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The Unification Chronicles: *Exiting Eden*

Volume 4

by Jeff Kirvin

The Story So Far: Major Jack Killian and the crew of the Envoy discovered humanity's first extrasolar planet, which they named New Eden. Shortly after landing, they found evidence of another sentient life form on the planet. Jack accompanied the captain of the Envoy to meet the aliens, an avian race resembling a large-brained cross between a velociraptor and a turkey. The aliens attacked as soon as they saw the humans.

* * *

Jack noted the arrival of the Marines, but he was too busy not getting killed to acknowledge them. Another explosion rocked the transport, and Jack could see two Saurian machines closing in from the sides. If Robyn and the others couldn't slow those behemoths down, Jack knew he would never make it back to the colony.

Robyn had started the evacuation, but TRHQ had to know what they'd be facing if they sent any more colony ships out. If Jack didn't make it back, someone who had faced these things in combat would have to.

Jack vaulted the transport over the crater of another near miss as Robyn and others moved in on the Saurian machines and engaged.

Humanity had a new enemy, and somebody had to live to tell them about it.

* * *

Robyn and her Marines did their best against the aliens, but their best wasn't doing much good. They'd each managed to distract one of the alien machines who didn't seem to care what they attacked but that still left two following the transport. She couldn't take down her machine quickly enough to attack the ones following the transport, assuming she could kill it at all.

The machine in question brought its foot down hard, nearly stomping Robyn flat. With a thought, Robyn activated her jumpjets and rocketed over the Saurian mech. From above, the avian shape was more obvious, and the dorsal side seemed to have less armor than the front. She fired her plasma rifle as she arced down with gravity, drawing only a scorched black scar on the back of the machine.

Robyn rolled as she landed, coming up in a crouch and shooting at the knee joint of the mech. She saw a satisfying burst of sparks, then had to roll to her side to avoid a stream of autocannon fire from the mech.

She saw another blast of fire hit the mech in the "arm," just above the autocannon. Private Girish bounded into her line of view, dodging the attacks of the mech with effortless grace.

"I got mine, Lieutenant," she heard his voice over the tacnet. "Let's finish these assholes and get back to camp!"

She jumped up and ran around the thing's legs, firing as she went. She was doing damage, but not enough. The only thing she had going for her was that with Girish jumping around, bouncing off cockpit, back, autocannon like an armored gnat, the mech's pilot wasn't working too hard at shooting at her.

She dodged a giant metal talon as the mech nearly stepped on her, then saw her opening. Lying supine, she raised her plasma rifle and fired at the underside of the mech, where the legs met the torso. She heard a loud crack as something weakened and snapped, then the mech began to topple.

As the cockpit of the mech smashed into the dirt, Girish bound up again to jump on its back.

He never landed.

Girish was ripped to shreds by autocannon fire. He didn't have time to scream. Robyn peeked around the fallen mech to see another running her way. The legs didn't move that fast, but with a stride that long, they didn't have to. She could see the small armored form of Sergeant Jabari trailing after it.

"Get under it!" Robyn shouted to Jabari. "Hit the hip joint!" She used the crippled mech as cover and opened fire on the newcomer.

Instead of attacking the new threat, the mech spun and opened fire on Jabari. She leapt out of the way, but it tracked her.

Robyn wasn't about to lose two of her people. Not like this. She bounded over the fallen mech and landed on top of the new one. She pointed her plasma rifle straight down and opened fire on the cockpit, trying to drill down into it.

The pilot lurched, trying to shake her off. Then she heard a familiar crack, and the mech began to fall backwards. Robyn jumped away, staying well clear of the mech's still firing autocannon.

"Come on," she told Jabari. "We're outta here. Let's just hope the boss made it back to camp."

* * *

Jack made it back to the colony, but that wasn't the end of his problems.

He drove the huge transport over the perimeter fence, and headed straight for the landing pad. The two Saurian machines slowed somewhat inside the fence, pausing occasionally to turn their weapons on buildings.

Go ahead, boys, Jack thought. We're never coming back here.

The colony was deserted, and when Jack arrived at the landing pad he confirmed why. Other than the security team's dropship, only one shuttle stood on the pad, prepped and ready to go. One of the few security concessions the optimistic and naïve designers of the *Envoy* had made was to include enough shuttles to evacuate the entire colony in one trip. Nearly a thousand people were already safe aboard the *Envoy*, and they would leave within the hour with or without him.

If Jack didn't find a way to distract them, the two Saurian machines could make easy work out of him and the remaining colonists as they tried to transfer to the shuttle. He had to get them off his back.

