

THE WAR OF ETERNITY

— BOOK ONE —

PRELUDE

CHRISTOPHER ARNDT

BRANDON PEAT

AN EXCERPT

AESGAR

KNOWN TERRITORY
CIRCA 2898 A.U.



THE UNKNOWN

THE FRINGE

• ICHTHYON

• ELURIA

• LAEGOS

THE COR

TERRA NOVA

TERRA NOVA
EMPIRE



PROLOGUE

“AND SO IT ENDS.”

A man and a dragon stood in a pale crystal room.

The man held a glowing object in his arms. Roughly six feet long and one foot tall, its nature was concealed by a shroud draped over it. The man placed the shrouded object on a stone slab in the middle of the room, then bowed briefly.

The orange-gold dragon gave a rumble from deep in his throat. “The people of Aesgarr werre nearrly destroyed overr this.”

“It was the right decision to make. Yet more death was averted,” replied the man. “This Ashtar will fade from memory. Aesgar will change. All will be renewed in time.”

The dragon slowly shook his head, smoke curling from his nostrils. “Not all will forrget such powerr.”

The man and dragon strode quietly up the stairs leading out of the chamber, and two huge stone doors swung shut with a loud *clang*.



T H R E E T H O U S A N D

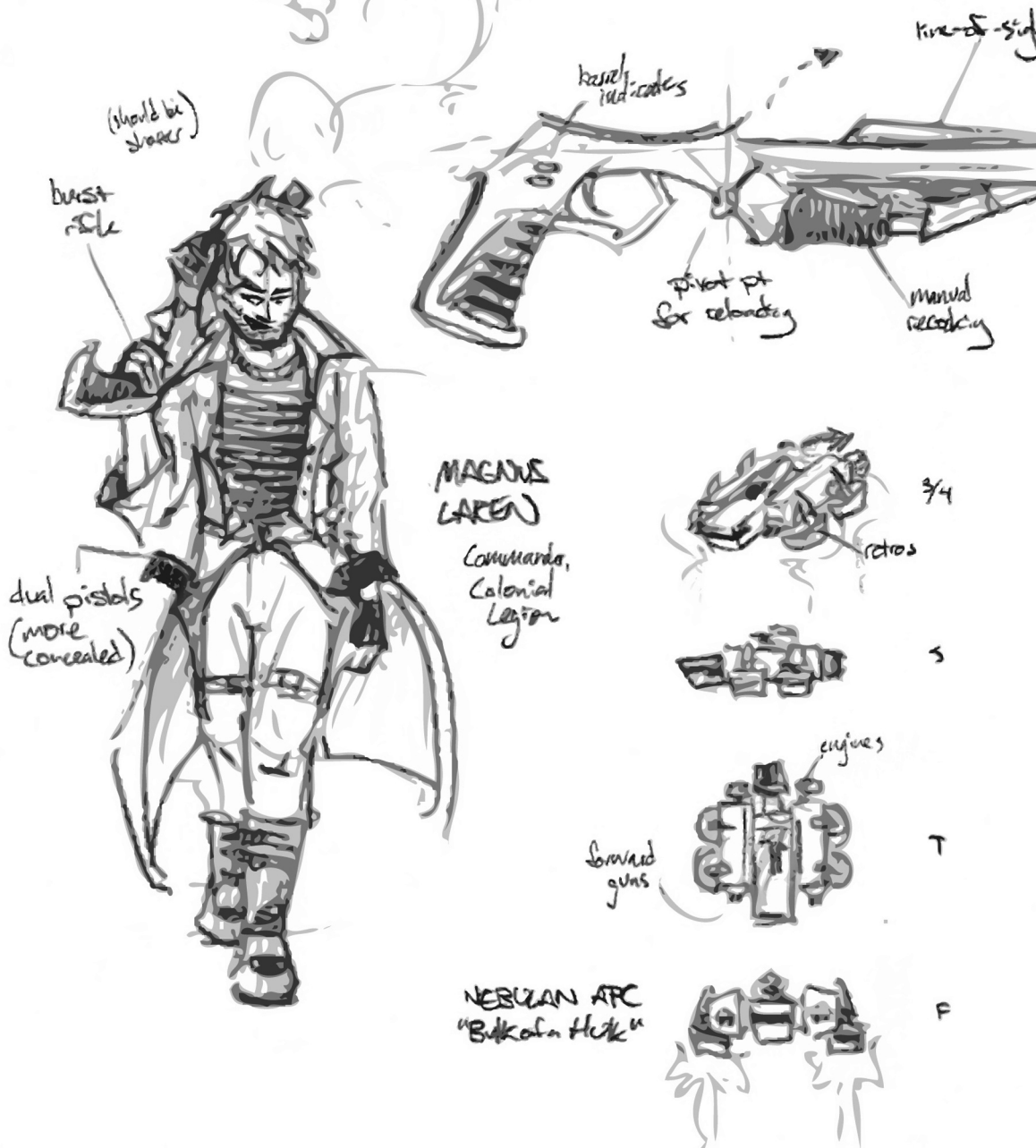
Y E A R S L A T E R . . .

