



HYBRID

FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE

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HYBRID

BOOK ONE

of

THE GUNNARSSON CHRONICLES

Control yourself...

Alea slowly unbuttoned Max's coarse, handcrafted tunic, gradually exposing his bare chest.

"Um, is this really necessary?" he asked the alluring woman as she leaned into him, crushing her large bosom into his left shoulder. She smelled nice. Like strawberries. And he might have felt differently about his situation had he not been bound to his chair by quadrinium chains and leather straps.

"Yes, it is necessary, Max. Please look at the placard on the wall."

"Fine. What is it?"

"It is the oath of office for Dominion commanders. They are just words, but you shall need to be able to read this while in your Battle Form."

"And why would I convert to that in the first—"

Alea punched him in the mouth before he could even finish his question. Blood trickled down his lip. His vision tunneled. His heart rate soared.

"Control yourself, Max. Control the change," she whispered in a sugary-sweet voice that betrayed the savagery of her blows, which were repeated and brutal.

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

- Arthur C. Clarke

One

Max

Córdoba

April 3, 2819 C.E.

Sideways rain seared through the lower atmosphere like blue steel razors, accompanied by howling, torturous winds that physically moved structures, shredded trees and buffeted bodies of water, without mercy or compunction.

But this wasn't unusual.

Every winter it was the same. Nature was in cleanup mode, purging itself of the weak. Anything unfortunate enough to not have been battened down became foodstuffs to the terrifying power of a weather system that, despite scientific advances, was still uncontrollable, insatiable and always hungry—especially during the cold months; those dark days and nights when any

creature of even limited intelligence would hide away and wait out the screaming tempest in the relative safety of an underground hole, a cave, or even the middle of a hypercrete reinforced warehouse, located in a seedy and rather dangerous part of eastern Córdoba.

In such a structure, and nearly delirious from lack of sleep, Max Gunnarsson, PhD was counting on nature's noisy tantrum and blaring rock music to keep him awake, and to perhaps provide him cover from the unnatural; the cold embrace of mechanized death. He had been working frantically throughout the devil night for good reason, loading, lifting, welding, trying to put the final touches on his project. His forbidden mission.

Upon creating the Verneuil-fused connection between two crystals on a deuterium regulation component, the young scientist removed his welder's mask, revealing a rather prominent five-o'clock shadow, messy, greasy dark brown hair, a moderately tanned complexion and hazel eyes. Quite normal for someone of the Córdoba region—sans the gleaming greasiness of his hair, which was the result of working in a maniacal frenzy for thirty-six straight hours.

Before he could brush his overgrown bangs away from his eyes, a familiar, archaic ringing sound called out, barely audible.

Crap. Not her. Not now.

Max removed the silvery mesh glove from his left hand, rotated his wrist upward and called out loudly:

"Music Off."

Hesitantly, he pressed his middle and ring fingers into his palm, activating the call.

"Hey there. Kinda busy at the moment."

"Max, why can't you tell me what you are doing?"

Max stared blankly at the coral-tinted holographic comm interface floating above his wrist. Sighing, he said, "It's okay, Mom. It'll all work out."

He watched his mother's aged, yet still-beautiful face as it contorted at his answer, bordering on anger; the three-dimensional imagery of her head flickering, most probably due to electromagnetic atmospheric disturbances from the seasonal storms that raged outside.

"¡Vos sabés muy bien que me preocupás!"

"I—" Max gulped. He paused. Struggling for words, he continued, "I really don't mean to worry you. This is gonna work. I swear!"

"Yo sé, cariño, pero... what about your job? You have worked so hard for so many years. You could lose everything."

His head dropping slightly, he sighed. "Mom, when I'm done, not only will I still have my job, I'll get a promotion. Just... trust me, okay?"

"Bueno, amorcito. Te quiero más que podés imaginar."

"I love you, too. See you soon."

Deactivating his dermis-embedded holographic comm by lightly clenching his left fist, Max disconnected the call and went back to feeling alone. Then he heard a metallic squall outside, suddenly pounding the side of his warehouse. He needed a distraction from his sadness, as well as the cacophony mere meters away.

