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# The Unification Chronicles: *First Contact*

Part 2 of 4

*by Jeff Kirvin*

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**The Story So Far:** *The TRS Envoy, humanity's first true starship, has reached a planet close enough to Earth's ecosystem to allow human colonization. After convincing the captain of the Envoy to let him explore the planet, Major Jack Killian of the Terran Republic Marines is leading a squad down to determine what threats might wait for the colonists.*

\* \* \*

The dropship plunged into the planet's ionosphere, buffeted by winds. Jack could hear the screaming air through both the dropship's hull and his helmet. Jack had been through this dozens of times, on Earth and on Mars. He noticed Private Vijay Girish's brown face taking on a tinge of green behind the flat faceplate of his helmet. The young Indian was a fearless infantryman that Jack had seen firsthand on Mars. Girish was an expert with every weapon the team carried, and a natural shot.

"Private Girish," he said over the chop.

"Sir?" Girish managed to sputter.

"I thought you were rated for planetary drops."

"I am. Sir." He avoided retching into his helmet.

Jack looked at him.

"Just because I can do it, sir, doesn't mean I have to like it." Girish said as he choked something back.

Jack smiled. "So long as you're okay by the time we hit ground, Private."

"Yes sir."

Robyn O'Reilly, the dropship's pilot, radioed back to Jack. "Approaching the first LZ! Two minutes!"

*Landing Zone*, Jack translated. The first of three spots designated as suitable colony sites by the Envoy computer analysis of the planetary topography.

"Roger that," he said to Robyn. Then, to the rest of the team, "Lock and load, people, we hit dirt in two."

The team checked the charges on their weapons, then the integrity of each other's suits. The atmospheric probe sent down by *Envoy* hadn't detected anything toxic in the air, but it was better not to take any chances.

"One minute!" Robyn called back.

Jack could see the planet's surface out the pilot's window. They were flying over a lush and expansive jungle, much like the pictures of rain forests he'd seen in history class as a child. The last Terran rain forest had disappeared more than a century before his birth. This alien version was breathtaking.

"Prepare for touch down!" Robyn shouted. Jack braced himself, and the dropship pounded into the soft ground of the landing site. The hydraulics of the landing gear absorbed a lot of the shock, but the impact still would have broken both his legs if he hadn't been wearing the armor.

Before the ship even had a chance to settle, the rear door snapped open and the Marines filed out, fanning out into a defensive formation as soon as they cleared the dropship.

For a few tense moments, the only sounds in the clearing were the hum of charged plasma rifles and the ticking of cooling metal on the dropship. The Marines trained their weapons on the trees around them, looking for anything that could threaten the civilian colonists. Finally, Jack raised his hand and called the All Clear.

"What next, sir?" asked Private Sighis Ahiga, a Navajo from a family that chose to live as their ancestors did, outside the city-sized arcologies that dotted Earth's land masses. Earth's ecosystem wouldn't have been able to handle twenty billion humans if they were all still spread out over the surface, and some of the arcology dwellers resented "natives" like Ahiga. Living off the land made the towering Navajo stout and muscular, an ideal build for the fireteam's mechanic and heavy gunner.

"We button up the dropship and secure the area," Jack said as Robyn and Corporal Shimura exited the craft. "We've determined the air and gravity won't kill us, but nothing else. We're here to find the snakes in the Captain Chenzokov's Garden of Eden."

That brought a smile from most of the troops. Jack's feud with the *Envoy's* skipper was no secret. Most of the Marines shared Jack's assessment that Chenzokov was idealistic, and thus dangerous.

Jack raised his plasma rifle. "Let's go."

\* \* \*

The first few hours of the search were uneventful, but that came as no surprise to anyone. The dropship landing made enough noise to scare off an army, much less any wildlife. As far as anyone could tell, the planet was every bit as benign as the probes said it was.

Then it happened.

\* \* \*

Even though the armor's power amplification wasn't supposed to make it any more stressful to wear than a normal uniform, Private Bartalo Rodas was tired. They'd been scouring the area for hours, and found nothing. Rodas trudged over to the nearest tree and leaned against it.

Although regulations stated that all components of the armor were to be worn until further notice, Rodas removed his helmet. *Screw the regs*, he thought. *I'm not breathing this canned crap one more minute*. They had all been breathing the air of the planet for a few hours, ever since Major Killian declared it safe to breathe, but by the time it passed through all the vents and filters, it smelled and tasted just like canned suit air.