Colonial Legion
unit patch

KOROBZINYAL

CHAPTER I

ANOTHER DAY





HOME...

Metal clanking against metal, the sound of rifles banging against walls and seats.

It takes so long to get back anymore...

Rifles that glowed in the dim blue lighting of the small room.

Soldiers, two dozen, armed to the teeth.

A ragged company with a haphazard assortment of equipment and armor, their one common denominator a diamond-shaped patch: 136th COLONIAL (KORODZINYAL).

The roar of sublight engines, barely muted through a vibrating bulkhead.

A voice over the intercom. "Ten seconds!"

Too damn long. Just get us on the ground.

Weapons clicked. Power cells were slapped into rifles. Breathing grew heavy and fast.

The moment seemed to last hours.

It never changes.

That uncomfortable return to combat that inevitably faced soldiers - especially those in the military of the Nebulan Star Empire.

The room rocked. Bulkheads creaked. The hum of the engines began to die down. And suddenly the hatch flung wide.

A pair of deep-set cobalt eyes snapped open. The young man shot up from his seat and drew a sleek rifle whose eager gleam matched his own.

Finally home!

He rushed out of the hatch, his unit behind him.

A hail of brilliant white spheres fell from the sky, crashing down around the landing zone. The soldiers scattered to avoid destruction.

The civilians rushing toward the landing craft for refuge were not so fortunate.

Charred body parts flew in all directions, some bursting into clouds of ash as they hit the cold metal roadway. One civilian was hit directly, incinerating instantly.

The violet-haired man smiled. *A few less bombs for us, then.*

The bombing run subsided, and the unit regrouped.

"Second squad, cover the right flank and secure the landing zone; we need to get a perimeter set up immediately! First squad, with me!" the man shouted into his headset.

Half the unit broke off and rushed to the right, laying down suppressive fire of white-hot energy beams toward the charred city buildings. Starfighters raced across the sky, streams of searing light flashing between them. More bombs fell in the distance, turning whole sections of the city into flaming debris storms. The screams of terrified civilians echoed in every direction as they fled or died.

The violet-haired man's eyes narrowed – annoyed, predatory.

Civs. The bane of any combat situation. An obstacle every city-based operation had to overcome. And they were *everywhere*, running straight toward him and his units.

Swearing, he tapped his headset. "I don't care how you do it, get these ruggin civs out of my field of fire!"

"We can't short of shooting them, sir!"

"Clear my damn field! The Terrans can collect their own."

But enemy fire beat him to the punch. Multicolored beams flashed from every street and from every pile of rubble, tearing fleeing citizens apart in a blaze of sparks and burned flesh. A flurry of bolts raced at the purple-haired man and his squad, but he evaded, diving down behind a fallen slab of burning metal.

Two of his slower men were ripped to pieces.

Two less useless heaps slowing the squad down.

Looking around, he shouted again into his comm. "It's too hot down here! Keep up a suppressing fire to cover the APCs so we still have a ride out!"

His squad shouted acknowledgement and began unleashing their own barrage against the unseen enemy.

The man gave a slight sigh. With their foothold so easily gained, the rest was likely to be busy work. That's what Colonial missions really were anymore. No real threats had challenged the Nebulan or

Terra Nova Empires since the peace accord ten years ago.

The landing craft – blocky vessels with four large, rotating engines – unloaded the last of the regiment into what had once been a city plaza. Troops rushed out in all directions, firing as they came. Their complements deployed, the transports themselves began to lift off.

