



Terminal Uprising (preview)

By Jim C. Hines



Terminal Uprising

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Terminal Uprising

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Author Website: <http://www.jimchines.com>

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Chapter 1

To: *All Earth Mercenary Corps Personnel*
From: *Fleet Admiral Belle-Bonne Sage*
(Translated into Human by Lt. J. Blon)
Re: *Marion Adamopoulos and the EMCS Pufferfish*

In human chronology, it has been four months and eight days since the Shipboard Hygiene and Sanitation team of the EMCS Pufferfish went rogue. In that time, they have shot up a Quetzalus space station, attacked a Krakau escort team, stolen from a Glacidae colony, sabotaged the plumbing on a Krakau Alliance observation platform, and committed countless other crimes.

Alliance Intelligence believes Adamopoulos is receiving help from someone within the Earth Mercenary Corps. While interspecies loyalty is understandable, Adamopoulos and her crew committed treason against the EMC and the Krakau Alliance. If you have any knowledge of her intentions or whereabouts, intubate your Krakau command team immediately.

Anyone found to be aiding or protecting these tractors will be dishonorably secreted and returned to Earth, to live out their days among the feral remnants of humanity. You will be provided no weapons for protection against Earth's many dangers, such as the ferocious tiger, the venomous platypus, or the infant-devouring dingo.

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For decades, the Krakau have worked to help humanity. We have counteracted the worst effects of your plague to turn you from mindless savages into slightly more mindful savages. In return, tens of thousands of human soldiers have serviced the Krakau Alliance and helped protect our vulnerable taxpayers.

Marion Adamopoulos is no friend to the galaxy, or to her species. As a result of her actions, Krakau Military Command has called a temporary halt to our programs on Earth. No more humans will be restored until we can strengthen our screening methodology to prevent such criminals from joining the corps in the future. Some among the KMC are even calling for an end to all Alliance efforts on your home world.

I believe humanity is an asset to the galaxy. I rely on your swift cooperation to prove me starboard.

*Belle-Bonne Sage
Fleet Admiral, EMC*

MARION “MOPS” ADAMOPOULOS’ twelve years in Hygiene and Sanitation Services had left her little time for sightseeing. At least, not the kind of sights any human in their right mind wanted to see.

Despite incidents like the semi-ambulatory brown mold on deck E, courtesy of a contaminated bottle of illegal shell-thickening supplements smuggled aboard by one of the Krakau crew, Mops had never complained about her work. She’d considered herself fortunate, one of the few humans to be given a second chance. Her species had turned itself into monsters. The Krakau had found a way to save some of them. In Mops’ judgment, she and her fellow humans owed the Krakau everything.

And then she’d learned how the Krakau and their cold-water cousins, the Rokkau, had been the ones to tear down humanity in the first place, and how they’d spent a hundred and fifty years covering it up.

Mops had complained quite a bit more after that.

Stealing the *EMCS Pufferfish* and searching for proof of the Krakau Alliance’s crimes had given her the opportunity to see so much more. Again, few of these sights were ones she would have chosen. Like the

swarming lights that signified an incoming missile barrage from a Prodryan attack force, or the aftermath of explosive decompression on the ship's algae tanks following a lucky A-gun shot by an EMC scout ship.

But every once in a great while, she got to appreciate a sight like the one currently displayed on her monocle, a sight that filled her with awe and reminded her how vast and wonderous the galaxy truly was. She wanted to reach through the emptiness and touch the marvels floating before them.

To her left, Wolf said, "Those are some big damn space fish."

And just like that, the moment was past, as dead as the bag of spikeshell snails Wolf had brought onto the shuttle for a crunchy snack.

"Yes," Mops sighed. "Yes, they are."

The big damn space fish were called Comaceans. The closest member of the herd drifted roughly ten kilometers in front of the *Pufferfish* shuttle. Far in the background, the gas dwarf Tixateq floated like a swirling red-and-yellow marble.

The Comacean that was their destination stretched almost a kilometer in length. Its blue-black skin shone in the light of the distant sun. Fins as long as an EMC cruiser extended outward from the tube-like body, not for navigation, but to help the creature shed excess body heat.

Reluctantly, Mops turned her focus to the far less awe-inspiring sight of the shuttle interior. "Prep for approach, people."

