



Terminal Alliance (preview)

By Jim C. Hines



Terminal Alliance

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Terminal Alliance

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Chapter 1

“Marion Adamopoulos.”

The circular training room fell silent. The other humans of Marion’s crèche turned toward the bubbling hot spring in the center.

Scheherazade pulled herself to the edge of the spring, fixing Marion with one large black eye. “Names are very important to humans. I don’t believe that one was in the database of suggested names.”

“It’s from our history review. It’s the name I chose.” Marion spread her arms. She didn’t realize until after the fact that she was mimicking Krakau defensive body language. Deliberately, she folded her arms and stared defiantly back at their Awakening and Orientation Officer.

Most Krakau massed less than the average human. They were roughly tube-shaped, with nine tentacles—arms—limbs? Marion had struggled with the difference. In Human language, the three smooth, snakelike primary limbs with the flat, diamond-shaped pads on the end were the tentacles. The pads were covered in differently-sized and surprisingly dexterous suction cups.

The lower six limbs were similar to those of an Earth octopus, covered in suction cups from tip to torso. These lower limbs were used for propulsion and mobility, but for some reason, were called “arms” in Human.

To quote Scheherazade, humans were strange and illogical, and their language reflected that.

“It’s been twenty-three days since your awakening,” said Scheherazade, her black, beaklike mouth grinding in confusion. A translator implant, like a large silver pearl in the yellow skin of the Krakau’s throat, repeated the clicks and whistles in Human. “Your

'rebirth,' as some humans call it. You have another month before you'll be given your first assignment. Perhaps you'd like to take more time to consider—"

"This is my name," Marion interrupted. "You chose your own human name. I have the right to choose mine."

Every Krakau adopted a name based on the closest thing humans had to a universal language: music. They each pored over hours of intercepted Earth signals and recordings to find the melody best suited to her personality.

By now, the other humans had begun whispering to one another. Scheherazade flicked a tentacle in annoyance, spraying droplets of hot, salty water onto several of the humans. "You know the history of that name?"

Marion recited the answer from memory. "Marion Adamopoulos was an early twenty-second century scientist who helped destroy human civilization."

"Why choose a name associated with so much death and destruction?"

"As a reminder of what we did to ourselves, and of how much we owe the Krakau for giving us a second chance."

It was an honest answer, if incomplete. The other reason was simpler: she liked the sound of it. Adamopoulos. It spilled lyrically from the tongue.

"So be it." Scheherazade extended a tentacle to note the decision on the glassy, waterproof console beside her pool, then turned to the next human. "And you?"

The human, a male with bushy black hair and a missing eye, swallowed nervously. "I reviewed the human name database. I can't decide if I'd rather be called Nelson Mandela, Rosalind Franklin, or Beyoncé..."

Marion made a note of her fellow humans' new names, but most of her attention was elsewhere. Another month at the Antarctic Medical Facility and she'd receive her first assignment as a member of the Earth Mercenary Corps. Most humans ended up in the infantry, fighting the Prodryans and helping to keep peace in the Krakau Alliance. After all the Krakau had done to help humanity after their self-imposed apocalypse, she was determined to repay the aliens in whatever way she could.

She'd named herself for a woman who turned humanity into shambling, feral monsters. The Krakau had spent decades trying to

reverse that mistake. Soon, Marion would set out to help them make things right.

LIEUTENANT MARION “MOPS” Adamopoulos, commander of the Shipboard Hygiene and Sanitation team on the *EMCS Pufferfish*, switched off the translation of a nineteenth century human history textbook she’d been reading and focused her attention on the alert icon on her monocle. “Go ahead.”

“Incoming message from Commander Danube. The Pufferfish has received a distress call from a Nusuran cargo vessel. All hands should prepare for battle and report to the nearest acceleration chamber. A-ring jump in nineteen minutes.”

The words of her personal AI unit, Doc, came from the directional speakers of her comm unit, secured in the bulky collar of her one-piece uniform. Doc himself existed primarily as code etched invisibly into the layers of memory crystal that formed Mops’ green-tinted monocle.

“What’s the status on the rest of the team?”

“J.G. Monroe is in his quarters. Technician Kumar is working to repair a cracked sewage relay on deck L. I’ve relayed the commander’s instructions to them both. Technician Mozart is in the brig.”

“Of course she is.” Mops stretched, grimacing at the popping of her left shoulder. There was no pain, but the sound and sensation made her cringe. The joint had started acting up two years ago, like machinery past its warranty.

