to the Company who were stood as a mass, awaiting their orders. More than anything they looked bored. "Our first operation has been green lit, we move in five!" A cheer rang out from the troops, but she quickly lifted up her palm to signal for silence. "Section and Platoon leaders to me. The rest of you, mount up!" The NCOs and officers gathered beside the supply dump as the troops stomped past into the copters. "Our first target is in the town of Troyes, a little over a hundred clicks from here. A short journey now we've got wings.

Initial intelligence shows local militia forces encountered a small number of enemy combatants while trying to enter the centre of the town." "Any idea how many?" asked Taylor. "Reports are sketchy, but several creatures have been spotted near the University of Technology. A number of militia and local soldiers have been wounded, but the enemy appears to make no sign of moving." She lifted out her Mappad and tapped a button that projected a holographic map in front of them. "We'll be putting down in this square just one hundred metres from the university. This is not a covert operation. We have superior numbers and firepower. We hit them hard and fast." "Seems pretty simple," said Silva. "I want you and Green's platoons to head for the southern entrance. Yorath and Jones, the east side. Taylor and I will take the north side. The only aim of this mission is to eradicate the enemy presence in the shortest time possible, but don't take any unnecessary risks, and no heroics. Remember, the war is over, and this is just clean up work." "Excuse me, Ma'am, but if the war's over, why are we still fighting?" asked Yorath. She sighed in response and knew it wasn't an easy thing to answer. "These are merely skirmishes. There may come a time when we go to war once again, but not today. We don't know if these enemy forces have been left to hinder our operations and rebuilding, or if it was a result of their rapid withdrawal. Either way, remember, those things are dangerous. Keep your platoons tight, and ensure you have superiority of numbers and firepower in any engagement. Any more questions?" They each studied the map carefully before Green finally spoke up. "Is this to be our lives for the foreseeable future? Cleaning up the country we have already fought and bled over since this began?" "Sure is, but it beats hiding in a trench under day long barrages," she replied. He could not help but agree. "Alright, good luck to you all, let's move." Taylor paced alongside Chandra to Rains' copter. "You surprised as I am that Schulz would be okay with us doing this?" he asked quietly. "The General has been trying to mend fences ever since you got out of the brig. I suggest you at least appear to be doing the same. The further we get from war conditions, the less you'll get away with." "And Dupont?" She sighed at the mere mention of his name. "He'll always be the same asshole he always has been. Fortunately, he isn't in command." "Not of the joint armies no, but let's not forget that we aren't in Germany anymore." She nodded in agreement and made a mental note to watch out for the French General. He'd been dying to get some payback for some time, and she'd be damned if she would let him. "This mission, is that all the information we have?" asked Taylor. "Afraid so. Communication links are still poor, and there isn't the time to investigate further. The civilian population is flooding back into France while it is still littered with dangers. We were not picked because of our investigative abilities. We're a rapid strike force who does not hesitate to jump into combat." "Well, hell, now you put it like that, I feel all warm and fuzzy inside," he laughed. She smiled as she could see the genuine relief on the Major's face, now they'd returned to the soldiering they had become so accustomed to. "How long do you think this will go on?" he asked. "Oh, I figure we'll have the area cleared within an hour." "No, I meant this. This taskforce, clearing France of any present dangers." "With us on the job, not long at all. Why? I thought you wanted to get back in action?" "Only in place of the shit work we have been doing." "Lost your stomach for war?" she asked. "Haven't we all? I didn't think any of us were still here because we enjoyed it." They went silent as they watched the ground zoom past through the glass of the fuselage. Chandra studied his face, trying to understand where his head was at. "And if you could be anywhere doing anything, right now, what would it be?" she asked. "Ah, hell I don't know. I don't know what I want anymore." She could see he genuinely meant it. They all lived in a world of uncertainty, where the possibility of death was a fear each day. "Do you really want to keep serving?" she asked. "What do you mean?" "You must have served far more years than you ever signed up to. The current war has come to an end, and no one would think lesser of you for wanting to give it all up and go on home." "And the next war?" She sighed. "The world fooled itself this last century. Thinking there could ever be an end to war when it is in our nature. There will always be another battle to fight, but there'll be new soldiers to do it." He sat back and thought about it for a moment. It was the first time he had given some genuine thought to handing in his papers since joining the Corps. *Has it really gotten that bad?* He asked himself. He nodded to himself as he answered his own question and continued on. "Na, I couldn't leave you all now. How could I go home without my friends? This is my family." "Alright, then, you're stuck with us." Chandra was contented that Taylor's heart was