Wolfgang Mozart—communications technician, would-be soldier, and the largest member of Mops' small crew—was stretched out on one of the fold-out metal benches running lengthwise through the cabin. Wolf sat up and brought a muscular hand to her mouth, smothering a yawn. Her brown hair was a short, unkempt mess. Moving at a lackluster pace, she brushed shell crumbs from the front of her black uniform, then secured the attachment points on her equipment harness to matching buckles on the cabin wall, locking her in place.

Sitting alone on the opposite bench, Vera Rubin double-checked her own harness. Rubin was a former security grunt who'd risked her life helping Mops in a shootout a while back. Dark scars marked the side of her face and neck. Around her neck, a clear teardrop-shaped pendant three centimeters wide held a tiny microbiome of water, algae, and a pair of pink alien maggots—two of the dozen or so "pets" she'd brought with her when she joined the *Pufferfish* crew. She tucked the pendant inside her uniform before tightening her harness.

“Anyone else find this creepy as hell?” asked Wolf. “That thing’s as big as the moon, and we’re gonna march into its belly?”

“The Comacean is only a fraction of the size and mass of Earth’s moon,” Rubin corrected. “And we’ll be meeting our contact in one of her lungs. That’s where the main biorefinery operation is set up.”

Wolf snorted. “What happens if the damn thing sneezes?”

“We’d be crushed and expelled through the blowhole, along with a substantial mass of crystalized mucus, but that’s highly unlikely. There’s only been one recorded Comacean sneeze in the past fifty years.” Rubin’s gaze appeared unfocused—probably watching the approach on her optical implant. “The Quetzalus install nerve blockers to prevent coughing, sneezing, vomiting, and flatulence. The real concern is hiccups. They haven’t found a cure for those yet.”

Wolf chuckled, then frowned. “You’re joking, right?”

Rubin ignored the question. “She’s beautiful.”

“How do you know it’s female?” asked Mops.

“She’s larger than the males, and her belly is smooth instead of ribbed. I wonder what her name is.”

“According to the briefing, ‘Biorefinery Eighteen’,” said Wolf.

Comaceans spent most of their lives in hibernation. Traversing the emptiness between Tixateq 1 and its sister planet took decades. It would be thirty-six years before the herd of more than a hundred Comaceans would reach Tixateq 2 to awaken to feed and mate. Then, once the planet’s orbit took them farther from the warmth and blue-white light of the sun, they would begin the long return journey to Tixateq 1.

In the interim, the Quetzalus harvested eighteen different substances from inside the largest of the creatures, including two mineral compounds, a raw form of a potent Glacidae narcotic, and a gel that had proven to be highly effective in fighting Krakau sucker-fungus.

Monroe twisted around in the cockpit, his white-haired head poking through the narrow doorway to the cabin. He was former infantry, and one of only two people on Mops’ team who’d proven they could get through the various piloting simulators without multiple casualties and/or explosions. “I’ve got a yellow blinker on the communications console. Is that a problem?”

“That should be the landing beacon,” said Wolf. “Have they assigned us a docking platform yet?”

It wasn’t that Mops’ team was inexperienced. It was that their experience was with things like unclogging plumbing lines and swapping out filters in the ship’s environmental system. Nothing in their time

keeping the *Pufferfish* relatively clean had prepared them for the work involved in running the entire ship. Four months of tutorials and on-the-job practice couldn't make up for official training and experience.

Monroe's years with the EMC infantry had given him a slightly wider range of experience. A Prodryan grenade had put an end to his infantry service. Krakau surgeons had replaced his right arm, along with a good chunk of his torso. He wore his hair long over the right side of his head, hiding the scars where his ear used to be.

His sense of balance had never fully recovered, but his discipline had made him an invaluable second-in-command. More importantly, Mops trusted him.

"They're sending us to platform three." Monroe tapped the console, transferring an image to the green-tinted monocles worn by the team.

Mops studied their destination. Pinpoints of light surrounded a metal blister forty meters ahead of a dorsal fin. Two additional lights flashed at a circular platform to one side.

"I tried to acknowledge," Monroe continued. "That should be the blue one, right? Nothing happened."

"You're still on intersystem communications. You need to switch to intrasystem." Wolf unclipped her harness and squeezed through to take the copilot seat. "Move over." After a moment's silence, she added, "Sir."

