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# The Unification Chronicles: *Inquisition*

Volume 5

*by Jeff Kirvin*

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Solo Media

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**The Story So Far:** Humanity's first interstellar ship, the Envoy, has been destroyed following a disastrous first contact with a theropod-like alien species. Major Jack Killian and

Lieutenant Robyn O'Reilly of the Terran Republic Marines were able to return to Earth and save nearly half the colonists, but the mission was a devastating failure and a massive setback in the 200-year old program to relocate some of Earth's twenty billion humans. Someone is going to have to answer for that.

\* \* \*

"Right this way, Major."

It was the first time Jack had ever been subjected to a formal inquest, and he wasn't sure what to expect. Even after Mars, there'd been nothing like this. They'd barely given him time to change into his dark brown dress uniform after landing before they ushered him into an elegant courtroom. He was told to stand behind a podium facing a long table with four seats, then he was left alone.

The far door opened and a sergeant came through. The man snapped to attention and then shouted, "Marine! Ten hut!"

Jack stood at attention, moving only his eyes as the members of the panel that would question him walked into the room and took their seats.

The first was James Staten, the President of the Terran Republic. Staten was a tall man with an almost regal bearing. Jack had worked closely with him on Mars and thought well of him. The man was a civilian, but he was strong. He had handled himself well on Mars and had fought to get Jack on board the *Envoy*. Jack took his presence as a good sign.

The next person through the door was Elaine Takemura, the president's science advisor. Takemura was a genius, generally regarded as the next Hawking or Singh. She was dressed in a severely tailored black suit, and moved almost like a bird, with quick, precise motions, uncomfortably reminding Jack of the Saurians.

Behind Takemura was Thomas Gosnell, the president's political advisor. Jack had met him before and didn't like the man. He may have been a political genius that got his boss reelected after Mars, but Jack still thought of him as a toad. The man was short and fat, and despite his obvious wealth wore an ill-fitting brown suit. Jack tried to shake off his feelings. He wasn't the first soldier that disliked politicians.

Last into the room was General Orlando Cheung, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

As all four took their seats, General Cheung said, "At ease, Major."

Jack relaxed his stance just a bit, falling into parade rest. He clasped his hands behind his back and waited.

President Staten took out a small pair of reading glasses, an archaic affectation that voters seemed to like. It had always bugged Jack. Staten consulted a slate on the desk in front of him, bringing up some text. "Jack, good to see you again," he said, looking up from his notes.

"You too, sir."

"Let's not beat around the bush, Jack," Staten said. "Somebody fucked up out there."

"Yes sir."

"I've read your report," the president continued, referring to the brief notes Jack had managed to compile on the way down to Earth from *Envoy's* tunnel point just inside Luna's orbit. "It doesn't paint a glowing picture of Captain Chenzokov."

"No sir, it doesn't."

Gosnell looked increasingly irritated in his seat. Staten seemed aware of it, but content not to acknowledge him just yet.

"But in point of fact," Staten said, "we have managed to confirm very little of what you report. Chenzokov never sent us any word of aliens and none of the colonists we've talked to so far ever saw one. We're going to need a little more to go on, Jack. The *Envoy* was the work of two hundred years, the pinnacle of human achievement. Now it's a ball of scrap metal. The public is going to want some answers."

"It's all in my report, sir. We set down on New Eden, started scouting colony sites. At our first location, we observed an intelligent, technological alien race with dinosaur-like characteristics. I informed Captain Chenzokov, and he decided to make first contact on his own and against my advice. The aliens reacted badly and we had to bug out."

General Cheung leaned forward. "Reacted badly, Major?"

"It was weird, sir. The Saurians were cautious, but not overtly threatening as we approached. They had their weapons pointed to the sky rather than trained on our vehicle, even though the big mechs could have taken us out without waiting for us to make a move. They were quiet, just waiting. It wasn't until Captain Chenzokov rounded the back of the vehicle and came into view that they reacted."

"And for the record, what was that reaction, Major?"