still in it. She sighed in relief at the thought. She couldn't bear to lose another close friend and ally. The rest of the short journey went by in almost silence as they soared south in the lightning fast copters. Before they had even had time to settle down and rest, Eddie was calling out over the intercom. "Troyes is up ahead. We'll be landing in two." Chandra leapt to her feet and took hold of the grab handle above. "Remember, this is no stand up fight. We're on the hunt. Stay alert, and watch out for traps, bombs and potential ambush zones!" she shouted. The front thrusters kicked in hard as Eddie brought them in for an abrupt and death defying landing. Taylor could just see out through the cockpit as they narrowly brushed the edge of a tree line and suddenly felt as if the whole craft was cushioned. Chandra rocked to one side but held on firm to the grab handle as the rapid decrease in speed jolted them all forward. The undercarriage touched down lightly, and Chandra immediately punched the door release. "Lets go!" she ordered. They had seen no sign of the enemy, but they all knew how vulnerable they were in a bird on the ground; especially after the roar of their engines would have notified all to their presence. Taylor leapt first from the door, so much so that he missed the ramp and hit the ground running. His eyes took a moment to adjust to the gleaming light bouncing off the thin sheet of snow that covered the park. He reached an old stone wall and knelt down beside it to survey their surroundings. Silence overcame the area as all crouched and awaited their orders. Chandra half expected to land in a hot LZ and to have to hit the ground shooting. Despite the relief of the silence, it also made her nervous. She got to her feet and rushed to the wall where Taylor was waiting. "I don't like this." "Why? Feels like we're right back to our training scenarios. These are the kind of actions are we trained for. We never expected to be slogging it out in trenches." "Maybe that's it, what we have become accustomed to. Either way, Mechs fight in open combat, this feels off." "Aliens invaded our fucking planet. It all feels off." She smiled in response and was glad of his cool headedness. "Back when this was a total war, we accepted casualties as a daily part of life. Those days are over, you hear me?" she whispered. "I hear ya," he replied. She looked around to the other platoon commanders and nodded for them to continue as planned. The Company arose after just a few hand signals and hushed orders. Taylor and Chandra advanced just a few metres apart with their platoons surrounding them. They quickly exited the park and were within sight of the university building. The vast complex was in stark contrast to the historical beauty of the stone churches and shopping quarter around it. The walls were of reinforced and mirrored Perspex. "No visibility in and a hard outer shell, not a bad defensive position," said Taylor. Chandra drew them to a quick halt as she tried to identify what was on the ground near the entrance. She lifted her rifle and peered down the scope. The body of a dead civilian lay in a pool of blood. It didn't shock her after the bloodshed they had witnessed, but she did sigh at the thought of civilians being killed while trying to rebuild their lives. "This certainly looks like the place." She scanned the area and quickly found two trails of blood where human casualties had been dragged away. The ground and building beside the scene had familiar scorch marks where energy pulses had smashed into the stonework. "Doesn't make any sense," said Taylor. "I don't think they meant to leave these soldiers behind. They're just trying to survive," replied Chandra. "You make them sound almost human." "How would you feel if your armies had left you to die like this?" She stopped herself as she remembered Taylor's experience of just that. As the shock left his face, he finally nodded in agreement. "How do you want to play this?" he asked. "They must surely know we're here, so we have no choice but to hit them hard and quickly." She tapped her radio mic and was surprised to see it was working. "No jamming equipment?" she asked in surprise. "All units breach, go, go, go!" She leapt to her feet and rushed for the main entrance of the building with the others following closely. Experience of the enemy had taught them to stick close to concentrate their fire. Just as they got within a few metres of the entrance, the Perspex shattered as a pulse ripped through the doors. Chandra rolled and tumbled against a brick wall that surrounded the complex. Taylor smashed into the wall beside him as other pulses rushed overhead. "Not the best welcome we've ever had!" yelled Taylor. Gunfire rang out as the Company poured fire into the entrance of the building, bringing down much of the frontage. Taylor peered out from cover and quickly identified the Mechs inside. "I see three targets. Eleven and one o'clock." "Looks like they're dug in there pretty good," replied Chandra. "We could call in a strike, flatten the complex? Not like there is any risk civilians." "No, this country has been

