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The Unification Chronicles #1

First Contact

Part 1 of 4

by Jeff Kirvin

Like most stars, it had countless satellites. Two rocky inner planets, one of those blue green and teeming with life. Five gas giants of varying sizes. Several hundred comets. Billions of asteroids ranging in size from small planetoids down to specks of sand. All of them moving in regular ellipses unchanged for billions of years. Stellar clockwork.

The blue-green planet was the farther out of the two inner worlds, roughly ten light seconds away from the star. It had one satellite of its own, an asteroid over five-hundred kilometers wide captured by the planetary gravity eons before. Had the vector of the asteroid been different by less than a degree, it would have hit the planet instead of being captured by it. The impact would have been sufficient to kill everything on the world, wiping out the planet's ability to support life.

One day, philosophers and theologians from other worlds would debate whether or not that should have happened. The history of the Milky Way galaxy would have been different.

As it was, the planet had one moon. Then the very next moment, it had two.

The newcomer was a featureless white sphere a mere kilometer in diameter. It fell into orbit around the blue green world, with only its unnatural perfection and regularity betraying that it didn't belong.

* * *

Jack Killian, Major of the Terran Republic Marine Corps, paused to straighten the tunic of his dress uniform. He looked both ways down the long, curving corridor. With everything in place, he opened the door and strode in.

He was on the bridge of the white sphere, the *TRS Envoy*. She was humanity's first true starship, capable of crossing the vast gulfs between star systems in the blink of an eye. The bridge was expansive, the sounds of dozens of crew members muffled only slightly by the non-slip rubber flooring. The flat black floor ran right up to the far wall, which consisted of a floor to ceiling viewscreen, displaying a view of space and the planet below. Jack always felt the bridge was floating in space, open to the stars.

Jack's target was the man sitting in the center of the bridge, his back to Jack. "Captain Chenzokov!" Jack called with a baritone voice used to commanding men. Everyone on the bridge turned to look, except Chenzokov himself.

Chenzokov continued to stare at the screen, showing Jack the back of his head. "Major Killian." The bridge crew seemed to expect more from their captain, but that was all he had to say.

Rather than walk to the front of Chenzokov's chair, Jack planted himself behind the captain, in a direct line between Chenzokov and the door. He stood at military attention, shoulders square, feet together, hands at his sides. "We need to talk, Captain."

The captain didn't turn. "So talk."

"In private, sir."

Now Chenzokov turned, his chair swiveling to face Jack. Chenzokov was much older than Jack, a robust bearded Russian in his seventies. With the vista of the planet behind him, he looked every inch the master of his ship. "We will do no such thing, Major. I trust my crew with my life. Anything you have to say to me you can say in front of them."

Jack didn't move from attention, but somehow gave the impression of nodding. He gathered a breath. "Why," he said, "was I not informed of your intention to use the Tunnel Drive?"

Chenzokov smirked, the action creasing his face. "Inform you?" He turned to address Ensign Williams, the communications officer on duty. "Mister Williams, have we received any changes to our orders?"

"No, sir."

Chenzokov nodded. "I see. So then under the authority of President Staten, I am still the captain of this ship?"

"Yes, sir."

“Hmm. Major Killian, it would seem that I am the captain of this vessel, it’s undisputed lord and master. Why would it be necessary to inform you before moving it?”

“The security of this vessel is my responsibility, Captain—”

“No, Major Killian, the security of our passengers is your responsibility. The security of the vessel itself is mine. Your past accomplishments mean nothing to me, Major. I will not have you usurping my authority on this ship.”

Jack wasn’t finished. “The President of the Terran Republic appointed me head of security for this mission. Before we tunneled into an unknown system, you should have given me the chance to make sure it would be safe to do so. My duty is to see to it that these people are safe, and I won’t have you jeopardize that just because you want to play cowboy with ‘your’ ship.”

“We scanned the system,” Chenzokov said at last.

“The probes—” Jack began.

“The probes are fine,” Chenzokov said. “The best Russian technology has to offer. If there were a threat in this system, we’d know about it.”

Jack took a deep breath, marshaling his strength. “I’m not going to get sucked into a debate over your pointless nationalistic rivalries. Not again. If you have issues with my being American, that’s just too bad. I’m the security officer for this mission, and I should have been notified before tunneling so we could be prepared to defend this vessel against any threats that your probes may have missed.”