Rodas wasn't thrilled about his assignment. Like most of the enlisted member's of *Envoy's* security team, he'd been randomly selected, *volunteered* for the job. TRHQ wanted to ensure there was no favoritism in the selection, so they ended up with a group that didn't care, or at least that's the way Rodas saw it. He had a nice little life going on back in Spain, and he had to uproot it all for this tromping around lightyears from home so some rich civilians could move out of the arcologies and screw up another planet the way humans had screwed up Earth.

So Rodas leaned against a tree, inhaling the moist and tangy air of an alien world, and he never knew what hit him.

\* \* \*

Jack stood up to his armored chest in the river, analyzing its composition. *Nothing out of the ordinary*, he noted, *just water and dirt*. There were a few microorganisms, but nothing that couldn't be filtered out.

"Major!" Robyn called from bank.

Jack stored his sampling equipment and began wading out of the river. "What is it, Robyn?"

"Rodas didn't report in."

Jack wasn't surprised. The guy had an attitude problem. For the millionth time, Jack wished he'd been allowed to select his own team. It was all he could do to get Robyn and Private Girish from his Mars squad, but the politicians assigned the rest. "Where was he the last time you *did* hear from him?"

"Recon, sector fourteen."

*Damn scouts.* Jack hadn't wanted to send Rojas off on his own, but his scout suit was faster than the rest. So while the other Marines were paired up, Rojas was free to roam on his own, the furthest from camp. Sector fourteen was kilometers away.

Jack keyed his helmet radio and called the two most reliable of his enlisted troops, Girish, and Sergeant Major Eleanor Jabari, a thin and elegant Egyptian old enough to be Jack's mother. Jabari looked matronly, but she could best any man in her platoon in hand-to-hand combat and she could drink most of them under the table. Robyn was Jack's right hand, but Jabari was his conduit to the enlisted troops, and was invaluable to maintaining discipline. "Jabari. Girish. Meet me in sector fourteen, waypoint one. We have a straggler."

\* \* \*

They found Rodas's armor several hundred meters into the forest, or what was left of the armor. Scattered fragments of it lay about like bits of lobster shell after a feast. Bloodstains marked the trees for ten meters.

"The first thing I want is to examine the remains," Jack said. "Private Girish, you get the honors of gathering them. Sergeant Major, you and I will provide cover while Private Girish works. I don't want whatever happened to Rodas to happen again."

"Yessir," the enlisted Marines said in unison. Jack and Jabari spread out, weapons ready, and Girish went to work.

Jack had been afraid something like this might happen. It was arrogance on the part of Chenzokov, and his cronies back on Earth, to believe an alien world wouldn't have threats and dangers all its own. Life wasn't that simple. Even on Earth it wasn't safe for most people to live outside the arcologies. Outside those self-contained havens of humanity, the rest of the planet had gone feral again. Grasslands had broken up and swallowed the vast seas of twentieth century concrete, and predators once again roamed wild, maintaining the balance of the ecosystem. Every once in a while, Jack read a story about a family outside the domes on vacation that got themselves eaten by wolves or something. It happened. And if it happened on Earth, a planet where humans had been the undisputed masters for centuries, why wouldn't the same risk apply on a world that had never known mankind?

"Sir," Girish said, holding out an arm of the armor suit. "This arm still has arm in it."

"Good," Jack replied. "The remains may give us some clue as to what killed him." Jack turned and saw that Girish had all of the armor parts gathered in an alloy mesh bag. "Got

everything?" he asked.

"Yes sir."

"Back to the ship, then," Jack said.

They left the rain forest. They were not followed.

\* \* \*

That night, from the safety of the dropship, Jack radioed Captain Chenzokov and relayed the news. Chenzokov took it well.

"What do you mean, a *creature*?" the thick Russian accent boomed over the speakers of the dropship radio.

"What I mean, sir, is that an unknown, indigenous creature has attacked and killed one of my men. I mean that this planet may not be safe for colonization, considering that the attack came while he was in full armor. I mean that you should not under any circumstances attempt to send a shuttle down until we determine the nature and extent of the threat. Is all of that perfectly, absolutely clear, sir?"

The captain was silent for a long moment, and Jack began to wonder if the radio link had failed. Then, "Do you understand, Major, how rare a planet is that is capable of supporting human life without an atmospheric dome?"

Jack knew all too well. It was the reason they were there, after all. "Yes, sir, I am. But breathable air won't make any difference if the colony gets eaten within the first six months."

"We aren't leaving, Major," Chenzokov said. "I'm sorry about your man, but we aren't giving up a promising colony world just because there's a violent predator on it. Find this creature, and kill it, but we aren't leaving."