She left her small quarters and hurried toward the center of the *Pufferfish*. The ship was built like an oversized torpedo, with three elongated weapons pods protruding like outriggers spread equidistant around the hull. The brig was near the aft engines. “How many times is this?”

“This is Crewman Mozart’s fourth incarceration since she was transferred to your SHS team. It’s her eighth during her one-year service with the Earth Mercenary Corps. Three more incidents, and she’ll break the EMC disciplinary record.”

She greeted several of the crew on her way to the central lifts. Doc automatically tagged them with their name and rank, not that Mops needed the assistance. After more than a decade aboard the *Pufferfish*, she knew them all. “Why wasn’t I notified when it happened?”

“You were off duty. Commander Danube is recommending Technician Mozart be expelled from service.”

“I’m not ready to give up on her.” Mops hurried into the first available lift, joining Sergeant Claus from infantry. She nodded a greeting as the doors closed and the lift shot downward.

“Where you off too, smoothie?” asked Claus. Mops outranked him, but relations between the soldiers and the non-combat crew tended toward the informal, and she’d known Claus for most of her life. His rebirth had been a year after Mops’ own. After Mops, he was one of the oldest humans on the ship.

It was easy to recognize the soldiers, not only by the unit insignia on the right shoulder of their uniforms, but from the scars they accumulated over the years. The left side of Claus’ face was a mess of scar tissue from a flamethrower attack two years back. An old plasma burn striped his right cheek.

The only smooth-skinned humans on an EMC ship were either shipboard maintenance or brand-new recruits. Mops had a few small scars from her life before the Krakau cured her, but those were all hidden beneath her uniform. Nor would anyone mistake the faint lines around her eyes and mouth for battle scars.

“I need to take care of a mess in the brig,” she said.

Claus snorted. “That mess wouldn’t happen to be named Mozart, would it? I hear she picked a fight with a Glacidae this time.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. I don’t know what I’m going to do with that child. She’s not happy in SHS, but you know infantry won’t take her. Danube wants to send her back to Earth.”

“Ouch.” He pursed his lips, crinkling his ragged blond moustache. “Give me combat drops any day over trying to survive a planet overrun by ferals. You know if she has enough saved up for passage to one of the stations? Humans can make decent money working security.”

“I doubt it. She’s not big on long-term planning.” Or short-term planning, for that matter. “What’s the word on this distress call?”

“Command crew doesn’t tell us grunts anything. We go where they send us and shoot what they tell us.” Claus clapped her arm as the lift came to a halt. “Good luck with Wolf, Lieutenant.”

Mops hurried down the corridor to the heavy brown door labeled *Brig and Backup Emergency/Acceleration Shelter* in Human.

The door unlocked with a heavy *clunk*. Inside was a narrow rectangular hallway with eight transparent doors, four to each side. A

larger door on the end led to the control room. Two guards approached to greet her.

“Morning, Lieutenant,” said Private Williams, an older man with a permanent smirk, courtesy of a dark knife scar across his cheek. “Come to claim your janitor?”

“It was either that or make her walk the plank.” Mops’ quip was met with blank looks from both guards, who were apparently unfamiliar with old human pirate stories. She sighed and tried a different conversation opener. “How’s your garden coming along?”

Calling Williams’ Earth mosses and lichen a “garden” was stretching things, but given how few plants could survive life on an EMC cruiser, he’d done an amazing job keeping his little collection alive.

“I can’t get the letharia to thrive. It’s not strong enough for the A-ring jumps.”

“That’s the yellow one with the tufts and branches, right?”

“They’re supposed to be green, but ship’s lighting isn’t right.” His expression brightened. “The caloplaca’s doing great, though. If it keeps spreading, I’ll need to pick up some new rocks.”

Mops chuckled and approached the only occupied cell. Glowing letters in the wide, glassy door labeled it Cell 6. “Doc, how long until we jump?”

“Twelve minutes.”

A narrow cot strained to hold Technician Wolfgang Mozart’s bulk. The guards had stripped Wolf of her equipment and harness, leaving her black jumpsuit bare and baggy. A short blue service stripe on her upper right sleeve marked her time in the EMC, just as the two short and one long red Lieutenant stripes on Mops’ denoted her twelve years.

