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The Unification Chronicles

First Contact

Part 3 of 4

by Jeff Kirvin

The Story So Far: *After landing on the first extrasolar world discovered capable of supporting human life, Major Jack Killian and his group of Terran Republic Marines encountered a creature, a multiton carnivore that killed one of the Marines. Upon closer inspection of the beast, Jack discovered a brand, evidence of domestication. Jack showed this evidence to Vladimir Chenzokov, captain of the exploratory vessel Envoy, who dismissed it as coincidental. The colony world, now dubbed New Eden, was human property, and Chenzokov would hear no talk of aliens.*

* * *

Major Jack Killian paused in his work, stopping to remove his helmet and wipe the sweat from his brow. Despite the armor's strength and climate control, he was dripping.

It had been a busy three weeks. Shortly after dismissing Jack's concern about the branded creature, Chenzokov had the colonists begin shuttling down. Jack and his men had the

perimeter fences up just as the last shuttle came down.

Chenzokov called an assembly and gave a stirring speech that Jack knew must've taken the old Russian half the trip to write. Chenzokov talked about the noble ideal they were living, and the great responsibility of founding humanity's first extrasolar colony. He finished by naming the planet "New Eden" and calling for a celebration that lasted well into the night.

The next morning the colonists began ferrying down materials to build the first human settlement on New Eden. Despite the use of prefab materials and plenty of powerloaders, unarmored civilian construction versions of the military powered armor suits, Chenzokov insisted that Jack and his men "earn their keep" by helping with the construction. Jack had been building parts of the compound ever since.

Jack knew the real reason for the order, of course. While the security team's powered assistance was valued, the real reason Chenzokov wanted them working was so Jack wouldn't have time to pursue his "paranoid theories."

All that was about to change. Jack and some civilian workers were just putting together the last building now. Once that was completed, Chenzokov would have to let Jack conduct "security patrols"; to do otherwise would call undue attention to himself. Chenzokov wasn't a politician himself, but he answered to politicians, and there were lots of VIPs in the colony that would be quite upset to discover that the captain had placed them in possible danger.

Jack looked around the colony to appraise his handiwork. The first settlement on New Eden was a sight to behold. It was a frontier outpost, to be sure, and inefficient compared to the arcologies, but they'd done a damn fine job putting it together. The gleaming white buildings covered almost a square kilometer, several of them two or three stories tall. Everything the colony needed was present, much of it transplanted from the Envoy. They had hydroponics gardens, dormitories, labs for biochemistry, zoology and the other ecosciences. Each building was a marvel of modern architecture, self sufficient and self contained. The roofs were composed of high-efficiency solar cells, and each building could be hermetically sealed if the need arose. Around the complex was a four-meter tall perimeter fence, ample protection from anything smaller than the creature that killed Rodas.

But Jack wasn't concerned about wildlife. He was still convinced the mark on that creature was a brand, and that the colonists weren't the only sentients on New Eden. And now he had the opportunity to test that theory.

Jack strode across the compound, looking for his Marines. He found Sergeant Major Eleanor Jabari and Corporal Horatio Shimura in the barracks.

"Suit up," he said from the door, his armor-amplified voice ringing off the prefab walls. "We're going on patrol."

* * *

Jack and his patrol started off to the north, the same direction the creature had come from. The rain forest made for easy travel, sparse tree trunks dotting the landscape under the high, interlocking canopy of foliage. It was quiet, peaceful, and it gave Jack the creeps.

"You looking for anything in particular, Major?" asked Jabari.

"Yeah," Jack said. "Whatever made that brand. If there's another sentient species on this planet, I want to make sure they're friendly."

"We didn't see any signs of settlement from orbit," Shimura said, "or on the way down. What makes you think they're still here, sir?"

"I don't, necessarily. It's possible they just left that creature behind by accident. But I have to be sure."

They continued on for a few hours, moving at a slow enough speed not to overlook anything, and keeping chatter to a minimum. This was no nature hike and they all knew it. If they didn't find anything within fifty clicks, Jack had decided to turn around, and they were fast approaching that boundary.

"Sir?" Shimura said.

"Yes, Corporal?"

"I'm reading several heat sources two clicks north by northeast, in a small valley. A few of them look..."