"*Envoy* out."

The radio went dead and Jack just sat in the cockpit staring at it for a moment. It was obvious that his recommendations meant nothing. The colonists' safety meant nothing. All that mattered was the bottom line. Jack knew that the colonists were coming down sooner or later, and that if they weren't safe, *he'd* be held responsible, not Chenzokov.

Jack got up and walked to the back of the cramped dropship, sidestepping the temporary base camp set up in the middle. A small workbench had been set up aft, and it was there that Jack found Private First Class Honir Bersi studying what was left of Rodas.

"What do we have here, Bersi?"

Bersi turned to Jack and held up his hands. "First off, sir, I'm just a paramedic. I'm not a doctor, I'm not a forensic scientist. All I really know is that Rodas is way too dead to treat."

"But you have some theories," Jack said. Bersi was using the Corps as on the job experience en route to being a doctor back in Norway. Jack had talked to Bersi over beers earlier in the trip and found him amiable, but he had no idea how Bersi would react in a dangerous situation.

"Of course. We'll start with the obvious stuff," he said as he turned back to the remains and pointed out things as he spoke. "All that's left of Rodas is most of his right arm, up to the deltoid, and part of his left foot. Now, on both wounds, there are characteristic gouges, here," he said, showing Jack the lacerated end of Rodas' arm, "and here," he said, showing the foot.

"The gouges are consistent in size and depth, and they appear to run in parallel."

"Teeth marks," Jack said.

Bersi nodded. "Looks that way, but these teeth would have to be 15-20 centimeters long and tough enough to bite through armor. Not to mention that the creature itself would have to be strong enough to attack and kill an armored man."

"Given what you can surmise from Rodas, can we find this creature, and kill it?"

"Sir, we can kill anything you want. And as big as this thing has to be, finding it shouldn't be impossible."

"How big do you think it is?"

Bersi leaned against the workbench. "About five to seven tons, seven to ten meters long, if it's shaped at all like Terran predators. Sir, we had a creature with the same size, speed and teeth on Earth.

"The Tyrannosaurus Rex."

\* \* \*

On board the *Envoy*, Captain Vladimir Chenzokov seethed in his quarters, pacing from wall to wall and back again. Unlike most of the crew quarters on the ship, his were spacious. He couldn't cope with the burdens of his mission without being able to pace.

Killian didn't get it. They had to settle this world, whatever the dangers. It wasn't a matter of preference. It wasn't like they had centuries to roam the galaxy, looking for someplace was just perfect, full of fuzzy bunnies and Povidlyanka.

The Terran Republic government, not to mention scores of private corporations, had spent far too much money for Chenzokov to allow Killian any vetoes. If they failed to find a suitable colony world, somewhere without the delay of centuries of terraforming ... Chenzokov shook it off. The penalties of failure were not something he wished to contemplate. He would not fail.

So there was an animal down there. Of course there was. There were billions of animals down there. The planet wouldn't be worth settling if there weren't. He had to rely on Killian to secure the area, make it safe. That's what his warmongering kind was good for, wasn't it? Killing, destroying? Just like he'd done on Mars. Yes.

Chenzokov stopped pacing and sat down at his computer. He starting going through the rosters of scientists, putting together a select group he could take down to the surface with him in one shuttle. If Killian couldn't handle this, maybe he needed closer supervision. To be shown the realities of the situation.

Yes.

\* \* \*

The next morning the Marines returned to the jungle in full combat armor, determined to find and destroy the creature that killed one of their own. In an attempt to cover more ground, they split up into smaller groups, two, two and three. Jack was teamed with Private Bersi and Corporal Shimura. The jungle was silent, and heavy with mist. Jack could see maybe twenty meters in any direction.

"What are we looking for, Private?" Jack asked.

"I'm not sure, sir. Just because this thing has the size and the bite of a Terran T. Rex doesn't mean it shares any other characteristics. It's big, meaning that even if it is exothermic, we should still be able to pick it up on infrared, and being a predator, it'll smell terrible. Other than that, I have no idea what it looks like."

Jack keyed his helmet radio. "Killian to team. Given the size of this thing, we're likely to pick it up on infrared long before we get visual through this mist. Switch to IR imaging until target is acquired. Out."

Jack switched his helmet's visual display to IR overlay. On the HUD projected on his faceplate, the jungle took on strange, ethereal shapes and colors as he began discerning objects by their thermal output rather than the visible spectrum colors they reflected. The ground was black, the trees a deep navy, and the occasional small forest creature a bright splash of fiery yellow, orange and red. But nothing big enough to have ripped open Rodas' armor.