Wolf’s sleeves were pushed back to the elbows, exposing the tattoo of an Earth wolf on her left forearm. She flexed her muscles, and the reactive inks animated the wolf’s jowls, making it bare its teeth in challenge. “I was just doing my job. The Glacidae should be in here, not me. They’re the one who started giving me crap.”

Mops folded her arms and said nothing. Anticipating her next request, Doc pulled up the incident report details on her monocle.

The cot creaked as Wolf sat up and ran thick fingers through her dark, sweat-spiked hair. She looked Mops up and down, probably trying to assess how much trouble she was in. “I mean that literally, you know. I was busting my ass trying to clear a jam in their toilet. The next thing I know, they’re shooting shit-pellets in my direction.”

“That wasn’t excrement. Technician Gromgimsidalgak was expelling unfertilized eggs.”

“Whatever. It was like a machine gun from their ass.”

“I’m sure Grom was as unhappy about it as you were.” The ship’s four Glacidae crew normally spent a few days in medical during this phase of their reproductive cycles. It must have snuck up on Grom this time. “Williams, I need Wolf released and her gear returned.”

Williams hesitated. “She assaulted a member of the crew. I’m not supposed to release her—”

“Unless there’s an overriding operational need, and someone supervises her conduct,” Mops interrupted. “My team’s short-staffed and we’re about to jump. If we’re going into battle, I need Wolf on duty, not napping in the brig. I’ll babysit her myself.”

“Yes, sir.” Williams ducked into the command room to fetch Wolf’s equipment while the other guard—Tzu—unlocked the cell.

“It wasn’t just eggs, you know.” Wolf held up her hands. Black scabs dotted her palms. “These are from Grom’s stingers.”

“You threw the first punch.” Mops chuckled. “And not a very good one, from the sound of it. At least not good enough punch to keep Grom down.”

“*There’s one other citation from security’s report,*” said Doc, pulling it up on Mops’ monocle and highlighting a passage near the end.

Mops groaned. “Of all the asinine... The rest of the galaxy already thinks of us as barely-sentient animals, Wolf. You can’t go around threatening to eat people’s faces!”

Wolf sagged back in her cot. “I’ll apologize, all right? I didn’t know they were... what do you call that? Eggstrating? I’ll bring Grom one of those methane slushies from the mess. The thing put up a hell of a fight for their size. I can respect that.” She shook her hand in mock pain.

The cell door slid open, just as a ten-minute countdown popped up in the corner of Mops’ monocle. “Move ass, Technician. We’ve got a jump coming up.”

Wolf’s belongings were standard issue. Where the guards and soldiers carried sidearms and ammo and restraints in their equipment harnesses, SHS personnel were loaded down with an array of hand tools and cleaning supplies, from high-pressure canisters of disinfectants, paints, and sealants, to more specialized items like ultraviolet lighting for spotting shed Glacidae spines.

Wolf brought her monocle to her left eye socket. It jumped into place with a faint click, secured by the magnets implanted beneath the skin.

“Do you *want* to be sent back to Earth?” Mops asked in a low voice.

“And miss the chance to scrape slime from the water circ filters in the captain’s quarters every week?” Wolf asked bitterly.

“You need to grow the hell up, Technician. I know you’re unhappy here, but you can’t solve every problem by punching it.”

“Course not.” Wolf tightened the last of her harness straps. “That’s why we have blasters and batons.”

Four egg-shaped indentations slid open in the back wall of the cell as Tzu converted the interior to a jump chamber. Tzu and Williams stepped through the doorway.

Mops gave Wolf a weary shove. “Hook yourself in. We’ll sort the rest out after the mission.”

Mops settled into the last vacant pod and raised her hands. The attachment points locked into matching mechanisms on her harness and tightened her into place. “Doc, what’s the status on the rest of the team?”

“Monroe and Kumar are both secure in acceleration chambers B-11 and D-4, respectively.”

Mops relaxed, letting the gelatinous padding of the acceleration pod mold itself to her body. Like practically everything else, the pod, the gel, and the acceleration rings were Krakau inventions. Technically, even humanity was a Krakau invention. They were the ones who’d figured out how to restore the feral remnants of humanity. To reconstruct Earth culture and a human language.

“This distress call, you think it’s pirates?” asked Wolf.

“They’re Nusurans,” said Tzu. “Probably started fooling around, got distracted, and crashed into an asteroid.”