"They went apeshit, sir. They fired on us immediately, screaming and hooting like it was the end of the world."

Elaine Takemura spoke up. "I'm not sure we can make any suppositions from their vocalizations, Major, without knowing what their language is like. What seemed like screaming to you may have been little more than tactical direction. I am interested in the timing, however. You say they didn't open fire until they actually saw Chenzokov?"

"That's correct, ma'am."

"Did Captain Chenzokov do anything they might have found threatening?"

"Not that I could see, ma'am."

"Interesting. So you would say that the reaction they expressed towards our technology was radically different from the way they reacted to seeing us in the flesh?"

"That was my observation, ma'am."

"Major," said General Cheung, "tell me more about what happened once you returned to the *Envoy*. What did you observe about the alien vessels?"

“Dangerous, sir. I couldn’t judge their size very well, but they were big. They seemed use the same tunnel effect we use, and also used it to incorporate a mass driver.”

Cheung nodded. “And their first shot missed you?”

“Yes, sir. I guessed from the sudden gravity spike what they were doing. It occurred to me that if I could put the gravity field of the *Envoy* between us, it might alter the trajectory of the asteroid.”

“Excellent call, Major. That seems to have made the difference in making it home,” said General Cheung.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Major Killian,” said Takemura, “how long did it take to execute the tunnel?”

Jack had to think about that. “Less than a minute, if I recall, ma’am.”

“And the aliens were both watching you the entire time?”

“Presumably, ma’am.”

“And you tunneled straight to Earth, is that correct?”

*Where’s she going with this?* Jack wondered. “Yes, ma’am.”

Takemura turned to Staten. “Mister President, there might be a problem. If the aliens thought to observe and measure the direction and intensity of our tunnel, they might have been able to determine where it terminated.”

“So the aliens might know our location?” said Staten.

“They would not know it’s our home system, but they might want to check it out eventually.”

Gosnell snorted again. The president sat back, nodding to him.

Gosnell leaned forward, his jowly flesh lapping over his collar. “Major Killian, you didn’t get along very well with Captain Chenzokov, did you?”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. What did that have to do with the Saurians? “No, I did not. But I don’t see—”

“In fact,” Gosnell interrupted, “we have numerous accounts from technicians, colonists, even your own troops that you argued frequently with the captain. Is that correct?”

“We had differences of opinion, and we voiced them. Sir.”

“Differences of opinion.” Gosnell sat back in his chair, the wood creaking. “You were actually against the Envoy Project from the beginning, weren’t you, Major?”

“I support the initiatives of the Terran Republic, Mister Gosnell.”

“Well, that’s good to know. Because you see, I was worried about that. I seem to remember you having gone on record as saying that, what was it?” He tapped his finger a few times on the slate in front of him, summoning up the quotation he was looking for. “Ah, here it is. You

said, and I quote, 'Colony domes can still work. Using *Envoy* to search for habitable planets is a mistake.' End quote. That sounds to me like you were opposed to the Envoy Project."

Jack took a deep breath. "No sir, not at all."

"But in your own words—"

"I was against limiting our search to worlds that had no need of terraforming. I felt it was slow and inefficient."

"I'll thank you not to interrupt me, Major."

"You were against the *Envoy*, but somehow you convinced us all to let you on board. We knew you were dangerous after you nearly got the president killed on Mars, and still we gave you a second chance."

"And now, you'd have us believe that you just happened to fail *again*, even more spectacularly, and you just *happened* to be one of the few survivors despite being at the heart of the conflict and you just *happened* to make it home while the man you despised and the project you opposed are both dead?"

It took all of Jack's self control not to leap over the podium and kill Thomas Gosnell. It would be so easy, so satisfying, to snap the man's corpulent neck. But instead he centered himself and looked to the president.

Staten was focused on his slate. Jack didn't know what he could possibly be reading, but the president seemed oblivious to the proceedings.

"Major Killian? Is that what we are to believe?" Gosnell asked.

"No, sir," Jack said. "I stand by my report."