"Look what?"

"Artificial."

Jack didn't see anything on his own sensors, but he probably wouldn't. Since their original scout got eaten, Shimura had drawn scout duty. His suit was lighter than the others but it had greater range and a better sensor array. The heat sources he saw were beyond the preset range for this patrol, but they were exactly what Jack was looking for. "We check it out. Carefully. This may be a first contact situation. We go in stealth, and try not to startle them."

"Aye, sir," the two Marines answered in unison. They all turned and began walking the direction Shimura advised, but they began walking slowly, taking great care not to make any excess noise.

Not long after they came upon the source of the heat readings. It was another base camp, but nothing like Jack or his Marines had ever seen. The artificial heat sources were machines, hulking bipedal walkers with reverse-articulated legs. The lines of the walkers were sleek and curved, and they appeared to be made a dull pewter metal. There were five of the walkers, two small ones and three that were much larger, the big ones dotted with menacing arms and what Jack presumed were weapons pods. Jack thought they were not unlike the legged, all-terrain tanks the Terran military sometimes used on rough worlds like Mars or Europa.

As interesting as the walkers were, they were nothing compared to the natural heat sources in the valley.

The creatures were also bipedal, and demonstrated a mix of avian and reptilian characteristics. They each had two arms and legs, horizontal spines, long tails and long necks that ended with heads featuring huge braincases and large eyes. Their mouths were long and filled with sharp, curved teeth, except at the end, where the mouth terminated with a bony protobeak. They had three digits on each limb, each ending with a sharp and hooked claw. Their skin was smooth on the back and sides, with a thin layer of down along the underside. Wattles hung from their necks, reminding Jack of Terran turkeys.

The larger type was red in color with yellow stripes and a thick crest of white feathers running from the top of the head down to the shoulders. They also wore gleaming body armor and carried rifles of some kind in addition to vicious bladed weapons.

The smaller type, and the type apparently in charge based on their actions, was dull green with red stripes and no crest. They wore no armor or clothing, but each had some kind of necklace bearing a metallic symbol, which Jack thought had to be some kind of rank insignia. Some of these green aliens were piloting the walkers while the others busied themselves with complex electronic equipment or ordered the red aliens around. Their vocalizations consisted of screeches and twitters, similar to Terran tropical birds, only much deeper in tone.

Jack and his men crouched down, doing their best to remain undetected.

"What do we do now, sir?" Shimura asked.

Damn good question, Jack thought. "We make note of this location and return to camp. The next step is Chenzokov's call, not mine."

Slowly, carefully, Jack and his Marines retreated the way they came.

* * *

Back in camp, Jack proceeded to the Administration building without bothering to remove his armor. Chenzokov had taken up residence in the Colonial Governor's office, and it was there that Jack found the big Russian.

"We have to talk," Jack said, closing the door behind him.

Chenzokov looked up from his computer and studied Jack's armored form. "Finally staging your coup, Major?"

"We found XTs," Jack said, ignoring Chenzokov's jibe. "We counted at least a dozen individuals, and there are probably more. Their technology is at least as advanced as ours, and they appeared to have war machines." Jack continued to explain, in detail, exactly what he and his men had seen.

"We have to leave," Jack concluded.

Chenzokov leaned back in his chair. "Nonsense," he said. "We will do no such thing.

"Major, assuming I believe you, assuming this isn't another one of your attempts to sabotage our mission, your news still means nothing. We found no evidence of a sentient civilization on this planet, which means the aliens are likely just visitors, and will leave shortly. Furthermore, we have no reason to believe their intentions are hostile. Any race advanced enough to achieve starflight is going to be civilized enough to communicate with. For all we know, the aliens' presence here could be the greatest fortune to ever befall mankind! If we could forge an alliance with a more advanced race, the benefits and advances we could acquire would be unimaginable!"

Jack stood silent for a moment, then said, "In the course of human history, contact between an advanced society and a less advanced one has always been disastrous for the lesser society. Ask any of the Amerindian or African or Australian tribes wiped out due to European

expansion.

"I'm putting my men on full alert, and readying the shuttles for a quick evacuation. When you come to your senses, let me know."