While she waited, Mops had Doc call up the ever-growing backlog of repairs, inspections, routine maintenance, and emergency cleanups assigned to her team. A backlog that was about to get even longer. With every A-ring jump, there were always a handful of people who suddenly lost the contents of their stomachs. The lucky ones lost said contents through their mouths.

Mops had never been able to fully wrap her brain around A-ring technology. The Krakau had developed them a hundred and fifty years ago, opening the galaxy to interstellar travel and communication. From the reading she’d done, the rings were similar in some respects to old human jet engine technology. Where a jet engine compressed and

accelerated airflow, A-rings gravitationally compressed space itself. Essentially, they pinched the universe, then shot the ship through like a pellet from a space-time slingshot.

The *Pufferfish* carried thirty A-rings. From a distance, they looked like an enormous white hose coiled around the bow. Each ring could be launched and expanded to allow the ship to pass through. The rings were only a meter or so deep, but the *Pufferfish* would traverse the equivalent of hundreds of kilometers in that single relativistic meter.

A hundred kilometers was nothing in interstellar terms. What mattered was the acceleration the ship gained in the process. As the A-ring disintegrated from the amount of energy being channeled, it sent the ship ahead at many times the speed of light.

Human scientists had believed light speed was an absolute limit. Of course, human science also used to believe meat transformed into maggots, the Earth was the center of the universe, and cholera could be treated with a tobacco smoke enema.

Mops had once written to the Technological Advancement Council, asking about relativity and the light speed barrier. The rather brusque reply explained that light speed *was* an absolute barrier. Any object travelling at the speed of light would be instantly destroyed. Which was why they used the A-rings to skip past that barrier and accelerate directly to faster-than-light speed.

It had been a remarkably unilluminating response.

The countdown approached zero. Mops closed her eyes, exhaled hard, and tightened her core as she felt herself slammed hard against the back of her pod. Inertial manipulation and the loopholes of relativity kept the crew from being instantly transformed into lumps of bloody jam, but technology could only do so much.

Three things happened more-or-less simultaneously. The *Pufferfish* leapt through interstellar space, thumbing its nose at primitive human science. The A-ring disintegrated in a flash of light and radiation. And everyone on board passed the hell out.

Mops' monocle noted it was roughly one hour after deceleration as she awoke. She blinked her dry, gritty eyes and stretched tingling limbs. A pungent, sour smell filled the air. At least one person had puked during the jump, or more likely, during the deceleration at the end. She touched her chin to make sure it hadn't been her.

“Sorry, Lieutenant.” Private Tzu’s face was pale and sweaty. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve and grimaced. The pods were supposed to vacuum any misdirected bodily fluids, but they never got it all.

“This will help.” Mops opened a compressed sanitizing sponge from a pouch on her harness. It expanded automatically as she tossed it to the private. “Doc, tag that pod for a full scrub down.”

“Done.”

Before she could say anything more, the lights turned green, and a *Battle Stations* alert flashed on her monocle.

For Mops and her team, that meant stay the hell out of the way and let the more essential personnel get where they needed to be. She asked Doc for a status report while the guards stumbled out of the acceleration chamber. Tzu nodded gratefully as she left, still sponging off the front of her uniform.

“We’re getting the normal list of cleanup requests, but it doesn’t look like anything vital broke during the jump.”

“Good. Relay the following assignments. Kumar, I want you in medical. If we get casualties, they’ll need help with cleanup and sterilization so the med team can focus on patching people up. Monroe—get down to engineering and coordinate with Lieutenant Lee to monitor and prioritize any repairs.”

Monroe cut in. “With permission, I’d like to make sure all nonessential plumbing is locked down, first. It’s supposed to happen automatically, but some of those valves are overdue for maintenance and replacement. I once saw a lucky shot burst a ship’s pipes and flood two decks with several hundred liters of partially frozen sewage. No way I’m wading through a mess like that again.”

“Good thinking.” Lieutenant Junior Grade Marilyn Monroe was ex-infantry, and had transferred to SHS after a Prodryan grenade tore up a third of his body. He’d been Mops’ second-in-command for more than a year now. “Report to engineering when you’re finished.”

“Let me guess,” Wolf muttered, turning to go. “Post-jump puke duty for me.”

Mops caught her arm. “You’re staying where I can keep an eye on you. Right now, that means the aft battle hub. I’ll dispatch you from there if necessary.”

Wolf’s face brightened. “Yes, sir!”

“Once the fighting’s over, *then* you’re on post-jump puke cleanup.”