Rank and discipline had eroded since they'd turned their backs on the EMC, but there were limits to what Mops and Monroe would put up with. Wolf spent most of her time testing or skipping blithely past those limits.

"Landing instructions received and acknowledged," Wolf announced. "Cut speed and close distance to two kilometers. They'll bring us in from there using grav beams."

A minute later, the shuttle jerked like they'd hit something. Mops gripped her harness as her internal organs tried to jump out from beneath her rib cage. For several seconds, she felt like she was falling in two different directions at once.

Monroe swore. "Forgot to synch the shuttle's gravity with the Comacean grav beams. Hold on."

The vertigo ended. Mops jerked back, banging her head against the wall.

"Sorry about that," said Monroe.

"As long as we're in one piece, I'm happy." Mops lowered her voice. "We are still in one piece, right?"

“*So far,*” responded Doc, a personal AI unit who existed primarily as code etched into the layered memory crystal of Mops’ monocle. His voice came from the speakers in her uniform collar, pitched low so no one else would overhear. “*Based on your previous missions, I estimate a sixty-three percent chance of that continuing.*”

“I appreciate your confidence,” Mops said dryly. “Monroe, any sign of EMC vessels?”

“Nothing but the Comacean herd and a few Quetzalus transports.” Monroe popped a bubble of green gum, filling the cabin with the scent of cucumber and tomato. He’d been chewing salad-flavored gum lately. “The shuttle’s scanners aren’t as sensitive as the *Pufferfish*’s, but they’ll alert us to any deceleration signatures in the system. If the Alliance shows up, we’ll see ’em in plenty of time to pull out.”

“What’s so important we gave up searching for the Rokkau prison planet to come here, anyway?” asked Wolf.

“All Admiral Pachelbel told me was that it’s vital we meet with this person, for the sake of both Earth and the Alliance.” Mops had known Pachelbel for most of her life. The admiral couldn’t openly assist wanted criminals, but she sympathized with Mops and her goals. She’d done what she could to help them from the shadows.

Mops opened the collar of her uniform to pull out the flexible bubble-style helmet. “Everyone seal up.”

Mops secured the clear material over her head and sealed the edge to the front of her collar, then bent down to pull the tabs that would seal the gap between boots and pants. Finally, she removed her gloves from their pocket and tugged them on.

The suit’s air circulation hissed to life automatically. Her helmet swelled outward, creases smoothing away until nothing remained to obscure her vision except a few fingerprints. She wrinkled her nose at the plastic and oil taste of the suit’s air supply.

A blue status icon appeared on her monocle, displaying suit integrity and confirming she had twenty minutes of air. Additional icons provided the same information for her team.

“Wolf, you’ve got a helmet leak,” she said.

“I see it.” Wolf scowled and grabbed a roll of metallic gold tape from her equipment harness. She tore off a strip and stretched it over the left side of her helmet.

The lone green icon on Mops’ monocle turned blue a moment later. Their uniforms were standard maintenance jumpsuits, and weren’t

designed for long-term space work, but they'd be more than enough for the walk from the shuttle to the Comacean airlock.

"Touchdown in twenty seconds," called Monroe.

The grav beams set the shuttle down as gently as a Quetzalus returning an egg to the nest. Monroe glanced at a checklist taped to the wall, reviewed his console, and twisted around in his chair. "All systems are blue."

"Everyone grab a PRA." Mops detached her harness from the seat and opened an overhead compartment to retrieve one of the personal respiration adjusters. The air mixture inside the Comacean was adjusted for Quetzalus. The PRAs would provide trace adjustments to their oxygen intake to keep everyone fully alert.

She looped the PRA around her neck like a medallion. "Wolf, you're staying with the shuttle."

Wolf froze, PRA in hand. "But Monroe's the pilot."

"Monroe won't punch out our escort." Mops waited, arms crossed, until Wolf stuffed the PRA back into the compartment. "Yes, I know what happened at Crossroads station last week."

"That Glacidae had it coming," Wolf muttered. "You think they oozed lubricating fluid in my soup by accident?"

"The pre-launch procedure should be programmed and ready to go," said Mops. "All you have to do is flip the switch."

"It's an interactive touch/voice menu, not an actual switch," Rubin clarified.