"Your report," Gosnell repeated. "You mean this fiction about aliens and starships? Please, Major. Don't insult us by making us discuss this further."

"It's not fiction, sir."

Gosnell sneered, making his face even less pleasing. "Then why did Captain Chenzokov never communicate any of this to us? Why is this the first we've heard of it? Doesn't it stand to reason that a man about to make first contact with an alien race would have called home for advice?"

Jack wondered if Gosnell had ever met Chenzokov. "It would, sir. But I'm not surprised Chenzokov never did. He had a flair for the dramatic, and I'm sure he wanted to wait until he could claim the glory for himself."

Gosnell shook his head. "Not very sporting, is it, Major, to speak ill of the dead? Captain Chenzokov isn't here to defend himself."

Finally Gosnell stood. "But that's the point, isn't it, Major. The dead tell no tales, right? So when you and your Marines tried a military coup and it went bad, you had to make sure there were no witnesses."

*So that's what this is about, Jack thought. Gosnell wants to set me up as the fall guy. "There*

was no coup, Mister Gosnell. As much as I may have wanted to remove Chenzokov from power, I did my job as a Marine and as *Envoy's* head of security."

Gosnell snorted. "Don't try to hide behind the flag. We all know what happened out there."

"*There was no coup.* I was there. You were not."

"I know you were, Major. And I—"

"And with all due respect, *sir,*" Jack continued. "Humanity has a new enemy. The Saurians are out there, they might be able to find their way here, and I think we all have more important things to do than cover our political asses while trying to throw some Marines under the bus."

"I warned you not to interrupt me, Major." Gosnell addressed the rest of the panel. "I move that Major Killian be placed under arrest, on charges of murder, attempted murder, mutiny and treason. This man has scuttled decades of work, wasted trillions of dollars and is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of good men and women that only wanted to serve the Terran Republic."

President Staten said nothing for a long moment. Gosnell turned to him, breathing hard from the exertion.

The president looked up from his slate. "I'm sorry, Jack, but charges have been made. We have to see this through. MPs, take Major Killian into custody, bearing validation of the charges against him."

\* \* \*

Commander Amanda Vogel was having a rough day.

The *TRS Hyperion* was cruising through the asteroid belt, ten days out of Io Station. They were looking for a pirate vessel that had been hijacking ore shipments back to Mars. The belt had been a haven for ore pirates for generations, but Amanda was proud to say that there had been a noticeable decline since the *Hyperion* was dispatched to roust them out.

This one was tough, though. *Hyperion* was a frigate, predating the tunnel drive or even rotational gravity. The old boat was sturdy enough, but she lacked the sensor packages on the newer boats. Amanda had to get a lot closer to her prey to see them than the distance at which some of the newer, wealthier pirates could see her.

This one was cagey. They'd had just a few contacts over the past few days, but nothing solid. Just when she thought they had something, it vanished into mist.

She pounded her fist against the armrest of her command couch, forcing her torso against the harness in the microgravity. Then she made herself relax, shaking her head and feeling the short russet hair sway a bit next to her head. *Have to get that cut soon, too,* she thought.

"Conn, Radar!" shouted Petty Officer Beaumont, her ECO. "Contact, bearing two seven three, mark three four up plane."

*Wow,* Amanda thought. *How'd we miss that?* The directional bearing the ECO had given

was almost directly left of the *Hyperion*, and a bit above them, 34 degrees above the plane of the solar system. "Roger, Radar. What do we have, Mister Beaumont?"

"It looks like our boy, ma'am. Hard to say for sure, but it's the right size and shape and doesn't move like a rock."

"Excellent. Helm, prepare to come about. We're not losing him again." Patrolling the belt wasn't as glamorous as people back home thought it was, Amanda knew. It wasn't like the vids. The rocks were scattered hundreds of miles from each other even at their densest, usually hundreds of thousands of miles away. *Hyperion* didn't have to dodge anything, but it was a challenge to pick the enemy spacecraft out of the radar clutter. It wasn't all that difficult for a canny pirate to make his metal boat look like just another iron rock.