"I have a heat source!" radioed Private Ahiga. "Two hundred meters north of my position. It's big, and it's moving, north by northeast."

"Roger, we're on our way." Jack called up a map of the area showing the relative position of his men. Ahiga was almost five hundred meters east of him.

Waving his Marines on, Jack took off in a powered lope towards a position north of Ahiga, his armored strength carrying him more than ten meters a stride. Bersi and Shimura followed.

Jack reached Ahiga. "Report," he said.

"There, sir," Ahiga said, pointing northward. "150 meters."

Jack looked where Ahiga was pointing and froze. The thing was huge, larger than Bersi's estimate. And it was heading their way.

Jack noted that the rest of the strike team had joined them. "Here it comes, Marines," he said. "Fire at will when it comes into visual range."

For a moment, the jungle was silent enough for Jack to become aware of the sound of his own breathing. Then, the creature appeared.

Bersi had been right about the head; it did resemble a Terran tyrannosaur. The rest of the body was different. It had four limbs, the front two being large and powerful enough for it to walk as either a biped or a quadruped. The tail was short and stubby, and the creature leaned against it as it reared up on his hind legs. The skin was smooth, and bright orange on the back fading to a pale cream underside. As soon as it saw the men, the creature let out a terrible

bellow, a scream no human had ever heard before.

"Fire at the body!" Jack shouted. "I want the head for study!"

On Jack's order, the men opened fire with their plasma rifles. Superheated streams of hydrogen enveloped the creature's torso, which burst into flames even before it died.

Once it was down, Jack and the men surrounded it. "Stay clear of the mouth," Jack warned, "until we're sure it's dead."

Upon closer examination, the creature looked less like a monster and more like what it was: an animal looking for food. Jack felt a certain pity for it, and was even more convinced that this was the wrong planet for *Envoy* to colonize.

"Sir!" called Jabari. "You'd better take a look at this."

Jack trotted over to where Jabari was standing, the flank of the beast. "What do you have, Sergeant Major?"

She pointed to some strange markings on the creature's right thigh. "That. We didn't do that. Is that what I think it is?"

Jack studied the strange symbols scarred into the creature's flesh, then it hit him what he was looking at. His mind flooded with images he'd seen in school as a child, a textbook of the American west. "Shit."

"Sir?"

"It's a brand. This creature belonged to someone. Or something.

"Let's cut down some of these trees and make some kind of harness to drag this thing back to camp. Then I have a call to make."

\* \* \*

Chenzokov and a few scientists came down in the first shuttle just over an hour later, and Jack was there to greet them as they came off the shuttle ramp.

"Good afternoon, Captain," Jack said, guiding Chenzokov towards the dropship. "I think there's something you need to see."

As Jack walked with Chenzokov behind the dropship, he heard the older man gasp. The carcass of the creature was laid out alongside the dropship, and between the plasma burns and the jungle's heat, it was beginning to get a bit pungent.

"The first thing I want you to take note of," Jack said, dragging Chenzokov to the front of the beast, "is the head. Note the teeth, both their size and number. These are the same teeth that ripped open one of my men, while he was still wearing his armor."

The Russian gagged, but said nothing.

Jack nodded. "And while you are thinking about that mouth attached to nine tons of muscle, let me show you something else." Jack guided Chenzokov to the rear of the creature

and pointed out the brand.

“Notice anything strange about this marking?” Jack asked.

Chenzokov coughed. “It is an odd shape and placement for scar tissue, I’ll admit—”

Jack threw up his hands in disgust. “It’s a *brand*, Captain. Proof of ownership. Someone or something tried to domesticate this animal.

“We are not alone here.”

“I—I see no proof of this,” Chenzokov sputtered.

“Captain!” Jack exclaimed. “You can’t still believe—”

Chenzokov straightened and looked Jack in the eye. “I believe you and your men found and killed a predator which attacked one of your men, a creature that bears a curious, if random, piece of scar tissue. Nothing more.

“We are here, Major, to establish a colony world for the Terran Republic. This planet is as close to perfect as we are going to find, and I’ll not let you chase us away from it with your wild and unfounded speculations!

“A brand. A barbaric practice we abolished centuries ago! To think a starfaring race would still ... No, you are wrong, Major. There is no danger here other than the wild animals of this ecosystem. To that end, you will set up a defensive perimeter large enough for the colonists. And I will hear no more of your paranoid theories!”

With that, Chenzokov turned on his heel and walked away, leaving Jack to ponder the strange symbol on the creature’s thigh.

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