Jack walked from the room, leaving Chenzokov in silence.

* * *

Chenzokov stared at his office door, his mind racing.

Aliens! He knew that they were statistically possible, even likely, but he never expected to meet any. Habitable planets in the galaxy were just too hard to come by for alien species to cross paths with any frequency.

Major Killian didn't understand that. The same rarity of habitable worlds that made XT contact so unlikely was the same reason humanity couldn't afford to give up New Eden just because another species might and there was still no proof of this have gotten there first.

Killian never seemed to appreciate the enormous pressures Chenzokov was under. The Envoy Project was the single most expensive undertaking in human history, and backers on Earth expected results. More specifically, they expected habitable worlds, places where humans could live without atmospheric domes or expensive and time-consuming terraforming. If those were acceptable options, there would have been no reason to leave Sol.

Chenzokov turned and looked out his office window, marveling at the alien sun shining through it. No, New Eden was a human world now, and they were there to stay.

Aliens. He couldn't wait to meet them.

* * *

That night Robyn O'Reilly wandered the complex, looking for her boss. Jack hadn't been seen all afternoon, and Robyn was starting to ... not worry, so much, as Jack was more than capable of taking care of himself, but Robyn was starting to wonder where Jack was, and if it had anything to do with the news.

Robyn found Jabari on her way back from the mess hall. "Sergeant Major!" she called out.

The older Egyptian halted her stride and approached Robyn. "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Seen the Major?"

Jabari tilted her head. "Not recently, ma'am. Have you checked the perimeter?"

Robyn slapped her forehead. "No, I haven't. Thanks, Sarge."

Jabari smiled and Robyn trotted over to the security fence encircling the compound. She should have figured it out before. Robyn had known Jack since Mars, and when he was troubled, Jack got meticulous. Given Chenzokov's afternoon announcement, Robyn should have guessed that the first thing Jack would do would be to check the defenses.

Robyn followed the fence almost halfway around the complex before she found her friend and superior officer. Robyn could see Jack's armored silhouette leaning against the northeast side of the fence. It was not lost on Robyn that northeast was the side closest to the alien camp. Illuminated by the floodlights from camp, Jack's figure almost blended right in with the dark shadows of the forest beyond.

"Heard the news, then, I take it?" Robyn called out.

Jack turned and looked at her, and Robyn could see what passed for a sarcastic grin through Jack's faceplate.

"Yeah, I heard," Jack said, his voice sounding tinny through the armor's speakers.

"And?"

Jack stepped away from the fence. "What do you want me to say, Robyn? I told him we should leave. I told him there was nothing but trouble here. Is it my fault he's decided to run headlong into that trouble?"

Robyn held out her hands in front of her. "Hey, no, boss, I didn't mean any of that."

Jack stared at his lieutenant for a moment, then relaxed. "Sorry, Robyn. Didn't mean to bite your head off.

"We'll have enough of that tomorrow."

Robyn walked a little closer to Jack and leaned with him against the fence. "You really think Chenzokov is that far off the mark?"

"You didn't see those things, Robyn. Physically, they had the look of pure carnivores, predators of the highest order."

"The same could be said of humans."

Jack ignored her. "And their war machines, walking tanks with more firepower than a squad of armored men. I got a bad vibe from them, Robyn."

"We're armored and armed, too. What's to say their intentions are any less peaceful than ours?"

Jack started to speak, then hesitated. "I don't know. Something about the way they moved, their attitude. They're warriors. I see the same checked aggression in them that I see in us. They are prepared to fight, and we're about to provoke them."

Robyn stood in silence for a moment with her friend, listening to the night sounds of the jungle mix with the human noises from camp. It was getting close to curfew, and the colonists were starting to pack up for the night.

"What's Chenzokov allowing for defense?"

"Just me," Jack said. "and no armor. I'm allowed to carry a sidearm, but that's it. A handful of colonists, Chenzokov himself, and me with a pistol against heavily armed aliens.

"Robyn, I want you to get us ready tomorrow after I leave. If this thing goes south, I'm going to need you to lead the defense of the colony while they evacuate."

"You really expect the worst, don't you?"

"Wait until you see them, and you'll understand." Jack left the fence and walked back into camp, leaving Robyn alone with the jungle.