"Helm, aye, ma'am."

*This is more like it*, Amanda thought. *Now we've got the bas —*

"Commander, incoming message, Gold channel," said Ensign Perez, her communications officer.

"Not now, not now," Amanda said. "Helm, all ahead full. Let's get 'em."

"Aye, ma'am."

Amanda felt the change in inertia push her back into her seat. The *Hyperion* had kicked in her fusion engines and they were accelerating at full speed.

"Conn, Radar!" shouted Beaumont. "Contact is rabbiting!"

The pirate yacht had stopped pretending to be a rock and was fleeing. This was the part Amanda loved the most. The chase. Running down the bad guys. And if the son of a bitch had a hold full of ore, he wouldn't be able to accelerate or turn as fast as the *Hyperion*. It would all be over soon.

"Conn, Radar! Target is accelerating. He's getting away, ma'am."

*Or not*, Amanda thought. Why wasn't this ever easy?

Amanda brought up her tactical display and looked at the field of battle. There was precious little to work with, only a few asteroids remotely close to her or the enemy. But she saw something.

"Helm, adjust course, one two degrees to port."

"That will take us off his tail, ma'am."

"I know, just do it."

"Aye, ma'am."

Amanda turned to Ensign Wilcox at Weapons Control. "Weapons, I want two firing solutions, and I need them now. Feeding the data to your station." Amanda touched her intended targets on her console and sent the data to the weapons station. She saw Wilcox's bushy eyebrows go up, but he got to work.

"Weapons, you may fire when ready."

"Aye, ma'am," Wilcox said, already feeding the coordinates to the missiles.

"Fire in the hole," Wilcox said as he launched two missiles, in different directions and at different speeds.

"Captain," Ensign Perez said. "This Gold Channel call doesn't want to wait."

"Well they're going to have to," Amanda said. "I'm busy at the moment. Helm, reduce speed 10% and hold this course."

"Aye, ma'am."

Amanda watched her tactical console. The first missile was on the tail of the pirate, and getting closer. It wouldn't hit him, she was sure, but he'd be preoccupied trying to shake it.

The second missile detonated right on time. It exploded in empty space, but the force of the explosion altered the orbit of a largish chunk of nickel, sending it directly at the pirate ship.

*Pay attention, now, Amanda thought to the pirate. I'm depending on you to be smarter than the average thug.*

"Conn, Radar! Target is altering course," said Beaumont. He thought for a second, and then said in a quieter voice, "He's headed on an intersect course with our current heading. Time to target, two minutes."

*That should even the odds a bit, Amanda thought. She didn't think the pirate would be dumb enough to hold that course, but by the time he was done dodging asteroids and missiles he would have brought himself much closer to the Hyperion.*

"Captain, new orders," said Ensign Perez. "We are to come about immediately and return to Io Station."

Amanda twisted in her seat to look at Perez. "What?"

The ensign looked about twelve years old. He wasn't much out of the academy to begin with, and no one on her boat wanted to annoy the Captain. "The orders come from the JCOS, ma'am."

*What in the bloody hell is this about? Amanda wondered. "It can't wait? We have him."*

The poor ensign shrank into his seat. "The orders state we are to return with all due haste, ma'am. Someone's in a hurry."

"Gott Verdammt Stück Scheiße," Amanda said. She had grown up in New Berlin and she always seemed to return to her mother tongue when she was mad. "Helm, come about, new course. Return to Io Station. Best speed."

She felt the ship turn again until it had almost reversed direction, then kick in the engines again. She looked at the fading report on the radar screen and cursed. Someone had royally fucked up her day, and they'd pay for that.

\* \* \*

“Hey, boss.”

Jack looked up from this bunk and saw Robyn standing at the bars of his cell. He stretched and stood up. “Lieutenant.”

Robyn leaned against the bars. “What’s the story?”

Jack looked up and down the central corridor of the brig. There was a guard about ten meters down, watching both of them with disinterest.

“I got railroaded, Robyn. Gosnell saw an opportunity to make me the goat for losing *Envoy* and he took it.”