He turned to one of the colonists huddling in the back of the transport. "You! You know how to drive?"

The man, a balding scientist in his late forties, shook his head. He was terrified, and nearly incoherent. Still, he was only one back there that wasn't either injured or in shock.

"Time to learn," Jack said. "Get up here." The man stumbled to the cockpit.

"What's your name?" Jack asked.

"Mike," the man stammered.

"It's real simple, Mike," Jack said, pointing with one hand as he talked, driving in narrow avoidance of the Saurians with the other. "The long skinny pedal on the right makes you go, the short stubby one on the left makes you stop. You control your direction with this wheel. Got that, Mike?"

Mike nodded.

“Great. You’re going to drive while I distract our two friends back there. As soon as they leave you alone, head straight for the landing pad and get yourself and the others on that last shuttle. Once you’re all on board, run to the cockpit and punch the button marked ‘Autopilot’. It’s already programmed to take you back to *Envoy*.”

“Got all that?”

Mike nodded again, doing his best to make himself look composed and in control.

“You’ll do fine, Mike,” Jack said, hurling the transport around a sharp corner to give Mike a few seconds to take the controls. Once the older man sat down behind the wheel, Jack lurched over to the side hatch. They were very close to the security building.

“I’ll see you on the *Envoy*,” Jack said, then he jumped.

As soon as he was clear of the transport, Jack sprinted for the security building. He didn’t have much time. The once stark white buildings of the compound were a dingy gray, and many of them were missing large chunks of plasticrete. The place was empty, a ghost town. The Saurians had done an effective job of defending their territory.

He reached the security building and hurried inside. His armor was where he left it, and he donned it with practiced efficiency. In under a minute, Jack underwent a transformation from harried man to confident metal demigod. He grabbed the most powerful weapons he could carry. Armed with a small shoulder-mounted rocket launcher, a plasma rifle and a rifle-sized rail gun, he stepped back onto the street. Elapsed time from his exodus from the transport: 77 seconds.

Jack homed in on the sounds of weapons fire. The transport was three blocks away, the two Saurians in close but frustrated pursuit. Mike’s inexperience with piloting was working in his favor, as the colonist haphazardly hurled and caromed the transport around the wide streets with frenzied unpredictability. The Saurians couldn’t draw a steady bead on the weaving vehicle.

Let’s give them something else to shoot at. He loosed a missile salvo for the Saurian on the left, and a few high density iron slugs magnetically accelerated to supersonic speeds by the railgun for the Saurian on the right.

The effect was immediate and exactly what Jack had hoped. Both Saurian machines pivoted and addressed the new threat that had pierced their rear armor. The transport forgotten, they advanced on him.

Jack keyed his helmet radio. “Killian to transport! Do you read me, Mike?”

“Yes,” came the tentative reply.

Jack backpedaled, making sure he kept the Saurians’ attention, and fired of his plasma rifle to keep them interested. He noticed it didn’t do as much damage as the kinetic weapons. “I think I’ve got their undivided attention,” Jack said into the radio. “Head for the shuttle and get everyone on board. After you leave I’ll make my way to the dropship and meet everyone on *Envoy*. Got all that?”

The Saurians let loose a barrage of particle beams, and Jack barely dodged in time. They crumbled the building behind him.

"What was that, Mike? I didn't read you."

"I said I understand," the colonist shouted into the radio, causing more ringing in Jack's ear than the Saurian weapons. "I'll get us out of here." The transmission cut off.

That's done, Jack thought, running into an alley, throwing just enough firepower at the Saurians to entice them into giving chase. He didn't plan on taking out the two Saurians, but if he could keep them distracted long enough for the shuttle to take off, everything would be okay. He needed the friendly confines of the prefab colony buildings; the Saurians could pick him apart out in the open. He ran through the alley, firing back at his pursuers.

The Saurians seemed to reach the same conclusion. With their next volley of fire, they destroyed the two buildings on either side of Jack, landslides of rubble rolling in towards him.

Jack vaulted up onto the artificial rocks and returned fire. He'd thrown away the ineffectual plasma rifle some time before, and was left now with the more effective kinetic energy weapons, the railgun and missile rack. His next volley set off a series of explosions in one of the machines, causing thick, oily smoke to billow out of its left "knee". When the machine moved again, advancing on its small but dangerous prey, it moved with a distinct limp.

So you can be damaged, Jack pondered as he leaped from the rubble, somersaulting over the answering Saurian particle beams.

As Jack landed on his feet in the street beyond the rubble, he heard the roar of engines at the edge of the compound, in the direction of the landing pad. Looking that way, he saw the final shuttle lift off and climb out of sight. Now he just had to get to the dropship and wait for Robyn and the others.

