



TERMINAL PEACE

(PREVIEW)

By Jim C. Hines



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Chapter 1

Human beings, once the worst of their feral instincts have been cured, are an undeniable military asset. However, the recent decision to allow the humans of Earth to govern themselves is the most tentacle-knotting foolishness to come out of the Alliance Judicial Council in decades.

Humans are little more than animals. I say this not out of malice or racism. Indeed, I'm quite fond of human beings. But after years of study, I've found them to be an evolutionary quagmire of inefficiency. Scientifically and objectively, humans are a primitive species.

*They have redundant lungs and kidneys, but only a single brain or heart, as well as seemingly "optional" organs like the appendix. Even more absurd is their reproductive system. Half the species keep their genitalia on the outside of their bodies! Then there's the human gastrointestinal tract, an evolutionary abomination if ever there was one.**

Recently discovered research from the Library of Humanity suggests one of the greatest threats to human health in pre-contact years was their own immune system. Much like humans themselves, their immune system was vicious and undiscerning. It attacked external pathogens with moderate efficiency, but assailed the host body as well.

A sampling of human immune disorders includes arthritis, diabetes, lupus, gastrointestinal inflammation, multiple sclerosis, and countless more. While human medicine was able to manage many of these diseases, their physiology was a disaster waiting to happen. The so-called "Krakau Plague"—an inaccurate and offensive misnomer—was but the latest in a long list of pandemics to ravage this primitive world.

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Indeed, one could argue that the Krakau Plague resulted in a stronger, more resilient breed of human. Just as Krakau government has produced a stronger, more stable human society.

-From "A Defense of Krakau Oversight in Human Evolution and Government"

By Krakau physician Aberdovey Bells

**The human GI tract is more than seven and a half meters long. Despite this absurd length, humans regularly emit foul-smelling exhaust as a byproduct of inefficient digestion. Krakau biochemists have tried for years to reduce these emissions through a carefully controlled diet, but their efforts have met with minimal success.*

Contractors and specialists from the Krakau Alliance had completely overhauled the *EDFS Pufferfish*, including “human-friendly” upgrades to the medical facilities. Brand new medtanks gleamed like oversized aquariums beneath light strips designed to mimic the spectrum of Earth’s sun rather than Dobranok’s. The walls and storage lockers were a gentle blue instead of the sandy brown the Krakau preferred. Cheerful images of baby Earth animals with encouraging text decorated the ceiling.

None of it eased Captain Marion “Mops” Adamopolous’ impatience. Every minute she spent here, lying in what the Krakau called “a perfectly balanced restorative medical bath solution,” brought them one minute closer to interplanetary war—a war with Earth at its center.

She stared up at the picture of a kitten clinging to a tree branch with its front claws. The text, in Human, read, *Continue dangling in your present location!*

“How long?” she asked for the sixth time.

Azure turned so one large eye faced Mops. “I’m analyzing your test results as quickly as I can.”

Mops dug deep, scraping for the last dregs of patience. Azure was young for a Rokkau, roughly equivalent to a human in her late teens, and while she was a genius when it came to biochemistry, that didn’t make her a trained physician.

Azure stood a bit over a meter tall, her cylindrical body resting on thick, snakelike limbs. Four long, dexterous tentacles paged through the medical information displayed on the wall-mounted console. One of those tentacles was slightly shorter and skinnier than the rest. Mops had shot that one off eight months ago, and it hadn’t quite finished regrowing.

Thick, overlapping shells covered most of Azure's body. Like the skin beneath, the shells were mostly black with irregular splotches of blue.

The everpresent salt-and-alcohol smell of Krakau antiseptics threatened to give Mops flashbacks to the first time she'd woken up in a medtank. That had been years ago, on Earth. Antarctica, though she hadn't known it at the time. She hadn't known anything. No language, no identity, no idea who or what she was. No memories, save for nightmarish flashes of hunger...

Back when Mops had been in charge of Shipboard Hygiene and Sanitation, she'd tried everything to minimize that smell. Odor-absorbing minerals, upgraded air filtration systems, air-freshening sanitary scrubs...nothing worked.

She turned onto her side. A painted gorilla grinned down at her from the wall. Colorful writing arched over the creature's head like a rainbow: *Have you groomed your dental protrusions today?*

"I'm not sure about the artwork."

"I'm told the style is designed to mimic the décor of an old human medical facility specializing in tooth care. Are the posters not comforting?"

"I'm not sure 'comforting' is the right word." In fairness, Mops doubted anything would bring much comfort today. "

Azure hummed and clicked to herself as she pored over a computer console. "Perhaps a trained doctor would be better for these tests. The Alliance has—"

"I don't trust the Alliance with this." Bad enough the Krakau—and, to be fair, their Rokkau kin—had been behind the infection that transformed humanity into shambling, near-unkillable monsters all those years ago. The Krakau Alliance claimed to have searched for a cure, but the truth was, they *wanted* the monsters. What they called a cure was just enough to turn the monsters into obedient soldiers in their war against the Prodryans.