demolished enough already. The people need some hope that they can return to their old lives." "Alright, no air support, at least we're used to it now," he replied. The two of them rose up and fired several controlled bursts into the atrium that was now fully visible from the street. They could make out movement as the Mechs disappeared from sight. "They're falling back!" Monty called out. "Forward!" Chandra ordered. They leapt forward and were quick to utilise the opportunity to get inside. Their boots trampled over the mound of shattered Perspex as it crunched under foot. They reached the long welcome desk from where the Mechs had defended and hunkered down for cover. They expected a continuation of the fight, but the spacious atrium was almost silent as the troops settled down into position. "Not much of a defence. What the fuck is going on?" whispered Chandra. "Would you have stood against these odds?" "Green, report," she asked. "We've entered the complex, no contact, over." "Jones, report." "Light resistance, one enemy down, and we're pursuing another, over." She shook her head. "This all just seems too easy." Taylor nodded in agreement. "All units proceed with caution." Taylor stepped up and led his platoon forward with Chandra just a few metres away. He quickly caught sight of a fine trail of blue blood running down a broad corridor further into the huge complex. The two platoons continued after the blood in two columns. The blood trail grew as they reached the entrance to a conference hall. Taylor turned and signalled for them to form up by the entrance. He peered around the doorway and could see the wounded creature laid out on a broad table with the other two trying to stop the bleeding. The injured creature writhed in pain but made no sound as the other two used what looked like heat torches to seal a wound. The scene made him freeze for a moment. It was eerily reminiscent of scenes that had become familiar to him during the war, but never of the enemy casualties. He looked away for a moment. He couldn't help but feel it was wrong to try and harm them when they were helping a fallen comrade. For the first time ever, he was beginning to see them as soldiers, rather than faceless aliens. As he sighed at the idea of the death and loss on both sides, his helmet tapped the doorframe. He quickly looked up to see the Mechs inside the room were reaching for their weapons. Taylor snapped out of his hazy state and jumped through the open doorway. His rifle was firing before his second foot was through the doorway. The first Mech was hit by half a dozen rounds to the chest, and it smashed down onto the hard floor. Just as the other was lifting its weapon to fire, it too was riddled with gunfire from the Major's platoon as one by one they rushed into the hall. Gunfire ripped through the previously tranquil room as sparks flew, and the last creature finally slumped heavily to the ground. Taylor lowered his rifle and stepped closely towards the wounded Mech on the table. He could see it posed no threat to him and made no attempt to fight. Chandra stepped through into the room to witness herself what had unfolded. She stopped and gasped at the sight of the creature taking its last few breaths. Its helmet visor was off, and they could see the struggle to breathe until it finally gave up and laid to rest. "It seems..." "What?" Taylor asked. "So human." Taylor could do nothing but stare at the corpse. The room was silent as the dozen other soldiers who had entered stood solemnly at the bloody sight before them. "We've got contact, Dining Hall B, floor two!" yelled Jones down the mic. They could hear gunfire over the transmission and the faint echoes through the building. "Enough, let's get on mission," whispered Chandra. They turned and rushed out the door together. Boots echoed down the long corridor as they jogged at the fastest pace they could risk in an urban combat zone. Taylor stopped as he noticed a map of the facilities on a wall beside them. "Two entrances to that hall, Jones probably went in through the eastern entrance." "Good, head to the other door. Lead the way!" He leapt forward and picked up the pace. They were all well aware that it wasn't sensible to rush into danger, but neither could they leave their comrades alone. Taylor reached the stairwell and launched up it three steps at a time. The gunfire was close now. Light seeped out from under a doorway up ahead as the guns roared. The walls were solid; they couldn't see into the room. Taylor leapt to the other side of the doorway and beckoned for the others to form up either side, ready to breach. Within a second, they were in position. "Three, two, one! Taylor shouted. His voice could barely be heard over the battle that was being fought within. He fired two shots into the locking mechanism, as did Lam on the opposite side. The large bore armour-piercing rounds tore through the centre of the double doors, leaving a hole the size of a football. "Go!" he ordered. The two of them barged through the door like raging bulls, forcing the doors to launch from their