Having finished the modification for the last electronic piece required for his navigational computer, Max was nearly ready to dive into the deep, dark unknown. But time is an invisible, soulless master. His mother had provided a distraction for him, telling his superiors he was ill and in bed. He had even cut his hair and sprinkled it over a heated mannequin he had left in his room, under the covers of his bed, just in case a long-range DNA scan was shot from outside. A satellite looking from low orbit would identify two heat signatures inside the compound he had called home for nearly his entire life. However, something more up close and personal would show a human female in one room, with a dummy wrapped in an electrical blanket in another. 29th century surveillance was rather intrusive, to the point of even knowing what you had consumed for breakfast, so he knew his hastily planned hoax wouldn't hold out for very long. But the one overriding and massively terrifying problem was that he didn't know whether he had hours or minutes left. Or even seconds.

Max had chosen this particular day very much on purpose. Baker Day was the second-most important holiday on the planet, after Constitution Day. So, with so many festivities happening worldwide, he was hopeful there would be enough distractions for the authorities, resulting in his project going undetected. The unforecasted storm outside merely assisted in his attempted stratagem. A bit of luck from the gods, if any indeed existed.

Almost done.

In the center of this rather unimpressive, yet thankfully sturdy building was the subject of (hopefully) secret controversy — an aged, medium-sized shuttlecraft, dull-gray, ten meters in length.

The shuttle itself was not slick or attractive by any means. It was built in the Rio Santiago Shipyard sixty-five years earlier, having been used as a

cargo transport during bicentennial celebrations, ferrying supplies between various planetary locations and Luna, upon which a rather robust and thriving society had been built.

However, it wasn't the shuttle that was illegal, per se. Rather, what was bolted onto the top of the craft was the unlawful part.

When he had purchased the vessel, it was old and in a state of disrepair; barely operable. It was also nearly unable to make the voyage from Santiago to Córdoba, especially given the poor seasonal weather in the southern hemisphere. But, after numerous weekend repairs and upgrades, he had acquired a good deal of affection for it, especially as it could communicate with him. And Max had questions that needed to be answered.

"Music off."

Only the elemental disharmony of the winter cyclone remained, along with the sounds of warehouse windows unwillingly bending to natural forces that would have caused the Titans to shield their eyes.

"Good afternoon, Alice. Ship status, please."

Wiping a trickle of sweat off his neck, he shook his head vigorously, trying to get the tinnitus-like ringing out of his ears as he waited on a response from his ship's artificial intelligence. Moments later, he received his answer in the form of the sultry female voice he had programmed into the system.

"Good afternoon, Doctor, I am pleased to report that all systems are functioning normally."

"Run an airlock test."

"Certainly, Doctor."

Thirty seconds. One minute. Max waited, impatiently.

"Doctor, the vessel is adequately airtight."

"Alice, please define adequate."

"Doctor, there is only a 0.087% chance that you will suffer a hull breach, which would result in having all the air sucked out of your body, followed by you drifting around the vacuum of space for all eternity as a freeze-dried carcass."

"Okaaaay," Max said awkwardly as the loading ramp reopened, the slight whooshing of escaping oxygen giving an audible acknowledgement of at least some sort of seal. Looking at the rear of his shuttle, a lump formed in his throat. He could only hope and pray, even though he wasn't a believer.

"Alice, please provide status on E-force."

"Doctor, we have an estimated internal gravity of 10.05 m/s^2 , or one Ensminger."

"Cool. That was an expensive add-on, but I don't want to be strapped in for any extended period of time."

"It was indeed a wise choice, Doctor."

Max didn't earn a lot, and no supplication to any sort of higher power was going to change that. In fact, to make ends meet he even lived with his mother in Córdoba and traveled daily to Buenos Aires for work, using the *Subte* (short for *Subterráneo*, or Underground, the subway trains that had served Argentines in one form or another for centuries). So, having cobbled together barely enough money for his project, he purchased the craft from a shifty and rather disreputable used transport merchant in Santiago some

weeks earlier. Still, there was a bit of a bonus in buying from there; all tracking sensors had been removed from the shuttle. After having been left to rot in an aircraft graveyard for no less than two decades, the ship was picked up by some fairly despicable pirate-types and was used as a smuggling shuttle, running contraband between various locations. So, as far as Max was concerned, it would fulfill its required function.