* * *

First light found Jack boarding one of the colony's wheeled transports with Chenzokov and a dozen or so colonists. The transport was a huge metal box, painted stark white and held aloft on giant struts and two-meter high rubber tires. It could roll over just about anything, and the passengers would be enclosed and comfortable. Per Chenzokov's order, Jack was dressed in fatigues and armed only with a hand pistol. He rode up front with the driver as the bulky vehicle made its bumpy and ambling way across the jungle to the alien camp.

Jack still dreaded what he was sure the day would bring. He wasn't a xenophobe; many on Earth dreaded the very thought of meeting nonterrestrial sentients, but not Jack. He just preferred to meet them on better terms, under the guidance of scientists and diplomats, not politicians.

Chenzokov staggered over to Jack as the transport crawled over the uneven terrain. *Speak of the devil and he appears*, Jack mused. "Yes, Captain?" Jack asked before the Russian could get a word out.

"I wanted to talk to you before we arrived," Chenzokov said. "I want you to know that you are present only to be in compliance with regulations. First Contact Protocol requires the presence of at least one security officer, and you're it. However, I believe your aggressive presence to be a detriment to our mission of peace and understanding. You will therefore remain confined to the transport for the duration of the contact with the alien species. You may watch through the viewscreen, but you will not under any circumstances make your presence known to the aliens. We have to establish ourselves as a peaceful, enlightened race, and I don't believe you capable of that.

"Do I make myself understood, Major?"

Jack stared at the Colonial Governor of New Eden until the older man dropped his eyes. "Yes sir," Jack said. "I understand you perfectly."

Chenzokov nodded, and moved to walk away, back to the exit where the others were preparing to disembark.

"But you understand," Jack said to Chenzokov's back, loud enough to be heard over the transport's engines, "that I have the right and responsibility to act as I see fit in a state of emergency, should the XTs pose a clear and present danger to any human colonists."

Chenzokov stopped, but did not turn or say a word. After a moment, he continued to the back exit of the transport.

Jack turned and looked out the viewscreen. They were almost there. The transport was just entering the valley where Jack had found the XTs, and he could see a couple of their giant walking machines already. Jack checked the clip in his pistol, and prayed he wouldn't have to use it.

Slowly, the transport rolled up to the edge of the XT camp. Jack watched as the aliens gathered around the front of the vehicle. He was able to study the creatures more closely now, having nothing else to do.

The males were the larger of the two types, and Jack felt the same sense of dread looking at them now as before. All the males wore armor over their yellow-striped red skin, and held mean-looking weapons in their clawed hands. They reminded Jack of Terran dinosaurs, a vicious species known as Velociraptor. Their saurian eyes stared unblinking at the transport, but they did not open fire, or seem overtly threatening.

Behind the males the smaller, red-striped on green females stood their ground. Several of them directed male warriors to new positions, but none of them were armed directly. Behind the females stood the massive war machines, gun pods tilted upwards, away from the transport.

Overall, the impression from the aliens was one of caution, but no real threat. They seemed to be deliberately trying not to threaten the transport.

Could I have been wrong? Jack wondered.

"Today will be long remembered by the human race," Chenzokov said at the back of the transport, near the exit hatch. "Our first contact with a sentient species other than our own. I am deeply honored to lead you."

Chenzokov opened the hatch, and extended the ramp down to the ground behind the transport, the side farthest from the aliens.

"Into history!" Chenzokov said as he and the other colonists started down the ramp.

Jack watched on the viewscreen and external camera monitors as Chenzokov and the others made their way around the massive transport. They would be in view of the XTs any second.

As he and the others stepped around the corner, Chenzokov spread his arms wide. "Greetings from Earth!" he said with a large smile.

The alien reaction was dramatic and swift. The females screamed and gestured wildly. The males opened fire.

Chenzokov was hit by the first volley and killed instantly. The other colonists dropped to the ground, some dead, some wounded, others scared out of their minds.

Jack was on his feet and bolting for the door even as Chenzokov fell. He unholstered his tiny pistol and swung around the back of the transport, firing at the closest Saurians. His bullets ricocheted off the armor of the males, but two females went down, and they pulled back.