hinges. Taylor spotted the dug in Mechs immediately and could see they had a good view of the creatures. Despite this, he continued to spread out into the room to allow further troops to join the fight. He rushed up and crouched behind a broad counter, lifting his rifle to fire. Gunfire cracked behind him, and the advancing troops fired as they passed through the blown entrance. Taylor could see Jones' platoon was dug in the other end of the room and unable to advance. He took aim at the nearest creature. He had a clear view of its flank, fired three rounds into its chest, and a last one through its faceplate as it twitched from the first three. Out of the corner of his eye Mitch could see the other Mechs taking cover. "Grenades!" he shouted. He pulled a frag grenade from his webbing and twisted the cap. He looked around to see that three others were waiting for his command. "Now!" The four grenades were launched into the air in almost perfect synchronisation and tumbled over into the Mech positions. They hunkered down for cover as the explosions shook the room, and part of the ceiling near them caved in. Taylor jumped up and leapt over the counter top, advancing on the enemy positions with his rifle at the ready. Chandra looked over the defences to see Mitch had jumped ahead quicker than any of them were able to follow. She saw him fire two shots into the ground, and as she drew nearer, she could see the body of one of the creatures lying lifeless at his feet. Another lay dead close by. She caught a glimpse of movement, turned quickly, and fired at another creature that was trying to get up from the ground. She nodded at Mitch, and they both knew each other's thoughts. The grenades were not powerful enough for the enemy they were fighting, and they were not going to take the chance that any had survived. The two officers moved up to the bodies of the other two creatures and fired several rounds through each of their faceplates until they were satisfied it was over. They stood for a moment, marvelling at their work as Captain Jones approached their positions. Before he could open his mouth, a signal came over their intercom from Lieutenant Green. "Tracking three hostiles into the basement in the north west of the building, over." "Hold tight, we're coming," replied Chandra. She turned and led the way without as much as a word to the troops. As they jogged down the corridors to meet with the others, she noticed specs of blue blood on her arm. Taylor also saw where the spray had coated both of them. He looked at it at first with disgust and then sadness. He was reminded of the scene in the conference hall just minutes before. Up ahead, they could see Green and Silva, and they had a wounded soldier being attended to. "Any other casualties?" she asked. "No, just one wounded. He'll be fine," replied Green. "Good." She looked down at the stairwell close by. It appeared to disappear into darkness. "This where you last saw them?" "Yes, Ma'am." "Any other sightings of the enemy?" He shook his head. "Jones, you and Yorath are to continue to sweep the rest of this building. Get on it." The Captain nodded and liaised quickly with Yorath before rushing off to continue his search. "Any other ways down there?" asked Chandra. "One fire escape from what I can see." Taylor looked over at the doorway to a nearby elevator. "What about that? It goes down below?" Chandra lifted up her Mappad and carefully studied the limited diagrams they had been given of the layout. "Not that one, but it looks like there is a freight elevator not far from here." "I'll take it," replied Taylor. "Alright, Green you'll take the stairs, but wait for our breach. Silva, you're with me." Parker had been listening and butted in. "We can't use that elevator. It will give us away in seconds." "I don't intend to ride it down," replied Taylor with a smile. "Come on, let's move." He turned to move out, but Chandra stopped him. "Confirm when you're in position and ready to go. Green, you wait ten seconds after our breach. That stairwell could be hell." Taylor nodded in agreement and quickly made his way for the elevator. After passing through a storage area, they found what they were looking for. He drew out his Assegai and thrust it into the join between the doors. The torch style blade cut a hole and broke the seal quickly. He levered open the door and took a look inside. "Good, it's up on one of the upper floors." He reached for the emergency stop lever to ensure it stayed put before looking into the most unwelcoming abyss. "We go down in twos the second we hear that breach, got it?" They nodded as Parker forced her way to the front. He already knew he could not dissuade her from being the first in. "We're in position and ready on your signal," he called down the radio.

‘Battle Earth’ is an epic science fiction series that tells of humanity's desperate struggle to survive against an overwhelming alien invasion. A futuristic sci-fi action adventure series that chronicles vast bloody battles following humanity’s first reach into the stars. This compendium edition contains the full text of books four, five and six in the series.

Battle Earth IV

The alien invaders were driven from Earth, but isolated pockets continue to hold out and hinder the recovery effort. Major Mitch Taylor’s Inter-Allied Company is reorganised into a rapid response taskforce to seek out and destroy all remaining threats. However, when Ramstein is obliterated in an aerial attack, they know that the battle for Earth is not over. With enemy forces remaining in the solar system, the armies of Earth have no choice but to rally together and make an assault against the Moon to secure the safety of their planet.

Battle Earth V

The alien invaders were crushed on Earth and driven to the edges of the Solar System, but the discovery of how they reached Earth uncovers a deadly threat that must be overcome. Major Mitch Taylor's Inter-Allied force, combined with masses of troops and a vast Navy, assembles to take the battle to the enemy in their own lands before they can recover from their losses.

Battle Earth VI

The counterattack into enemy territory proved the aliens were far stronger than the humans thought. Whilst many got on with their lives in the hope the aliens would not return, Colonel Mitch Taylor knew better. No longer seeking to occupy Earth, the enemy Lord Demiran wants revenge. This time he means to obliterate Earth with a new terrifying weapon of mass destruction that will mean extinction for the human race.

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