Robyn nodded. “I thought so. I’ve been through questioning three times in the last two days. They keep asking about a coup. It’s taken this long for me to sweet talk my way down here.”

“What’s the official story topside?” Jack asked.

She shrugged. “Not much of one. So far the general public doesn’t even know *Envoy* returned. We’ve all been sworn to secrecy. I think somebody is running scared.”

An image of Gosnell’s fat form flashed into Jack’s mind. “After Mars, I don’t think they can afford more bad press. And having me involved each time gives them an excuse.”

“So what are you going to do?”

\* \* \*

“I won’t stand for this, Thomas.”

James Staten sat in his office overlooking the mountains outside the Terran Republic capitol of Geneva. While Jack Killian was only a few blocks away—and many stories down—Staten was starting to wonder if he’d be able to free the Marine.

“Mister President, you don’t have a choice,” said Thomas Gosnell, sprawled across an easy chair on the other side of the desk as if he owned the place. Staten thought about that. Maybe Gosnell did have more right to the room than he did.

It wasn’t easy running a global government. To this day, Staten didn’t know how Daniel Cho had done it. But the result was that the president had very little power to actually make decisions. Mostly, his hands were tied by political arrangements, markers and favors held and given. And while Staten did a good job of looking the part of a strong leader, he couldn’t have done the job without Gosnell, who knew who owed what to whom.

“This dropped into our laps, Jim,” Gosnell continued, his Australian accent more noticeable away from the cameras. “When the voters hear about what happened to *Envoy*, they’re going to demand that someone pay for that. The goal of getting people off this rock has been the only thing holding our government together for two centuries. The public faith in that goal was

shaken after Mars.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“I have to, Jim, because you don’t seem to get it. A lot of people connect Mars to you. Right or wrong, fair or unfair, that’s the way neural pathways work. They think Mars, they think you, they think disaster and no leaving Earth. We were able to get you re-elected on the promise that you’d make good on the other half of Cho’s plan. If we couldn’t colonize Mars, we’d leave the solar system entirely.

“Do you think they’ll forgive you if you botch that, too?”

“I had nothing to do with what happened out there and you know it!”

Gosnell got up and started to pace. “I know that and you know that. But the people ... The people want accountability. They want a leader.

“Now both of us know they’re not going to get what they want, but they have to either think they’re getting it or they have to have someone to blame. They can blame you, or they can blame your pet jarhead. Both of you were on Mars when it blew, and both of you are connected, at least in the minds of the public, with *Envoy*.”

Gosnell stopped and leaned on Staten’s desk. “I know it’s not what you want, Jim. I know you feel like you owe this guy. But we have to look at the political realities here. It’s you or him, and thank God we have him in the first place or it’d just be you.

“Look at it this way. He’s a soldier, and you’re sacrificing him for the greater good. You can do more good for the people of the Terran Republic as President than he can as a Marine. So you sacrifice him. In a courtroom, on the battlefield, what’s the difference?”

Staten sat back in his chair and stared out over the mountains.

\* \* \*

Amanda jumped out of the shuttle that brought her over from the *Hyperion* and found Jeremy waiting for her. “We had him, Jeremy.” She stepped around him. They were alone in the dark, dingy metal of the shuttle bay. Jeremy matched her step, again barring her way out.

Commander Jeremy Weaver was the senior officer of Io Station. He was also Amanda’s lover. Neither mattered to her all that much right now, and all she saw was that he was in her way. “Amanda, you’re going to want to calm down.”

She stopped. “Calm? You want me to be calm? We fucking had him. I’ve been after this prick for months and we *had him* before some VIP jackass changed our orders.”

Jeremy smiled in that smug, irritating way he had. Nothing ever seemed to upset him. “I’m to escort you to meet General Cheung. And just for a change,” Jeremy said as he ushered her through the door, “try not biting his head off.”

\* \* \*

“Commander Vogel, so good to see you at last,” General Cheung said. “Please, come in and sit down.”