Jack started ushering the wailing colonists back into the transport. An over-the-shoulder glance told him the giant war machines were on the move, and they didn't have long if he was to get warning to the colony. A Saurian energy bolt grazed his left arm as he dragged a hysterical man back to the transport, the pain intense enough to knock him to his knees. As he turned around, the Saurian male warrior walked towards him warily, weapon up and ready. Human screams, Saurian screams and weapons fire filled the air.

They're still cautious, Jack realized. *They didn't think they could beat us*. He raised his pistol and shot the alien in the face, one of the few unarmored body parts he could see. The Saurian fell to the ground, screaming its parrot scream.

"We're going," Jack said to the colonist, and he got up and ran for the transport, the other man staggering after him.

* * *

Only Jack and five colonists made it back to the relative safety of the transport alive, but that was only a temporary measure. The Saurian war machines were moving, and preparing to fire. Jack settled behind the transport controls and fired up the engine. One of the machines already had its guns trained on the transport, and Jack didn't want to give it a stationary target.

"Here we go!" he shouted as he threw the transport into full reverse just as the Saurian machine fired. The ground where the transport used to be exploded in a rain of rock and dirt, and the transport backed away, bouncing over the uneven terrain.

Jack keyed the radio as he spun the vehicle around. "Killian to base camp. Do you read?"

"Roger, boss," Robyn answered. "Five by five. What's your situation?"

Jack accelerated the transport as fast as it would go, but the Saurian walkers were having an easier time on the rough ground, and they were gaining. "The XTs attacked us on sight. Chenzokov is dead. I need you to start the evacuation immediately, and send anybody you can spare to our beacon to provide cover fire.

"Shit!" Jack added as one of the Saurian blasts came a little too close.

"Roger, sir," Robyn said. "Will comply. Over and out."

* * *

Robyn was stunned but she didn't let that get in her way. No sooner did she break communication with Jack than she was on the colony PA system.

"Attention, please. This is Lieutenant Robyn O'Reilly of the security team. We are evacuating the colony. I repeat: we are *evacuating* the colony. Please drop what you are doing and report to the shuttles *immediately*."

After programming the PA system to repeat her announcement in a loop, Robyn ran out of the communications building, switching to her armor's tacnet. "O'Reilly to team. Shimura, Ahiga and Bersi are to supervise the evacuation. Everyone else, with me."

As Robyn's armored strides sped her to the northeast gate, the armored forms of Jabari and Girish formed up at her side. "The boss is in trouble," Robyn explained as they ran. "The XTs attacked on sight, and now they're in pursuit. We need to home in on the transport beacon and provide cover fire for the transport. Questions?" she asked.

"No ma'am!"

Robyn checked the radar on her HUD. The transport wasn't far, but there were five huge signatures practically on top of it. Jack had to be doing a helluva job of driving to keep away from them, but he couldn't last much longer. The alien machines were trying to outflank him and cut him off.

"O'Reilly to Killian," Robyn broadcast over the base radio. "We are en route to your position. What's your situation? Over."

"Agh!" Robyn heard Jack answer, along with what sounded like an explosion way too close to the transport. "Transport is heavily damaged. The XTs are trying to outflank me."

"Roger that," Robyn said. "ETA thirty seconds. Over."

As Robyn and the men crested the next rise, they saw the transport and its pursuers. "Oh my God," Robyn said.

Surrounding the transport were five alien war machines, each a bipedal, metal monster a dozen meters tall and weighing tens of tons, judging by the depth of their footprints. They were built around a bulky, horizontal fuselage, not unlike the snout of a dropship. Underneath the fuselage were two birdlike reverse articulated legs, ending in splayed metal feet three meters across. The machines also sported a wide variety of weaponry attached as "arms", missile racks, autocannons and energy weapons that made Robyn's plasma rifle seem like a kid's water pistol.

In short, the machines were exactly as Jack had described them, the weapons of a race that knew how to fight. *Wait until you see them, and you'll understand*, Jack had said. Robyn understood.

"O'Reilly to team," she said over the tac net. "Fire at will. Fire at will. Protect that transport!"

Running down a slight grade and on an intercept course with the transport, Robyn opened fire.

* * *

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