* * *

Mops ducked into Battle Hub Three, one of several reinforced rooms at the core of the ship. Three other human officers sat in front of hardwired terminals. Mops steered Wolf toward a vacant seat. “Stay there, and don’t touch anything.”

Mops sat beside Lieutenant Tambo from Engineering. The chair magnetized itself to the back of her harness to secure her in place. Once she was settled, the screen expanded and curved to fill most of her vision. In the center was a tactical display of the *Pufferfish*. Mops’ team appeared as small blue dots. She checked to confirm everyone was at their assigned station, then focused on the bigger picture.

A second display showed them to be in the outskirts of the Andromeda 12 system, approximately 260 million kilometers out from the star, and 100 million kilometers “above” the orbital plane. They’d traversed almost thirty light years in the ninety-minute jump.

Two small Prodryan ships hovered over a Nusuran freighter between the fourth and fifth planets, both of which were home to fledgling Nusuran colonies. The freighter looked like a bloated metal maggot, while the Prodryan ships were more like broad-winged gnats.

“That’s all?” Wolf sounded disappointed as she peered at Mops’ screen.

Tambo snorted. “You were hoping for another Siege of Avloka?”

It was almost twenty-five years since the EMC had freed the Krakau colony of Avloka from the Prodryan occupation. Fewer than half the human soldiers had survived that four-month war, but the Prodryan forces on the planet were utterly destroyed. It was the first time the galaxy had seen a large-scale human army in action.

“Just seems like a waste,” said Wolf. “An EMC cruiser for two little fighters? How long until we reach them?”

Mops pointed to the display. “We’re coming in at point-zero-eight. That’s around eighty-five million kilometers per hour. We’re still decelerating, but we should be close enough to engage directly in ninety minutes or so.”

“Ninety minutes?” Wolf sagged in her chair. “They’ll have gutted the freighter and be long gone.”

“You’d be surprised,” said Tambo. “It takes time to get clear and calculate a jump out of the system, and we’ve got a lot more speed. Even if they started accelerating the second they detected us, we’d have a decent chance of getting within missile range.”

“And it’s not like Prodryans to run from a fight,” added Mops. “Even a hopeless one.”

“We’ll have this cleaned up before the command crew wakes up from their nap,” said Wolf, sounding torn between pride and disappointment.

Other species were more susceptible to damage from A-ring jumps, requiring additional medical preparations and time to recover. The Glacidae would start coming around in another few hours. The Krakau would be the last to awaken from their “nap.”

Mops pointed to the second Prodryan ship. “Looks like one of the Prodryans docked with the Nusurans. They might be taking hostages.”

Wolf nodded, her attention fixed on the screen. Mops couldn’t recall ever seeing her this focused.

“The *Pufferfish* library has a whole section on Earth military history,” Mops suggested. “Land, sea, and air battles. I can recommend some titles if you’d like.”

Wolf scoffed. “A bunch of primitive humans running around with gunpowder projectiles and swords, riding elephants against giant wooden horses and tanks? No thanks.”

Wolf’s tangled impression of Earth history hurt Mops’ brain. “How about something simpler. Doc, upload a copy of Sun Tzu to Wolf’s monocle.” She lowered her voice, speaking so only the AI would hear. “Preferably a version with lots of pictures.”

Within twenty minutes, it was clear the Prodryans planned to fight. The closer fighter had begun accelerating toward the *Pufferfish*, spitting a swarm of green dots across the empty space between the ships.

“Missile barrage.” Excitement raised the pitch of Wolf’s words.

Tambo chuckled. “At this range, they might as well try to piss out of a gravity well.”

“They’re too eager.” Mops’ pointed look in Wolf’s direction was wasted. Wolf had eyes only for the battle unfolding on the screen.

The *Pufferfish*’s countermeasures had no trouble taking out the barrage. Guidance jamming sent most of the missiles veering away to detonate in empty space. The ship’s interceptor flares had plenty of time to track and set off the rest.

A few minutes later, the *Pufferfish* fired a single plasma beam. At this range, it missed by more than a kilometer, but it seemed to enrage the Prodryans. Which was probably the point. Prodryans acted on instinct, especially when under stress. Another barrage of missiles flew toward the *Pufferfish*, to be dispatched as easily as the first.