But heavy weapons fire erupted from one of the city streets. A volley of rockets streaked through the air, bursting against an APC and ripping open its heavily armored side. Flames blasted from every hatch as the APC plummeted to the ground in a violent explosion. Shrapnel flew in all direction, crushing many soldiers and impaling others.

The man nodded. *I'm almost impressed. Gives me hope for a particle of challenge this time.*

The other APCs managed to escape the landing zone intact and took their vengeance upon the enemy, unleashing a storm of anti-personnel cannon fire from their forward weapons array. The rain of death pierced even the heaviest of enemy positions.

A short, powerfully-built soldier with a thick beard yelled to the purple-haired man. “Magnus, we’re getting prelim reports now! Says they ain’t even taking the colony, just leveling it building by building!” His rough voice could be heard clearly even over the raging battle.

A burst of light raced by the short man’s head. In one fluid motion, Magnus snapped up, aimed, and fired a burst of fiery gold energy that relieved the attacker of his cranium. Magnus quickly dove back down and pressed up against the heated metal of their defense.

“Good. That just makes our job more fun – no need for subtlety.” Magnus slid carefully toward the right edge of their makeshift barricade. “*Alaric!*” he called to the stout soldier. “Bring that repeater up here and get on that northwest street!”

Edging his way toward Magnus, Alaric hefted a large assault cannon – a heavy rotating plasma turret with eight barrels. Magnus tapped several keys on a datapad built into his left forearm plating, sending Alaric the vector he needed. Lights flashed on Alaric’s own datapad, and he nodded readiness.

“Squad, grenades and cover fire...*NOW!*” Magnus shouted to his troops.

Each plucked a random explosive from some part of their jumpsuit – no two soldiers seemed to have the same equipment – and armed it. In perfect unison they hurled the explosives up and over their position toward the northwestern street. Some burst on contact in a flurry of

small, superheated shards, while others erupted forward into a wall of fire that consumed everything in its path.

Like all things Colonial, no uniformity.

Then the troops rose up slightly and began firing from their positions. As they forced the enemy down, drawing their fire, Alaric hefted his massive cannon and rushed from his cover to a nearby blast crater. He dove into the shallow hole of hot, mangled metal, settling his cannon over the rim. Squinting into the targeting sensor, he locked onto the enemy position and fired, unleashing a loud torrent of blue energy bolts. The cannon fired so quickly that the barrage sounded like one continuous shot, and the debris pile the enemy was using for cover began to melt.

This model of assault cannon was normally fitted on tanks as anti-personnel armament – and Alaric handled the heavy weapon like a carbine.

The other troops in Magnus' squad cheered loudly at the sight, even as they watched men being cut in half or partially melted away.

Magnus himself allowed a slight grin at the spectacle.

Suddenly a flash of light dropped near Alaric, briefly blinding the squad. Unfazed, Magnus peered past his beleaguered ally, shouting into his comm while tapping his datapad. "They're pegging you for mortar fire. Sending coordinates."

Alaric quickly scanned the location and reached behind his shoulder, drawing another weapon –smaller, with a sleek rounded shape. Setting it on his shoulder, Alaric quickly entered the coordinates and glanced into the weapon's auto-targeting scope. He stood, aimed, and fired in one smooth motion. A burst like a dazzling star launched from the barrel, turning the enemy position into a tower of flames. Men were tossed from their places like leaves in a gale.

Again Magnus' squad cheered.

"Alright, squad, stow it! We've still got plenty more to fry!" Magnus ordered.

Quickly assuming their covering positions, the squad prepared to press forward, into the heart of the battle.

Magnus smiled again.



A blackened, mangled shape fell onto a pile of similarly burnt objects, crackling and partially disintegrating into ash. A grimy young woman in a leather jumpsuit and jacket rubbed her hands together, shaking the dirt and ash off her cutoff gloves.

"Well, that's the last of them," she said, breathing a sigh. "I hate raiders, especially the ones that hit just outside our territory. Honestly, don't people have anything better to do than try to terrorize colonists?"

Magnus flopped against the heap of carbonized corpses with a sickening series of crackles. "At least they were well-armed. We actually had to try this time. I don't mind a little exercise here and there." He rubbed the back of his neck and squinted his eyes. "What planet is this, anyway?"

The woman narrowed her eyes – pure gold against her deathly pale skin. "Ferrith, I think. Where the phrase 'duck and cover' apparently has no meaning."