A Saurian particle beam shook him as it pulverized the ground. Rolling with the concussion and then back to his feet, Jack saw the two Saurian machines lumbering over the rubble they created. They crept with great caution over the unstable surface, and Jack took off in a powered run. He might be able to outrun them to the landing pad.

No such luck, Jack discovered before he turned the first corner. He could outrun the machines, but not their weapons. Rapid fire particle beams from behind him pulverized the buildings in front of him, the wreckage pinning him in. He could jump for it, but a burst of fire over his head convinced him he'd be an easy target until he got over the makeshift wall.

Instead, he turned and fought. The knee joint of one of the machines was still billowing smoke, and Jack hoped to do just enough damage to get past and around them. There were many routes to the dropship. He had to find a different one.

The damaged Saurian lurched forward and fired off several of its weapons. Jack sidestepped the missiles and autocannon fire, not realizing that it would take him in line with the particle beam.

The force of the blast hit him dead center in the chest and knocked him off his feet. Warning lights flared and buzzers sounded all through his helmet, desperate to tell him what he already knew: one more hit like that and he was dead.

Jack struggled to get to his feet, but a missile barrage from the other Saurian machine kept him down. They had him pinned, and they were moving in for the kill, or worse, capture. Jack didn't know what Saurians did with their POWs, but they were all claws and teeth, and he didn't relish the thought of being alone with them without his armor.

Jack rolled across the rubble, staying ahead of a stream of autocannon fire. Somewhere along the way, he'd lost his railgun, and his shoulder-mounted missile rack was pulverized. Fight was no longer an option; he had to find a way to make flight feasible.

The Saurians machines drew closer to Jack with each barrage of weapons fire, the one on the right stepping lightly for a hunk of steel weighing several tons, and the one on the left eschewing avian grace for a crippled stagger and dragging its smoking leg. The noose was closing, and Jack could see no way around them that wouldn't get him flattened in the attempt.

Better that than capture, he thought, and pulled himself into a crouch on the rubble, preparing to explode into the fastest run his armor could muster.

Just as the closer of the two machines, the crippled one, drew another step in, Jack heard the familiar sound of plasma fire and saw a stream of superheated hydrogen erupt off the cockpit of the machine. Two figures appeared in his peripheral vision, one on either side of him, and the Saurians stepped back, reassessing the situation.

"I was wondering when you'd get here," Jack said to Robyn. "Where's Girish?"

"He didn't make it."

Jack nodded, and looked back at the two Saurian machines. Their initial surprise fading, they moved towards the humans again. "At least the odds are in our favor. Three to two instead of two against one."

Jack was knocked off his feet by an explosion from behind. Spinning around, he saw three more Saurian war machines crest the rubble, standing atop the ruined building, great conquering birds forged in steel.

"Make that five against three," Robyn said. "Where the hell did they come from?"

Jack lurched to his feet. "You didn't think we saw all they had in that clearing, did you? We still don't know what *their* dropships look like. Let's go."

Robyn and Jabari turned and fired on the three Saurians standing on the rubble. The Saurians returned fire, but the humans were no longer there. They ran top speed for the two Saurians in the street, Jack slowing only to scoop up his railgun.

Jabari took aim and fired on the smoking knee of the crippled war machine, tearing the joint apart and causing the machine to topple onto the street. The standing war machine was hit repeatedly by weapons fire from the other three Saurian machines as the humans put it between the three on the rubble and their escape. As they turned the first corner, they heard the chain reaction of explosions that signified the machine's demise.

Two down, three to go, Jack thought as the human trio wound their way down a labyrinthine path through the artificial canyons of the colony base camp. Their radar picked up the three war machines following them, but the big Saurian machines weren't as agile as the

armored humans, and Jack and his Marines gained distance on the Saurians with every turn.

They reached the landing pad. As expected, the dropship sat alone on the far edge of the flat plasticrete expanse, its boarding ramp extended.

“We’ll be sitting ducks until I can get that thing prepped,” Robyn said.

Jack checked his radar. The Saurians seemed to have figured out where the humans were headed, and were taking the straightest route possible to the landing pad. “Then get to it. Jabari and I can hold them off for a few minutes.”

The trio rushed to the dropship. Robyn hurried inside while Jack and Jabari assumed defensive positions just outside.

The Marines stood ready while Robyn brought up the dropship’s engines, the whine of its fusion turbines drowning out the approaching thunder of the Saurian mechs.