And then, four months ago, Mops had discovered a Krakau admiral working to infect and weaponize other races. To deliberately do to them what an accident of biology had done to humans.

Mops wasn't alone in her distrust of the Alliance. These days, only escalating Prodryan aggression kept the whole interplanetary organization from crumbling like wet sand. She wasn't sure how much longer that would be enough.

"You don't trust them, but you trust me?" Azure's stuttering clicks were the human equivalent of wry laughter.

"Why not? You haven't attempted any acts of bioterrorism in eight months."

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Azure waved a tentacle. “That was the impetuosity of youth. Who hasn’t incapacitated a ship and tried to wipe out a planet’s population when they were a child?”

“Some of us spent our youth trudging about a ruined planet, eating anything that moved.” Fortunately, Mops had no memories of those years before the Krakau had “cured” her. “Speaking of children running wild, how long has it been since you called your mothers?”

“Three days.” The translator on Azure’s beak managed to convey her eye-rolling exasperation, though Mops wasn’t sure if it was directed at her or at Azure’s parents. “They got matching shell-etchings last month: three-color line art of coral blooms curled with silver wave-skimmers.” At Mops’ blank expression, she explained, “Wave-skimmers are like shimmering dragonflies. They mate for life. The coral blooms are just pretty.”

“That sounds nice,” said Mops.

“It’s *embarrassing*. They’re old enough to be grandparents. Do you know what they said to me when I asked about getting an etching, back on the life ship? I thought they’d burst an air bladder...”

Azure’s skin darkened. One large, black eye continued to watch the console. The other shifted to focus on Mops.

Mops braced herself. “What is it?”

“I’ve finished comparing your test results to Alliance diagnostic criteria.” Azure’s lower limbs undulated with distress. The melody of her words—before translation—was off-key as well. “It appears your body’s immune system has begun to reject the Krakau cure.”

Mops had been dreading those words. Hearing them now was almost a relief, an end to weeks of uncertainty and dread.

For close to a month, she’d felt *off*. She had trouble sleeping, and when she did drift off, she spent her nights twitching and sweating, jolting awake from half-remembered dreams.

At first, she’d told herself it was nothing serious. Humans were practically unkillable, immune to most diseases and able to shrug off injuries that would destroy another species. It was one of the things that made them such useful soldiers. But as her symptoms increased, she’d started to suspect the worst.

“Well, shit.”

Azure gave an exaggerated full-body nod. “A fecal analysis was part of the diagnosis, yes. Your nonstandard diet presented challenges, but the sample’s pH was abnormally high. In addition, your white blood cell count is up, your adrenal glands are overproducing, your neurotransmitters—”

“I’m reverting.”

“It appears so,” Azure said quietly. “I’m double-checking the results.”

Mops sat in the tank, acutely aware of her body. The wrinkled skin on the pads of her fingers. The medbath lapping against her skin. The recirculated air raising goosebumps on her arms. She felt...hollow, like an old tree rotting from the inside. “What’s my prognosis?”

Azure’s beak clicked. “I don’t understand your question.”

“How do we treat this?” Mops snapped. “What are my odds?”

“There is no treatment.” Azure spoke slowly, as if to a child. “I’ve reviewed the latest medical research, what little there is, but...”

“There’s not much there,” Mops guessed.

“This particular area of study is remarkably barren.”

Why wouldn’t it be? If the occasional human reverted back to its feral state, there were millions more where that one came from. Cheaper to round up and cure a new batch from Earth than to try to troubleshoot and fix whatever had gone wrong with one random human.

“What triggered this?” asked Mops. “Why is it happening now?”

“It’s impossible to say.”

“Could it be deliberate? A form of biological attack? You and the other Rokkau developed a drug to trigger immediate, temporary reversion. If the Prodryans got hold of that, they could have used it to—”

“All humans were inoculated against that formula seven months ago,” said Azure. “I’ve found no trace of any external agent causing your reversion. This is a result of your body’s own actions. Your immune system is rejecting the cure.”

“In other words, my body screwed the pooch on this one.”

“Bestiality would not cause reversion either,” Azure assured her.

“It’s an expression.” Mops touched the controls on the side of the tank. The med fluid drained away, and warm air blasted her from above. The transparent walls lowered. She swung her legs over the side and stood. “What about natural immunity, like Gabe and the others? Could we use their genetics to help me fight off the effects?”

She was stretching, grasping at any grain of hope.

“I’m sorry, Captain.”

Meaning Mops was facing not one, but two unwinnable wars: one against the Prodryans, and one against her own illness.

It had been a joint Krakau/Rokkau contact mission to Earth a hundred and fifty years ago that inadvertently triggered the end of human civilization. Rokkau venom, combined with humanity’s ill-advised attempt at a cure, had created an unstoppable outbreak.