Magnus grinned. "*Had* no meaning." He elbowed the heap.

"They singed my beard..." Alaric grumbled, stroking a blackened part of his long, carefully tended brown beard.

The woman grinned and gave a low laugh. "Our greatest casualty?"

Alaric growled.

"I think it is, Ivia," Magnus interjected. "He really goes berserk on the enemy when they have the *audacity* to hit the beard, which means he'll probably kill most of what we encounter before we can fire a shot. But if he's got no beard left after that, we don't have our berserker."

"Then perhaps we should see to making more of a man out of *you* then, laddie! Get working on that pathetic stubble!" the stout soldier proclaimed, slapping Magnus on the back.

"Too bad they hit our medic this time." Ivia crossed her arms and nudged what seemed to be a headless torso with her boot.

"It's not like he could have done anything for that poor NCF who got vaped right off the ramp...or his buddy who left only a lump of metal to send back." An unnerving smile touched Magnus' lips. "We don't even get bagged or boxed anymore. How many down this time anyway?"

Checking the power cells and barrels of his heavy gatling cannon, Alaric quickly stole a glance at his forearm datapad. "Seven. Six dead, one wounded." The pad beeped. "And 124 raiders killed, one spared for interrogation."

Magnus yawned, lazily stretching his armored body. Their landing zone looked much different than it had when their unit had

first landed. Most of the buildings had been razed to the ground. Bodies were piled across some of the intersecting roads, the horrible reek of burned flesh and equipment wafting through the air. Several squads of soldiers were busy inspecting the twisted mass of corpses: a handful their own, some civilians, and some the raiders.

All in a day's work for the Colonial Legion.

Their comm sets buzzed. "Commander Laren."

"Laren here."

"Everything's secured, sir. Request permission to begin withdrawal."

"Hold for now. Who are we supposed to report to on this mudball?"

"The colony's security chief is coming for a debriefing, sir."

Ivia rolled her eyes.

"Copy that. Make sure everything is in order; we'll be leaving soon. Laren out." He leaned his head back into his gloved hands and closed his cobalt eyes.

Ivia stretched again and ran her hand through her luxuriously thick red hair. "I hate Terra Nova. They're the foremost power in the galaxy and they can't even properly defend their outlying Fringe colonies. Maybe the Scales should start thinking about that."

Magnus shrugged. "Those dragons practically rule these Terran men with impunity. Besides, if they did that, we'd have less to do."

Alaric looked up from cleaning his assault gun and flashed a wicked grin. "How much do you think we should charge them for this one?"



"That's extortion!" exclaimed the Terra Nova security chief.

The man had arrived half a standard hour late – probably, as Magnus believed, in an attempt to humble and irritate him. By means of reply, Magnus met him while lying upside down on the hill of bodies. Six Terra Nova troopers accompanied the official, their plated body armor clicking together in cadence to their step. The low number of troops was not surprising considering Ferrith's remote location; soldiers were in high demand in the Fringe regions, and not deployed lightly.

The security chief had likely intended to greet Magnus and his two companions with the usual shallow salutes and expressions of thanks. But Magnus knew that the officer – like any true-blooded Terra Nova official – despised Nebulans, military personnel in particular. It was genetic by this point. Fifteen hundred years of distrust between conflicting species weren't about to vanish thanks to one act of military aid from the Nebulans.

And even though the Colonial Legion was not officially part of the Nebulan armed forces – it often performed regular assignments, but maintained an unprecedented degree of autonomy – it was not a galactic secret that Nebulan Military Command exerted influence over their operations. Thus they were hated by affiliation.

And Magnus' negotiations had not endeared them any more to the appalled Terra Novan.

"We answered your distress signal, which stated that *any* help available come to your aid." Magnus glanced back at Ivia and Alaric. "Isn't that right, Lieutenant Commander Vaskes?"

Ivia nodded.

"Lieutenant Alaric?"

Again a nod of agreement.

"You seemed in dire need, sir, and we came to your aid, but unfortunately there is a fee for our service," Magnus continued. "And our standard rate is fifty thousand per kill."

"I know of no *fee* that comes with the military assistance of the Nebulan Empire," the officer again protested.

Ivia leaned in, blinking slowly. Her inner golden nictitating eyelids retracted, giving the officer a clear view of her pure black eyes underneath. They bore through him like a plasma beam as a sadistic smile grew on her own face. "Ah, but we aren't Nebulans, now are we, sir?"