"I know, I know." Wolf returned to the cockpit and dropped into the pilot's seat.

"Keep an eye out for unexpected company," said Mops. "Maintain an open channel with the *Pufferfish*, and a second line with me. That's the other reason I need you here. Monroe doesn't know comms like you do, and we can't afford to lose contact."

Wolf straightened a little at the acknowledgement of her newfound expertise.

"Stay suited up until the shuttle's completely repressurized," Mops reminded her. "Just in case."

"I know the regs." Wolf offered a halfhearted salute and punched the door controls, closing off the cockpit from the rest of the shuttle.

The cabin lights turned green as the air thinned. Mops' suit puffed out slightly in response. "No projectile weapons inside the Comacean," she reminded them. "Combat batons only."

Hopefully they wouldn't need weapons. Humanity's reputation as savages should convince the workers to give them wide berth.

The rest of their equipment was standard SHS gear. If anyone asked, they could claim to be a cleanup crew doing contract work.

The hatch fell silently open, becoming a ramp leading to a path marked with blue light strips.

"Stay between the lights," Rubin warned over the comm. "Comaceans aren't massive enough to generate significant gravity. Step off the grav-plates, and you'll float away."

Mops spotted two other shuttle-class vessels parked nearby. The first was Quetzalus in design, tall and blocky, like a house ripped from its foundations. The second was Merraban, painted in a jarring color scheme of cheerful red, green, and pink.

Beyond the square metal plates and the border lights, the Comacean's skin reminded her of volcanic rock, wrinkled and pitted and cracked. Veins of dark green ice filled the deepest cracks.

The way the surface curved away in all directions triggered a primitive part of her brain, making her feel like her next step would send her falling toward the stars. "Doc, where's my ship?"

A glowing arrow appeared on her monocle. She turned her head until she spied an oversized silhouette of the *Pufferfish*. With all essential systems shut down, the *Pufferfish* should be safely invisible unless someone knew exactly where to look.

"This is cruel," murmured Rubin. She crouched at the very edge of the "road," where the overlapping grav plates were "stitched" to the Comacean's skin with black polymer cable.

"The Comaceans have evolved to take micrometeoroid strikes." Mops pointed to a small crater to the left of the road. "I doubt this one even noticed a few piercings. The Quetzalus have specialists seeing to the health of the herd, not to mention a team of lawyers making sure they comply with Alliance laws about the treatment of rare or endangered life forms."

"Alliance laws." Rubin continued toward the airlock. "Laws that permit one species to modify and colonize another? I wouldn't trust their laws to protect my pet slug, let alone the Comaceans."

Her voice, normally atonal, grew louder at the end, revealing the depth of her unhappiness.

The dome ahead rotated to reveal a triangular airlock door, which slid open a moment later. The airlock was large enough to hold multiple

Quetzalus. For three humans, it was more spacious than the entire *Pufferfish* shuttle.

The door slid shut, the lift pressurized, and the whole thing sank down with a faint slurping sound. This was one of eight blowholes spread around the Comacean's body: four toward the front, and four more near the tail. The creature only breathed when inside a planet's atmosphere, so there was little chance of her snorting the lift and its occupants into space.

Artificial gravity couldn't fully compensate for the vertigo as they followed the Comacean's airpipe toward one of the lungs.

"Welcome to Biorefinery Eighteen, a Zenkozan family business," a mechanically-translated voice announced. "We have identified you as *human*. If this is incorrect, please state your species name and preferred language now."

After a pause, the voice continued. "You are responsible for obeying all safety regulations and posted signs. As you are *human*, please pay particular attention to the following rules. One: Eating Zenkozan employees is strictly forbidden. Two: Eating the Comacean is also forbidden."

"Our reputation precedes us," commented Mops.

Monroe grunted. "Probably a good thing Wolf stayed behind."

The lift stopped. Eventually, the door opened to reveal two Quetzalus. Each massed roughly the same as an Earth elephant. Dull, patchy hair covered their yellow-brown skin. Both wore metal cuffs near the base of the upper part of their beaks. The devices appeared to be a combination translator/computer interface/identification. Clipped to the lower beaks were short metal tubes.