All three appeared at once, coming from different directions. They formed a rough semicircle around the landing pad, noted the bristling weaponry on the dropship and moved cautiously.

“How long?” Jack asked Robyn over the tacnet.

“About forty seconds to liftoff.”

Forty seconds, Jack thought. Not too long at—

As if reading Jack’s thoughts, the Saurian mechs charged as one, their towering metal legs eating up distance to the dropship.

“Open fire!” Jack shouted.

Both armored Marines gave the Saurians everything they had, but it wasn’t doing much. Jabari’s plasma rifle just scorched the mech rushing from the north, and Jack’s railgun knocked the arm off the eastern mech, but nothing more. They didn’t have the firepower to standoff the giant war machines.

Jack felt the dropship lurch into the air behind him. Riding gouts of superheated flame, the Terran warship swiveled in midair and launched a barrage of missiles at each mech, reducing them to shrapnel.

Robyn’s voice sounded over the tacnet. “You folks need a ride?”

Thirty seconds later, the final three human survivors of New Eden were aloft and speeding back to *Envoy*.

* * *

Per evacuation protocol, all the colonists were still in their shuttles when Jack arrived, lined up in the launch bay. Jack and his Marines exited the dropship the moment it touched down and ran to the bridge.

The bridge of the massive ship was nearly deserted, only the skeleton crew of ship’s pilot,

navigator and communications officer present. Jack removed the helmet from his armor and began giving the orders to tunnel back to Earthspace. He was interrupted.

"Sir!" the comm officer shouted. "We have two tunnels opening, bearing 245, thirty-two degrees up!"

"Show me."

On the central viewscreen, Jack watched the images captured by cameras on that side of the ship. In two different locations, Jack witnessed the signature distortion of the starfield caused by the intense gravitational energies of a tunnel drive bending the light. Two tunnels opened, and from these rents in the fabric of space, two starships emerged. They were like nothing he had ever seen.

The ships were identical. Each was nearly two kilometers long, and roughly cylindrical. They were dark pewter, full of sleek curves and ripples, suggesting the powerful musculature of a predator. The bow of each ship bristled with spiky extrusions Jack took to be the barrels of weapons, and at the center of the bow was a dark maw. On one of the ships, this maw began to glow.

"Sir!" the comm officer shouted again. "I'm reading a massive gravitational surge from one of the craft!"

"Adjust our orientation," Jack said as he slid into the Captain's chair, listening to it creak and protest under the weight of his armor. "I want both of those ships underneath us. And ready the tunnel drive to get us out of here. We're going home."

"Aye, sir," said the ship's pilot from his neural interface couch. Jack felt the slight tidal disturbances as *Envoy's* gravitational field altered, pulling it into a new orientation. The views on the screens shifted to keep the alien craft in view.

Jack watched as the glow increased from the alien ship.

"Sir! The alien craft's gravitational field is spiking!"

I was afraid of that, Jack thought. "Hang on, everybody!" he shouted as he gripped the arms of his chair with armored strength, almost ripping them off.

A flash of light appeared on the bow of the alien ship, followed almost instantaneously by a severe rocking of the *Envoy*. Robyn and Jabari fell to the deck, and the navigator was knocked away from his console.

"What was that?" Jabari inquired.

"A mass driver," Jack said. "Probably an asteroid, accelerated by their tunnel engines to good chunk of C. It was deflected by the space curvature caused by our tunnel drive to create artificial gravity, but they won't make that mistake again."

"Where the hell is that tunnel drive?"

"On line in twenty seconds," the navigator said. "I've laid in the course to Earth. We should come out just outside of Luna's orbit."

Twenty seconds, Jack thought. *Not so bad...*

"Sir, I'm picking up the same gravity surge in the second alien vessel," the comm officer said.

Bad, Jack thought. "Pilot! Tunnel the instant the tunnel drive is on line."

"Aye, sir."

Jack could do nothing more than watch as the seconds crept by. The glow on the alien's bow was growing much more quickly this time.

"It's spiking!" the comm officer called.

"Initiating tunnel drive," the pilot called.

Jack felt the familiar tug against his body in all directions as the tunnel drive deep in the heart of *Envoy* created a fold in the fabric of space, temporarily placing their current position just nanometers from a point in the Sol system. They tunneled home.

The last thing Jack saw on viewscreen before the tunnel was a bright flash from the bow of the alien ship.

* * *

The *Envoy* had no sooner reappeared in Earthspace than it rocked with a huge explosion, the lower third of the giant sphere ripped off and flung into space. It began to spin as atmosphere rushed out of the missing hull.