The officer spat at Ivia's feet. "I won't be mocked by a *Chorodemon* shlet!"

Magnus eased out his arm in restraint even before Ivia lunged forward and held her back, mere inches away from the Terra Novan. "Sir, one more racial slur against my Chorodemarii second-in-command or any member of the Colonial Legion and I will not be held responsible for the consequences." He shot Ivia a quick glance, calming her enough to release his grip, then rolled up onto his feet and turned to face the official again, dusting ash off himself in the process. "For that disrespect toward your saviors, I feel obligated to let you know:

fifty thousand is the standard fee for kills *alone*. We haven't yet tallied reimbursement costs for losses in equipment and NCFs."

"NCFs? What are those? You'd tack on additional costs for something I am not even familiar with?!"

"NCFs are highly valuable resources —"

"New Cannon Fodder. That's the Colonial Legion's abbreviation for new unit recruits," came a synthesized voice.

Magnus and his companions glanced to see a group of soldiers approaching. Covered in coal-black armor from head to toe, a small cloak hung from their upper armor plating through their belts. Their helmets completely covered their heads, vision fed to them through an intimidating Y-shaped sensor plate fitted around the eyes and chin. A crest adorned the top of each helmet, with another on the right pauldron of the lead soldier; along with the silver chevron on his helmet, this distinguished him as commanding officer.

Each soldier carried a standardized SZ-34 plasma rifle. All walked in perfect unison. Nebulan Army regulars.

"And who might you be?" the Terra Nova official snapped, his hatred of Nebulans growing by the moment.

"I'm commanding officer of the Nebulan relief force: Colonel Kraedar from the Ansgard Division, Second Brigade, Fourth Regiment. We'll be relieving the Colonials until Terra Nova forces arrive in two days." The masked colonel looked at Magnus. "And this illegal attempt at extortion will go on your record, Commander Laren. You are seriously overstepping the bounds of your authority."

They never wasted a breath.

Magnus raised his arms in a gesture of innocence. "What authority? I'm not a Nebulan by blood, and sure as *kresh* not a Nebulan soldier either!" He gave a rusty bow and salute.

The glare of the armored figure was apparent even through his faceplate.

"The Colonial Legion!" the Terra Nova chief spat. "Rebels and brigands paid by the Nebs to cause trouble, I think!"

Magnus smirked. "Well, I can't deny —"

At a signal from Kraedar, the Nebulan soldiers trained their rifles on Magnus and his companions.

"That works, too..." Magnus said, turning and ambling away with a strut in his step.

Ivia and Alaric followed.

"One of these days, someone's just going to shoot you, you know," Ivia snickered.

Magnus shrugged.

"Nov kozyiv av hif takashka, davna, Khazam?" Kraedar called out to him.

A smile creased Magnus' face. "As per orders, Colonel."

The officer continued conversing quietly with the Terra Nova security chief as Magnus and his fellows continued on.

Magnus' comm buzzed again. "Commander Laren, we've found some stragglers and survivors around the outer rim of the battle zone."

Magnus sighed. "Kill 'em."

"Sir?"

"Command only ordered us to leave at least *one* alive for interrogation – we've already done that," replied Magnus. "Besides, we wouldn't want any surprises to sneak up on our dear Terra Nova friends, would we?"

A brief silence followed.

"No, sir," the voice finally replied.

"*Straggler, southwest crossing!*" cried a soldier in the distance.

Gripping his double-barreled burst rifle, Magnus swung around and took quick aim at the only moving person on the bridge spanning two crushed buildings. Barely bothering to track his target, Magnus squeezed the trigger. The blinding golden burst from his energy shotgun all but cut the fleeing man in two, completely scorching his midsection.

Lowering his rifle, Magnus looked over at Alaric and Ivia. "What's it up to now? 125?"

"For now, at least," Alaric replied.

"Do you enjoy the sight of blood for its own sake, Mag?" Ivia asked, a crooked smile on her face.

The commander shook his head and propped his rifle against his shoulder. "Not really. Doesn't bother me, though. I figure they pay me to kill, send me to die, so I might as well do what I'm good at."

It's good to be home.

nov kozyiv av hif takashka, davna, Khazam?: Akreshna (the standard Nebulan language) for you kept one alive for interrogation, correct, Commander?

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