A faint wave of vertigo told her the *Pufferfish* had begun approach maneuvers, angling for a clearer shot at the Prodryan fighter that would

keep the freighter out of the line of fire. Mops double-checked water storage and the greenhouses, making sure the acceleration hadn't exceeded the tanks' tolerance. It wouldn't be the first time her team had dealt with a spill in the middle of battle.

"What's that second fighter doing?" Mops muttered. It wasn't like a Prodryan to pass up a fight. They should have broken away from the freighter by now to join the attack on the *Pufferfish*, leaving a handful of soldiers behind to supervise their hostages. Instead, the fighter was using maneuvering thrusters to keep the freighter positioned between them and the *Pufferfish*.

"Hiding behind the Nusurans," said Wolf. "Cowards."

More missiles came at the *Pufferfish*, though this barrage was thinner than the others. They couldn't have many missiles left. Once again, countermeasures made short work of them, though one got close enough for a bit of shrapnel to strike the front of the ship.

Mops checked the damage report. "Doc, tag air duct sections 153L through 157L for inspection when this is over."

The *Pufferfish* twisted to one side, A-guns firing. The smaller A-rings in the guns accelerated fist-sized projectiles to only half the speed of light, but that was more than enough to tear through anything they hit. Green lines appeared on the screen to show the path of each shot. Three misses tracked through empty space. The fourth and fifth shots drilled through the Prodryan fighter.

Decompression and a small explosion sent the fighter tumbling out of control. Escape pods burst away like sparks from a firework.

"What's so important about that freighter?" Mops frowned. "And where the hell do those escape pods think they're going?" At this distance, it would take the pods several days to reach the nearest planet.

"Probably hoping we'll round them up when we finish their friends," said Tambo.

"When's the last time you heard of a Prodryan choosing capture over death in combat?" The pods had blossomed in all directions when they fled their doomed ship, but they didn't appear to be heading anywhere. They just sat there, waiting...

She reached for the console, keying in a comm request to the combat bridge. "BC Cervantes, this is Lieutenant Adamopoulos."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"The Prodryans know EMC protocol and procedures. They know we won't fire on enemy escape pods. I'll bet my library they're creeping

toward us, hoping we don't notice until they're close enough for a kamikaze run."

A long pause. "Confirmed. It's slow and subtle, but they're all heading this way. I'll have gunnery team two track 'em and fire the moment we confirm hostile action."

Wolf stared at Mops, her forehead wrinkled, her mouth open in confusion.

"Any suggestions for that second fighter?" asked Cervantes. "Even docked with the freighter, they're more maneuverable than we are."

"Shoot through the freighter," she said.

This pause stretched out even longer. "Did I hear you correctly, Lieutenant?"

Mops touched her screen, zooming in on the Nusuran freighter. "The Prodryans are tethered to the Nusurans' cargo bay. An A-gun shot through the bay shouldn't hit any vital systems. The Prodryans probably cleared the Nusurans out of the way. Even if they've got a few hostages tied up in the cargo bay, brief depressurization won't bother them. Nusurans take naked spacewalks for fun."

"This isn't covered in our combat plan."

"Or you could sit around and wait for Captain Brandenburg to wake up. How many Nusurans do you think the pirates will kill in that time? Mops out." She sat back to watch.

"What the freeze-dried shit was that?" Wolf whispered, leaning over Mops' shoulder. "Since when does SHS give tactical advice to the ship's *Battle Captain*?"

"When you've served longer and observed more battles than anyone else on the ship, people tend to listen." Mops shoved Wolf's face back from her own without looking away from the screen. The escape pods had begun accelerating. Moments later, the *Pufferfish* launched a series of missiles to intercept. The missiles detonated just before reaching the incoming pods, spraying them with a directional shower of shrapnel. At that range, she doubted anyone could have survived.

The remaining fighter continued to keep the Nusuran freighter between itself and the *Pufferfish*. Ninety seconds later, a streak of light flickered from *Pufferfish* weapons pod three, marking the shot of a single A-gun. Air and debris erupted from the freighter. Both ships lurched, and the docking tunnel connecting the two broke away. Cargo spilled into space. The spray stopped seconds later as the freighter's emergency systems sealed the ruptures, but by then the Prodryan fighter was peeling

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around to attack. An attack Battle Captain Cervantes should be more than capable of squashing.

“What in the depths are you doing in SHS?” asked Wolf. “You could be up there directing battles, or leading infantry, or—”

“Maybe.” Mops shrugged and sat back to watch the rest of the battle play out. “But then who would keep the ship clean?”

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