Chenzokov rose from his chair. “ ‘Defend this vessel’? Against what? If anyone is playing ‘cowboy’ here, Major, it’s you. Maybe you see danger everywhere you go; given your record, I can understand why. But I assure you, my dear Major, we are quite safe here, and if we weren’t, there’s nothing you and your Marines could do about it.”

Jack stood in silence for a moment, beaten. He raised his head and looked the captain in the eye. “You have a point, Captain. Maybe I was overreacting.”

Chenzokov nodded, and the bridge crew turned back to their tasks.

“As there are no threats in the area to keep us with the ship,” Jack continued, “I’d like to take my Marines down in the dropship and scout potential colony sites. We might be able to see things on the ground that we could miss from orbit.”

“Yes, fine,” the captain waved his hand. “Whatever. It will be a few days until the science teams will be ready to land. You have until then.”

Jack exited the bridge. No one saw the smile on his face.

* * *

Marine Lieutenant Robyn O’Reilly stood in the cramped Marine briefing room, a conference room near the drop bays. Like most of the military quarters on the ship, it was small, poorly ventilated and looked like the afterthought it was. The one thing it had going for it was the far wall, a floor to ceiling viewscreen similar to, though much smaller than, the one

on the bridge. It gave her an unobstructed view of the planet they now orbited.

The door opposite the screen opened and Jack walked into the room. He looked pleased, but worried about something too. She'd been Jack's XO long enough to read his moods. Now a First Lieutenant, she'd been a Second Lieutenant fresh out of the academy when Jack had first met her on Mars. Now she was vital to him as a sounding board, voice of reason, and all too often, his conscience.

"So, how'd it go?" she asked.

"He approved a scouting mission in the dropship."

Robyn had expected it, but the news still surprised her. "With armor?"

"My discretion," Jack said, walking past her to the viewscreen.

"How did you manage that? Chenzokov has had us just about confined to quarters. He's wanted to shove us all out the damned airlock since we left spacedock."

Jack turned to her and smiled. "I started an argument with him, then apologized. Once he saved face in front of his crew, he stopped listening and gave me anything I wanted."

Robyn laughed. "You are my god."

"Easy there, Lieutenant. The tough part is just beginning."

She looked at the screen, the world so like Earth spinning beneath them. "You don't like it, do you?"

He looked at the screen. "It wouldn't be my first choice. Too many unknowns. There's a whole ecosystem down there that we've never seen. All we know is that the gravity and atmosphere are close enough to Earth not to kill us. That leaves a whole lot of things down there that can."

She walked over to stand next to him. "You understand why we're here. You know better than anyone why terraforming a dead world isn't politically viable with the folks back home."

He sighed. "Yes, Robyn, I know."

"Hey," she said. "Mars wasn't your fault. You did everything possible to avert—"

"It wasn't enough, though, was it?" Jack said. "And now we're passing up any number of worlds suitable for terraforming, taking unnecessary risks—"

"We're soldiers, sir. We're doing what we've been ordered to do."

Jack stood a little straighter at that. "Good point, Robyn."

Jack touched a few controls at the edge of the screen. The view of the planet zoomed in, showing just the tropical and temperate zones.

With his finger, Jack circled three locations on the planet, two in the northern hemisphere and one in the southern. The screen reacted to his touch by showing bright red circles around the locations he specified and humming softly as each circle pulsed.

"I think we should concentrate here," he said. "All three sites offer a good mix of terrain and climate. They should give us a nice overview of what this planet has to offer."

Jack leaned against the viewscreen as he talked. Robyn thought it looked like he was about to fall out into space. She didn't know why, but the image frightened her. She shook it off. She was a Marine. She wasn't afraid of anything. "What are the opsspecs?" she asked, focusing on the view of the planet itself.

"We'll go down in full armor, and breathe on suit air until we're sure there are no pathogens in the atmosphere. I want a full dispersal, full sensor sweep. This is going to be a nature hike on an alien world, and we need to treat it with the requisite caution."

Robyn nodded. "Yes, sir."

Jack walked towards the door. "Round up the troops and meet me in the drop bay in fifteen minutes, Lieutenant. I want to get off this giant golf ball before Chenzokov changes his mind."

The door closed behind Jack, and Robyn looked back at the screen. Something about that planet unsettled her, but she'd be damned if she could figure out what it was.