"*Electrical stunners,*" said Doc. "*Short-range. Probably not powerful enough to kill a human, but it would leave you twitching on the floor in a puddle of your own piss.*"

Mops was less concerned about the stunners than she was those computers. The average Quetzalus might not be able to tell one human from another, but if their systems identified Mops and the others as wanted fugitives, this mission could get clogged up fast.

Both Quetzalus were nervous, judging from the dim blue glow of their tongues. It might be nothing more than having to get close to humans. Mops kept one hand near her combat baton, just in case.

The closer of the two—the lack of a crest atop her head marked her as female—cocked her head. Probably listening to instructions via an implant. "You are Captain Jean-François Paillard?"

“That’s right.” Mops had chosen the alias after confirming the real Captain Paillard was helping with security and relief efforts at a Krakau colony twenty-three light years away. “We made arrangements with Zan Zenkozan to pick up one of your guests.”

Said arrangements had mostly involved transferring a significant amount of money into the Zenkozan family coffers. Given Quetzalus economics, it was less a bribe than a tip. If they’d done the numbers right, it would be enough to ensure cooperation and secrecy without being so extravagant as to raise suspicions.

The male’s bushy red crest was fully erect. A wave of orange light rippled through his hair. Quetzalus “hair” was more like biological fiber optic cable, with different color light indicating strong emotions.

“Is there a problem?” asked Monroe.

The female clacked her beak, making a sound like wooden planks smacking together. Hard. Mops had heard Quetzalus laughter before, but it still made her flinch reflexively.

“Quil is expressing relief. I am Ulique Laccalos. Quil and I are thrilled at your arrival and will happily escort you to your passenger.”

“How quickly can you take him?” asked Quil.

Mops blinked. “Our shuttle is ready to launch. We can go as soon as—”

“He’s in the commissary,” interrupted Ulique. “This way, please.”

Their eagerness to be rid of their guest made Mops more nervous, not less. Who—or what—had Admiral Pachelbel sent them to retrieve?

With a sigh, she left the airlock and hurried to keep up with the long-legged Quetzalus.

The passageway reminded Mops of a flexible ship-to-ship boarding tube, only larger, with an odd series of vertical bulges striping the walls. Orange-tinged light strips ran along either side, half a meter above human eye level. Gravity was a third of Earth normal.

Monroe ran a hand over one of the rounded bulges on the wall. “Structural reinforcements?”

“In a sense,” answered Ulique. “Those are bones.”

Mops frowned. “I thought we were inside the equivalent of a bronchial tube.”

“We are,” said Quil. “Diminutive creatures like yourselves require far less skeletal support than one as magnificent as B-18. We’ve

developed several new manufacturing techniques based on the Comacean's ability to grow flexible metal-infused cartilage."

Mops took a closer look. "Kumar would love this."

"Probably why he insisted I record everything for him," said Doc. "He also asked if we could bring him back, and I quote, 'Some parts to dissect'."

"Confirming I made the right call to leave him on the *Pufferfish* for this one." Mops doubted Kumar's enthusiasm for all things biological would have gone over well with their hosts. Or with Rubin.

Another airlock opened onto an open metal platform, enclosed beneath a clear dome. Mops' breath stopped as she took in the enormous blue cavern stretching out before and below them—the Comacean's lung. The bulging air sacs lining the surface of the lung made Mops think of the inside of a pomegranate.

Quetzalus worked in circular pit-like stations, each one holding three or four people around a central computer terminal. The younger ones lit up with anxiety at the sight of the humans.

A maze of narrowing tunnels stretched away from the domed platform, many disappearing into the lung walls. These were similar in color to the Comacean's skin, dark with green lines running beneath the surface.

According to the specs Doc shared through her monocle, the Quetzalus had settled eight of the larger air pockets within the lung, including cargo and equipment, residences, and a secure control area. This was communications and transport.

"We've colonized several other organs," Quil said proudly. "Including four gizzards and a section of...I believe in humans, it would be called the liver."

After checking the air readings, Mops unsealed her helmet and activated her PRA. A puff of metal-scented oxygen tickled her face. The air smelled faintly swamplike. Old instincts kicked in, and she glanced around for mold. She found nothing but the faint oily sheen left behind by cleaning drones.

"What's that music?" asked Rubin as she removed her own helmet.

"Counterclassical travelling songs," said Ulique. "Used to remember hunting and migration routes back home."