Ready now more than he ever would be, the scientist did the 29th century equivalent of walking backward in the forest and using a tree branch to erase his footprints.

He flipped a conspicuously large toggle switch on his main console, itself mounted onto a long, steel workbench, enacting a macro-virus in his computer network that caused all data sources and zeptoprocessors to melt, destroying everything contained within. His secrets would be safe—as long as he wasn't captured, only to have his brain engrams painfully extracted during a torturous foray into the marvelous world of intelligence interrogation.

Quickly spinning around to avoid the billowing, caustic smoke that emanated from the mass of evaporating electronics in the warehouse, he deftly grabbed a duty bag from the floor and walked over to his little monstrosity, which he had named the *Machu Picchu*. Sympathetically running his fingers over the smooth outer surface, where he had spent six hours grinding off some rather gaudy flames that had been painted onto the hull, he walked to the rear entrance of the shuttle. Before entering the vehicle, he pulled a jewelry box out of his bag and looked at the small cube while bearing a rather wistful expression.

He had no idea why his widowed mother had given him her wedding ring. He actually thought it was a silly, useless gesture. She had asked him

to give it to his bride when he got married, but the only partner he would ever meet, he thought, was someone freakishly large and tattooed, in a jail cell in the Buenos Aires Penitentiary, if his luck didn't hold out, that is.

Max stuffed the jewelry box into his pocket and, taking one last look around, walked up the ship's loading ramp, which then slowly lifted up and created an airtight seal with a metallic hiss.

Running up through the cargo hold and into the cockpit, he dropped into the pilot seat; the newest part of the vessel, which he had installed post-purchase. He needed comfort for his trip, as this was no mere jaunt to Luna and back. Eyes scanning the control panel, he made a quick, final check on his boards. Just a scant overview—not a systematic flight list. There was no time for such a thing. Holding his breath, his heart pounded in his chest, his shirt drenched with sweat, the inevitable arrival of Federation authorities still an unknown factor.

He flipped a toggle on the dashboard. The ship violently lurched as the Machu Picchu's engines roared to life. Nothing exploded.

So far so good.

A Transformers bobblehead figurine of Optimus Prime jiggled back and forth on the control panel. He had actually used his childhood toy as a rudimentary attitude indicator, being as none of the readouts on the instrument panel were properly functioning when he had first flown the vessel. Even though stalling was something long-ago eliminated from flight, he liked to know whether or not he was sideways while stealthily cruising through heavy cloud cover.

Concussion boosters whomped rhythmically, causing items on local workbenches to fly off in equivalent cadence. The warehouse base buckled.

A long crack ripped along the concrete floor. Tools bounced off walls, the massive metal benches themselves vibrating on their legs, erratically rattling away from the craft as if they were trying to escape impending doom. Two of these benches flipped over end on end, making loud, brain-shattering clanging noises. Max used his thumb to move the vertical thrust slider upward in the left handle of the yolk which he had firmly in his grip. The shuttle started to slowly lift off. The warehouse roof mechanically parted down the middle, smoothly opening up and exposing a hellacious atmosphere of horizontal rain and raging winds.

And that was when things went wrong.

Before Max could get his shuttle out of the internals of the warehouse, dozens of armed, military-looking individuals dressed in black, full-faced helmets and articulated body armor, burst inside, firing projectile weapons at the Machu Picchu while she floated upward toward uncertain freedom.

A blaring loudspeaker projecting enough volume to be heard within at least a one-kilometer radius announced the official intent of the invasion:

"Attention, Doctor Gunnarsson. You are in violation of the Federal SSCC Non-Proliferation Act, and are to be taken in for questioning. Land immediately or we will be forced to destroy your craft."

Max heard the order. He also ignored it. To do otherwise would have meant abject failure.