* * *

Jack walked into his quarters, a room two by three meters square. It held a cot, a locker and not much else. Part of the wall above the locker was a viewscreen capable of displaying anything he wanted, but Jack left it blank. He didn't have time for entertainment vids, and landscapes or other scenery were just fluff.

The one thing in the room Jack cared about was a small steel pendant on a stand above his locker. He walked over and held it, enjoying the feel of the rough-carved steel. The pendant had cost him almost nothing when he got it from a street vendor in New Chicago. It was the shape of the Tai Chi Tu, the Chinese Yin and Yang symbol. Besides being the symbol of the Terran Republic, it was a religious symbol to Jack. Or at least, he tried to make it one.

Jack tried to be a Taoist. The ancient Chinese philosophy stressed tolerance, going with the flow, relaxing and letting events unfold at their own pace. The problem was that he was a classic "Type A" personality and just letting things happen wasn't in his blood.

He was the last in a line of military men dating back to the American Civil War. In all that time, he was the first officer, and he was proud of that. But in the two centuries of a unified world government since the Angelic Jihad, the role of a soldier had changed.

Earth had been at peace for over 150 years, and even the French Separatist Movement of 2029 was settled without undue bloodshed. Most citizens didn't feel the need for a standing military, and Jack had taken his share of being called "warmonger" and "killer." Chenzokov was vocal about the need, or lack of need, for a security force on board *Envoy*, and the Marines were shoved in late in the construction, ordered on board by the President over Chenzokov's objections.

Envoy was a mission of peace, after all. The ship was the brainchild of Daniel Cho, the first President of the Terran Republic. Cho understood that most of the fighting in the history of the

human race was over territory. If humanity was to stay at peace, united by a single government, it would have to spread out, move into the stars.

The first phase of Cho's plan was the colonization and terraforming of Mars. This was working out until six years before, when a presidential assassination gone bad destroyed the largest colony dome on Mars, killing millions of civilians. Jack had foiled the assassination but failed to prevent the explosion. He and the President lived, but waiting centuries under pressurized colony domes to terraform a planet was deemed too dangerous to continue.

Cho had started another project after his presidency ended that ran in parallel to the Mars Project. Project *Envoy* was more ambitious, but would give mankind the stars if it succeeded.

The idea was to build a faster than light engine that would allow true star travel, then use that to power a colony ship that could settle other star systems. The Tunnel Drive had been invented when Jack was just a boy, but took decades to perfect it and build a ship to use it.

After the Mars incident, politicians in the Terran Republic decided that *Envoy* would be used to find earthlike, habitable worlds. It made the search longer, more difficult and orders of magnitude more expensive, but safer.

President James Staten disagreed, despite what he'd experienced on Mars. When it became clear that the Senate would mandate a search for Earthlike worlds over his objections, he fought to put Jack Killian on board the *Envoy*.

Jack took his appointment to protect the *Envoy* and her crew seriously, even if he was unwelcome. He'd seen enough danger in his career to know that nothing was safe, no matter how innocuous it looked.

He brushed his fingertips over the pendant, then started changing from his dress uniform into the combat harness he'd wear underneath his armor.

* * *

The drop bay of the *Envoy* was the largest single room on the ship. Only the tunnel drive itself was bigger, but it wasn't a room. The drop bay was situated on the *Envoy's* "equator" and was shaped like the inside of a doughnut, with the central pillar housing the Tunnel Drive. Along the outer edge, it had multiple doors that opened into space. Facing most of these doors were shuttles, large bulbous ships designed to carry as many passengers and equipment as comfortably and safely as possible.

One ship was different. The Marines's drop ship was a sharp, angular and wicked looking ship, apart from the gleaming white civilian shuttles. The snub-nosed cockpit gave way to massive "shoulders" that housed 30mm chaingun arrays. The dorsal side of the dropship was studded with missile launchers, and it tapered to a V-shaped tail. The cockpit sides were painted with shark's teeth, a design dating back 250 years, and the motto of the Terran Republic Marine Corps was painted above it. "Semper Fidelis," in white cursive script against the dull gunmetal gray. Always Faithful.

When Jack walked into the drop bay, the assembled Marines were standing around, leaning on equipment, clustered around the dropship but not doing anything in particular.

Robyn was among them, shooting the shit with the guys. As soon as she saw Jack, she bolted to attention and shouted, "Ma-RINES, ten-HUT!"