It sounded like metal rasps rubbing together, overlaid with low wind instruments and the horn-like sounds of untranslated Quetzalus speech. "This is not a common Quetzalus language, but I can attempt to translate

if you'd like," offered Doc. "I believe the refrain refers to a bumbling son who died in a tar pit."

Doc paused. *"And also died in a lava flow. And a mudslide. And some form of playground equipment. It's possible my translation is off."*

"This way." Ulique led them to the largest of five open passages leading deeper into the lung.

They entered another bronchial tube, which sloped steeply downward. The grav-plates kept Mops' inner ear from registering the change.

"If my specs are accurate, we're passing over the bladder and water filtration plant access point," said Doc.

Ten minutes later, they emerged into what appeared to be a small, colorful jungle. Thick yellow moss carpeted the floor. Vines as thick as her arm clung to the curved walls and ceiling. Clusters of bell-shaped orange blossoms grew alongside thorny, hard-shelled fruits. The too-sweet floral scent made her eyes water, and Mops surreptitiously turned up her PRA.

A nearby Quetzalus extended a quadfurcated tongue to grasp one of the swollen fruits. He twisted carefully, then froze, his glowing tongue still half-extended, when he spotted the humans.

"The commissary?" guessed Mops.

"There's gathering space toward the back," said Quil.

"We don't have much here suitable for aliens," Ulique said apologetically. "But humans don't eat real food anyway, right?"

"Not usually." Mops gestured for the others to remain still. "The Krakau found tube feeding to be easier and healthier for human sustenance."

"Disgusting." From the flat tone, she was fairly sure Ulique's comment was meant as observation, not insult.

Doc translated the whispers he picked up as the Quetzalus warned one another about the arrival of humans. The one with his tongue out finally pulled the fruit free, took it carefully in his beak, and backed away.

"Most of our people have never seen a human in person," Quil said, crest drooping. "They hear stories of your service as fierce soldiers for the Krakau Alliance."

Mops forced a chuckle. "I think they're more concerned with the stories about humans reverting to feral, shambling cannibals."

"That too, yes," Ulique said awkwardly. "There is an entire genre of 'monster human' stories, popular among our youth. The worst are the

games that allow you to play as a human, killing and consuming sentient beings.”

“Our navigator has several of those. They don’t play ’em much anymore.” Mops watched as the Quetzalus quietly cleared out. In another situation, she might have tried to ease their fears, but for this mission, the fewer witnesses, the better. They wouldn’t all leave, of course. There were always gawkers who enjoyed the alien equivalent of an adrenaline rush that came from getting close to such dangerous animals.

“This way.” Ulique led them down a well-trampled path toward a mossy clearing with a bubbling, steaming pond at the center. Smooth-topped rocks, about a meter in diameter, were scattered about like tables. Only a few Quetzalus remained, their enormous eyes fixed on the humans.

Mops barely noticed them. Her attention was locked on a table near the back and its lone occupant: a creature a meter in height, with broad blue and yellow wings draped like a cape from the middle of his back. Gleaming, colorful armor plates protected his torso and shoulder joints. Overlong fingers poked at a rectangular lump of brown nutritional supplement.

“Your passenger,” said Ulique, not bothering to conceal her relief. “How soon can you take him?”

Mops’ hand dropped to her combat baton. “Doc?”

“*On it.*” He pulled up their instructions from Admiral Pachelbel.

Mops reread every word. The admiral had been even less forthcoming than usual about this one. Nowhere had she made any mention that their contact was Prodryan.

Monroe and Rubin stepped into position on either side of her and waited for orders.

Technically, there was no law against a Prodryan being here. The Prodryan war against the Alliance was a disorganized thing, a thousand individual actions rather than a centralized campaign. The Prodryans had never officially declared war, in part because war was their default state. They’d wiped out dozens of colonies and killed hundreds of thousands, including many of Mops’ fellow humans.

“Captain Adamopoulos?” The Prodryan rose and brushed crumbs from his armor.

“Captain Jean-François Paillard,” Mops said firmly.

“Of course. Captain *Paillard.*” Prodryans were furious fighters but terrible liars. “My Human name is Advocate of Violence. I’m a certified

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legal advocate and part-time spy. I'm here to assist you and your crew. In return, you'll help me end the Krakau Alliance.”

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