The bridge was in chaos. Power had gone out, and the emergency power had kicked in only partially. The pilot had let out a bloodcurdling scream at the moment of impact, then lay limp in his neural interface couch. Jack and his Marines were still okay, but the artificial gravity was coming on and off intermittently, and they had to engage the electromagnets in their boots just to remain standing. The navigator and comm officer weren't so lucky, and the irregular gravity was wreaking havoc with them.

"Report!" Jack shouted to whoever was still listening.

Robyn made her way over to a status console, stopping to check the reading on the pilot's couch. "The pilot's dead. The neural feedback from the damage overloaded his safety buffers. Nearly the lower third of the ship is gone, and the tunnel drive is severely damaged. The power system has gone completely haywire, and is causing secondary explosions and fires all over the ship. Oh my God."

"What?" Jack asked as he made his way over to Robyn.

"Several of the explosions have been in the launch bay. I can't get a reading on the status of any of the shuttles."

"Then we check it out personally," Jack said, reading the data over Robyn's metal shoulder. "It's time to get off this scow anyway."

Robyn and Jack each grabbed one of the still living crewmembers, who had now been forced to don emergency oxygen masks due to the thinning atmosphere. They were also

shivering from the cold. The bridge rocked sharply from a nearby explosion, and the gravity cut out.

“Sergeant Major,” Jack called out as he reached the door. “You coming?”

“No sir,” Jabari said, taking a seat in front of the emergency command console. “I’ll stay here and try to stabilize things as much as I can until you get the evacuation underway.”

Jack nodded. “Don’t wait too long, Eleanor. Meet us at the dropship.”

She nodded, and the others left the bridge.

The rest of *Envoy* was in much worse shape than the bridge. Twice Jack and Robyn had to backtrack and find alternate routes to the launch bay due to fires in the corridors, the bright flames flowing like water in the zero gravity. They could have ignored the flames in their armor, but the bridge crew didn’t have that luxury.

They reached the launch bay. Jack stopped short, and almost dropped his charge.

Half the launch bay was missing. A great gouge had been ripped in the side of the ship, and the half of the launch bay that remained opened to empty space. Jack did a quick count.

More than half of the shuttles were gone.

Liquid, zero-G fire was spreading into the remains of the launch bay. They didn’t have much time. Feeling rather than hearing their magnetic boots thunder down on the deck, Jack and Robyn ran for the nearest shuttle. After cycling through the airlock, Jack ran to the control console of the huge craft.

He opened the radio channel as he ripped off his helmet. “Jabari!” he shouted.

There was no answer for a moment, then faint, with crackling interference, “Yes, sir!”

“Half the launch bay is missing!” Jack said. “The ship’s coming apart!”

Another delay, then, “I know! The reactor has taken too much damage. The tunnel drive is totaled, and we have no AG or insystem propulsion! The remnants of the tunnel effect are tearing the ship apart!”

“Get down here!” Jack said as he eased his armored form into the control chair. “We’re leaving.”

“With all due respect, sir,” Jabari answered, “get the other shuttles out first. It’s all I can do here to hold the ship together. I’m tied into the pilot’s neural interface couch. *Envoy*’s a lot bigger than the transport mechs I jacked in training, but she’s manageable. As soon as I leave, *Envoy* will shake apart!”

Jack stared at the radio, then turned his attention to another control panel. As a safety feature for just such occasions, the shuttles all had an emergency override feature that allowed the entire group to be controlled remotely from any shuttle. Jack engaged this feature, then began moving the shuttles out of the launch bay in something resembling an orderly manner. In the microgravity, a slight touch on the thrusters was all that was needed to get most of the ships clear of *Envoy*.

As Jack tended to this task, he noticed the tremors shaking the *Envoy* increasing in intensity and frequency. With or without Jabari's intervention, the ship was shaking itself apart.

Finally, only Jack's shuttle remained. He turned to the radio again. "Jabari!"

There was no reply.

"Sergeant Major!" Jack shouted into the microphone.

Nothing. Robyn put her hand on Jack's shoulder just as another mammoth quake racked the ship. "She's gone," Robyn said. "Let's make her sacrifice mean something."

Jack nodded, and fired the thrusters that would take the shuttle out of the ruined launch bay and into space.

Clear of the ship, Jack brought the rear camera view up on the monitor. Great holes had been ripped out of *Envoy's* once unbroken sphere, and gouts of fire shot from rents in the hull. The great ship quivered, shook, and collapsed in on itself, leaving only a small and irregular hunk of metal smaller than one of the shuttles.

Turning his attention back to the front viewscreen and the view of Earth, Jack moved aside and let Robyn pilot the shuttle home.

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