The Marines ran to their spots in formation and snapped to attention. Jack stood back and addressed the troops. There were only four of them, just a fireteam. *Envoy* didn't even rate a full platoon. "Okay, Marines, we finally get to do what we've been training for. Captain Chenzokov has authorized a dropship mission to scout potential colony sites.

"I think you all know the dangers involved. We have no idea what's waiting for us down there. We do know it's a new ecosystem, and as far as the planet's concerned, we don't belong there. Our primary goal is to make sure that when Chenzokov sends down the civilian scientists, they don't get eaten, poisoned, driven crazy or dissolved.

"We're going to scout three colony sites, ensuring the safety of each one. We can't afford to miss anything. We've got a couple days to determine everything this planet can throw at us before the captain gets impatient. We need to work quickly.

"Let's suit up."

Jack led the Marines to a section of the wall surrounding the central pillar. Lined up like sentinels were several suits of armor. The armor was flat black, metallic and sculpted to correspond to major human muscle groups. The result was a dark Greek god, sleek, lithe and powerful. The armor was based on the suit of angelic armor worn by Daniel Cho in the Angelic Jihad, although two centuries of refinements had made these suits stronger, faster and more responsive than Cho's. Each suit weighed less than two hundred pounds, and each Marine was capable of suiting up on their own, without the group of assistants Cho had needed. The new armor was also more power-efficient, allowing a Marine to run for up to two weeks without recharging the suit.

Jack put on his armor, the rank insignia on the shoulders all that differentiated it from the others. He looked out through the heads-up display in his faceplate, seeing readouts for various suit systems superimposed over his vision. He cycled through several targeting modes, making sure everything checked out. A Marine's armor was more than protection. It was weaponry, life support, mobility. A suited Marine could run over fifty miles an hour in bounding strides, lift up to five tons, and survive in environments from the cold vacuum of the moon to the molten-lead greenhouse heat of Venus. In a hostile environment, a Marine's suit was his life, and Jack instilled that respect in all his troops. They were on a short time schedule, but there was no rushing to check out their suits. No one would leave until everyone was suited up.

Jack got a thumbs-up from each of the Marines. Everyone was checked out and ready to go. He led them to the back of the dropship, where they all walked up the ramp into the belly of the ship. Robyn and her co-pilot Corporal Shimura continued forward to the cockpit while Jack and rest took their places along the walls, fitting themselves into armor-sized restraints for the ride down. Once secured, Jack and the other Marines would be parts of the ship, as immovable as the hull itself. Jack was right next to ramp. He insisted on the last in, first out position.

He heard Robyn's voice over the TacNet, a radio link between armored suits. "Everyone secure?" He knew she could see a readout in the cockpit that showed the status of each Marine in their harness, but she asked anyway. Like many pilots, Robyn didn't trust instrumentation.

Jack looked around, then joined the TacNet. "That's affirmative, Lieutenant."

"Roger. Buttoning up," she said, and the ramp began to pull forward and tip up to become the bottom panel of the dropship's tapering tail. It sealed with a metallic clang.

"Clearing the drop bay," Robyn announced with calm routine. Jack heard a whooshing through the hull of the dropship as all the air was sucked out of the room and into other parts of the ship. No sense wasting it by letting it vent out to space when the doors opened. Looking to his left, he could see down the center of the dropship into the cockpit. The drop bay was bathed in red light, a warning to any unsuited civilian to get the hell out of there.

"Drop bay is clear," Robyn announced. "Opening the bay doors."

Jack saw but could no longer hear the huge white doors slide up and down, revealing the blackness of space beyond. He couldn't see the planet below from his vantage point.

"Powering cat," Robyn said. Jack's adrenaline level and heart rate was rising, but Robyn sounded bored. Jack knew her well enough to know she was as excited as he was, but military pilots had a tradition going back to the dawn of the jet age of keeping their cool. If they didn't sound like they were about to fall asleep, they weren't pilots.

Jack felt an increase in vibration as the catapult holding the dropship powered up, building and holding enough power to fling the massive armored craft out of the *Envoy* and into space.

"Launch in five," Robyn said.

"Four, Three, Two..."

Jack felt a sharp build in power. Here it came...

"One."

With a jolt, the dropship plunged out of the drop bay and into the open space beyond. The exploration of humanity's first extrasolar colony world had begun.

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