Amanda was standing at attention at the door to the guest quarters to which Cheung had been assigned. The room was the nicest accommodations Io Station had, but it still amounted to little more than metal walls, a cot and a desk.

“Commander?”

Amanda walked into the room and the door shut behind her, two MPs on the other side. They’d opened the door without speaking when she approached. Cheung was seated at the desk, busy with something on the slate computer he had in front of him. “Please take a seat,” he said.

Amanda felt a surge of anger rise in her again, a little voice in her head saying *he pulls me off an intercept but then makes me wait ...* but she controlled it. Frankly, she’d expected a vice admiral at best, not the highest ranking member of the TR military. Her curiosity trumped her anger and she had to find out what Cheung could want with *her*. She sat down on a small sofa facing him.

Cheung put down the slate and gave her his full attention. He wasn’t as old as she thought he’d be, mid-80s maybe. His predecessor had held the post of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs until he was 112. He was dressed in a utility uniform, not Class As.

“I’m sure you’re curious about a number of things, Commander. Why I’m here, what the hurry was, what this all has to do with you. So I’ll get right to the point. I’m here to give you a promotion.”

“A ... promotion, sir?”

Cheung nodded. “Your name is spoken often back at headquarters, Commander. You have a way of getting results that has won you many admirers, myself included. You are a brilliant tactician and strategist. You have a way of getting more out of your crew than previous commanders. A ship with you commanding it seems to be more than the sum of its parts.

“Which is why we’re about to throw you straight into hell.”

“Sir?”

“What I’m about to tell you is classified, so high that we’ve had to bump up your security clearance just so you could hear it. Only a handful of people back home know what’s going on, and we’re going to try to keep it a secret for as long as we can.”

Cheung told her about the return of *Envoy*, and what had happened to it. He told her about aliens with starships far more advanced than anything she’d seen, and terrible weapons. Amanda was speechless. This had to be some kind of joke, there’s just no way it could be real. But Cheung looked deadly serious.

“Frankly, we’re lucky we know anything about the aliens at all. It looks like *Envoy* just barely made it back. Most of what we do know comes from Jack Killian, *Envoy*’s security chief.”

“Crap,” Amanda said. “I’d forgotten he was on board.”

“You have a problem with Major Killian?”

Amanda shook her head. “Not personally, sir. I’ve never met him. But from what I know of what happened on Mars with the President, and now this ... Trouble seems to follow that guy. I wouldn’t want him on my ship.”

Cheung nodded. “I understand. Well, there’s more. Because of the way Killian tunneled back to Earth, we have reason to believe that the Saurians could know our location. We don’t know why they react so violently to us, but we can’t afford to wait.”

Cheung leaned over and handed her his slate. On it, she saw diagrams and sketches for a huge rectangular structure, full of angles and hard planes.

“Those are some of the plans we have for a new kind of starship, the first of the Ares class carriers. It’s the *TRS Daniel Cho*. It’s already being built at the shipyard in orbit where we built *Envoy*. Like *Envoy*, it’s powered by a tunnel drive, and like the Saurian ships, the main gun will be a mass driver.

“We’re promoting you to Captain and you will be the new skipper of the *TRS Daniel Cho*.”

Amanda looked up from the slate. “Me?”

Cheung nodded. “There are lots of captains more senior than you, but this isn’t a time for seniority. The fate of the human race might be at stake, and we’re not going risk that to avoid stepping on some egos. You’re the best officer for the job, and we think—I think—that you will bring innovative thinking to the job that more senior captains might not.

“I hate to do this to you, Captain. Frankly, you deserve better. But you’re the best we’ve got and I have to use you. Your mission will be to take the fight to the enemy, keep them distracted while we build up Earth’s defenses. We have to assume that you’ll be facing a superior force with very little intelligence about them. Your chances of survival aren’t very good. But that’s the hand we’re dealt.”

Amanda was near shock. This was a lot to take in. Had she really been ready to light into this guy because of a stupid ore pirate? That all seemed so distant now. Now the human race was at war. With aliens they knew almost nothing about.