The Machu Picchu kept rising toward the tormented indigo sky, shrugging off the small arms fire being laid upon her hull, thanks to a very rare and special metal that covered the craft in a micro-thin layer. It was also very expensive—more than Max could afford, so he had stolen it from

work over a period of months. In his mind it was all justifiable. It was for a better cause.

"Doctor Gunnarsson, if we do not leave this vicinity immediately, I fear we will suffer a hull breach."

"Alice! Hit it! Go! Go! Go!"

"As you command, Doctor."

The Machu Picchu shot up and out of the warehouse into the upper atmosphere at an instant Mach 10, violently blowing a good percentage of the invading army back into crumpled piles of unconsciousness. If it weren't for the quadrinium gravity dampeners he had installed as an upgrade, Max would have been crushed like a tomato beneath a commercial air truck, the sticky red muck of his corpse forever embedded into the grated steel deck of the cockpit.

Pieces of the roof, dislodged from the concussive blast, fell back to the ground and took out five more soldiers.

And Max watched it all happen real-time through his downward-facing camera display on the flight console.

"Shit!"

"Doctor, you are well aware that I am incapable of such an action."

"Shut up and go faster!"

Alice increased the Machu Picchu's velocity to Mach 13 without further complaint and Max burst up toward the blackness of space, entering the deadly vacuum in under fourteen seconds. Then the federation provided a nice surprise for the escaping madman. Five Draeder-class exo-atmospheric attack fighters pursued in tight formation, quickly catching up with his

dilapidated craft. Weapons fire erupted from the Draeders, rocking and buffeting the small transport during its desperate exit from the atmosphere. Luckily, the precious metal he had used to cover the ship's hull also protected it from the low-charge weaponry being used against it. At the moment it seemed the Federation wanted him alive. But the effect that anything more powerful might have had was unknown to Max, and he didn't intend on becoming an unwilling physics experiment in the vacuum of space.

Suddenly and surprisingly, a loud, ripping sound from an accurately fired continuous-pulse beam to his ship's hull indicated that his pursuers didn't care if he were brought back in handcuffs or a hazmat bag. Max banked hard and charged back toward the atmosphere in the desperate hope he could buy some precious seconds. Watching the passing Draeders scream by and then perform similar maneuvers, he knew what to do next:

It's time. Let's do this.

Skimming the atmosphere, Max pulled a lever back on his dashboard.

His unlawful component was enabled. His crime had been committed.

A mass of glowing machinery pushed out through the top of the ship, causing a rippling disruption in space that somehow tightly followed his flight pattern. This almost alien-looking equipment reached up and into the newly created rift. The hull creaked and groaned, titanium wailing in what sounded like its last throes of death. He again increased his velocity and banked out into space again, perhaps to buy himself time and avoid dying in a horrific explosion as he left the last vestiges of waning atmosphere.

Then, as six individuals raced out of orbital perimeter, free from the suffocating gravity that had for so long kept humans bound to their

terrestrial mistress, Max and the five Draeder pilots simultaneously pressed buttons on their control panels. Fortunately for Max, his touch was a fraction of a second faster than the pursuing pilots. The Machu Picchu blinked out of sight and the local solar system.

Terminal Solution beam weapons flashed into space with silent, concussive force, reaching where the escaping ship was located only a moment prior, all failing to meet their target. To have not escaped their trajectory would have meant the instant atomization of the Machu Picchu and Doctor Max Gunnarsson: Traitor. Mad scientist. Fugitive.

Seated in the pilot's chair, an extremely lucky Max gripped the yolk as if it were his only link to existence. His knuckles turned white. Dripping with sweat, he tried to calm himself down by taking deep, slow breaths. His forward view screen displayed wild, shifting colors encompassing the entire visible spectrum, with energy currents whipping around in all directions, flashing like an obscene strobe that painfully penetrated his brain, creating utter confusion and nausea. As he flipped a toggle switch to lower the protective shield over his view screen, he took one last look upon pure chaos—a definite sign he was not in normal space. It didn't help that his vision sharpened immensely when he was in stressful situations, either. But he was on course. At least his computer told him so. And his ship was intact, carrying him along on a seven-day voyage to the world of his ancestors...

Earth.