Cheung got up and headed for the door. “I’m going to my shuttle. Grab what personal effects you’ll need for the next month and meet me there within the hour. You’re being reassigned to oversee the completion of the *Cho*. While you’re doing that, you’ll put together your crew.

“Oh, and one more thing, Captain. I know it’s tradition for a captain to have right of first refusal when it comes to members of the command staff, but I’m afraid we have to make an exception in your case. One member of your command staff is non-negotiable.”

\* \* \*

“Marine! Ten hut!”

Jack scrambled off his bunk and snapped to attention. He was in his pants and undershirt, and his beard showed a scruffy two weeks of growth. He’d had little to do in the past two

weeks but exercise and think about how he was going to get through to the politicians that they had bigger problems than what to do with him.

He heard sharp footfalls coming down the corridor, expensive dress shoes, not the combat boots the guards wore. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a tall, white-haired man in a dark suit stop in front of his cell.

"At ease, Jack," President Staten said. Jack dropped to parade rest while the president turned to the guard. "Open this up and bring me a chair."

"Yes, sir!" The guard double-timed it down the corridor after opening the cell door.

Staten stepped into the room. "As you were, Jack, have a seat."

"I prefer to stand, sir."

The guard came back with a chair. Staten took it and sat down. "Sit down, Major. That's an order."

"Yes, sir." Jack sat down on his bunk.

Staten turned to the guard, read his name tag. "Corporal Simmons, you're dismissed."

"Sir, I have orders not to leave the prisoner alone—"

"And I'm countermanding those orders. Go."

Simmons nodded. "Yes, sir."

After the guard was out of earshot, Staten turned back to Jack. "I'm sorry about all this, Jack, I really am."

"I understand, sir."

"I'm under a lot of pressure, Jack. Gosnell wants me to, as you say, throw you under the bus, and get on with dealing with what happened to *Envoy*. He tells me that it's me or you, that one of us has to take the fall, and that you're more expendable."

"Mister President, that's a mistake. The Saurians—"

"Are out there, yes, Jack. I believe you. We've done some more digging, questioned all the witnesses very thoroughly, and I'm convinced you're telling the truth. I've always wanted to believe you, and had it been up to me, you wouldn't be in here, but now we have enough to go on.

"Doctor Takemura has been thinking a lot about what you said in the hearing, and she believes that the way the Saurians reacted had more to do with the human form than anything we did. They were reacting to what we were, or what they thought we were, rather than what we were doing. I'm not sure I understand that, but I know she'll explain it to you.

"But you see, Jack, Thomas also has a point. When word gets out about *Envoy*, the public is going to want to blame someone. They're going to want revenge. They're going to want a sense of closure. I can't give them that, and frankly, I don't think blaming you gives them that either. If I were to blame you, I'd still catch heat for insisting you be on *Envoy* in the first place. I'm sure Thomas knows that, so I think we both had better be on our guards.

“Because the unfortunate fact is, the Saurians are out there, they don’t like us, and they just might know where we live.”

Jack slumped a little at this. He knew it, and had been over it a hundred times in the last two weeks. But that didn’t make it better news.

“So here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to make public that we’ve lost contact with the *Envoy*, but not explain any more than that. We’re building a new fleet of tunnel-capable warships and we’re going to use those to keep the enemy occupied and distracted while we shore up defenses here on Earth.

“I’m also dropping all charges against you and promoting you to Lieutenant Colonel. You’re going to be in charge of the Marine contingent on those warships, and you’re going to spend the time between now and when they launch training your troops to fight the Saurians and working with Doctor Takemura to help us learn everything we can about the enemy. We are going to pick your brain clean, Jack, so be ready.

“I’ve also got to mend some fences with Thomas, so don’t piss him off. He’s not going to be happy about my ignoring his advice on this, and frankly I’m going to need his political savvy to sell this war.”

Staten stood, picked up Jack’s uniform shirt and threw it at him. “Let’s go, Colonel. We have work to do.”

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