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Shame had driven the Krakau to cover up their part in Earth's downfall. They publicly blamed the Rokkau, even going so far as to banish the Rokkau from their home world. A handful of Rokkau, like Azure's great grandparents, escaped into hiding. The rest were imprisoned where it was believed no one would ever find them.

The Krakau returned to Earth a century later. The first explorers from that mission to set their tentacles on the planet's surface were promptly swarmed and eaten by Mops' ancestors.

Poetic justice, considering.

A minuscule fraction of Earth's population had proven immune to the plague. They'd hidden all those years, doing what they could to survive and preserve Earth's history and knowledge in what they called the Library of Humanity.

Their bodies had fought off the changes wrought by the plague. Mops' body had fought off the fucking cure.

She gathered her things from the fold-down shelf in the wall and dressed slowly, hands trembling with fury. Slipping into the familiar black jumpsuit eased her nerves a little. Every movement was disciplined. Routine.

Mops had helped design this uniform. One shoulder sported the gleaming pufferfish insignia of her ship, the other a rotating image of Earth. The globe was the official emblem of the Earth Defense Fleet—currently a fleet of one. Yellow stripes above and below the pufferfish marked her as the captain of that lone ship.

She donned her equipment harness next, then pulled on her boots. Finally, she slid an oval memcrys lens from a padded pocket and placed it over her left eye. It jumped from her fingers, aligning and connecting to the magnets implanted within the orbital bones.

"Your pulse and respiration are both up." Doc "spoke" through the speakers in Mops' collar. The AI's voice was pitched low, for her alone. *"Skin conductivity suggests increased perspiration. I take it the results weren't good."*

Mops pushed the shelf up until it locked flat. "Azure confirmed reversion."

"Well, shit."

Trust Doc to make her chuckle, even on her worst day. "My words exactly."

"Alliance medical records have fifty-six known cases of reversion. Given Krakau secrecy surrounding their role in infecting humanity, there's

an excellent chance they've classified additional information that could be useful in treating your condition. We could—

"The instant we start digging into secure Alliance data, they'll want to know why."

Azure paused, clearly piecing together the half of the conversation she could hear. "You don't want anyone to know about your condition?"

"How long until the effects become debilitating?" Mops' words sounded distant, like she was listening to someone else speak. Someone far more calm and clinical. Buried beneath those words was the real question: *How long until I lose myself and try to eat my own crew?*

"The rate of progression varies from patient to patient," Azure said slowly. "Judging from the tests we've done so far, you could have anywhere from two weeks to two months. Running additional lab work in the coming week should give us a better idea."

Two weeks. Two months if she was lucky. "What should I expect in the meantime?"

"It varies," said Azure. "Your thinking will probably get cloudy. You may have blackouts. Appetite will increase. Emotional regulation could become more of a problem. Digestive complications are likely."

"Digestive complications?"

"Certain internal processes are trying to recalibrate. Intestinal calibration may go too far, or not far enough."

"Lovely."

"Should I continue?"

Mops shook her head. "Upload the list to Doc. I'll review it later." She rotated her arm until the shoulder popped. "Am I fit to continue commanding the ship?"

"For now." Azure slid closer and twined a tentacle around Mops' forearm, a gesture of fondness and support. "I'm sorry, Captain. I assume I should keep this secret from the crew?"

"They deserve the truth." That much, Mops was sure of. "I'll tell them at this morning's briefing. I trust them."

And if...*when*...she lost herself, when she reverted to the mindless savagery she'd been born into, when she fell too deep into hunger to claw her way back, she trusted them to do whatever was necessary to stop her.

Just like medical, the bridge had gotten a months-long upgrade. Mops barely recognized it anymore.

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The personnel stations circling the center chair looked brand new, with all their exposed circuitry and wiring fixed and sealed away. The notes Kumar had scrawled on the walls at Navigation were scrubbed clean. Gone were the video game controllers Grom had spliced into Navigation and Tactical. Even the old methane smell from spilled alien slushees was gone, replaced with a faint hint of lemon and pine.

At Mops' request, the engineering team had also installed a permanent cupholder at Grom's station.

The bridge was empty save for her second-in-command and a Krakau engineer on loan from Stepping Stone station who'd adopted the Human name Johnny B. Goode. Both were engrossed in their work and quiet enough for her to hear the low hum of the air vent fans hidden in the walls.

"Good morning, Captain." Commander Monroe vacated the captain's station in the middle of the bridge and moved to his customary seat at Tactical.

He'd recently straightened his shoulder-length white hair, draping it to the right and tying it off with a static bead, a small sphere of alien design with just enough of a charge to help hold the hair in place. It wasn't exactly regulation, but it partially obscured the damage done by a Prodryan grenade during his infantry service.

Monroe blew a bubble of brown gum that smelled like barbequed ribs as he studied Mops. "What's wrong, sir?"

"I'm changing our schedule." She missed the upholstered lounge chair Grom had welded into place after the loss of the ship's original Krakau captain. This new seat was too stiff, and had the faint chemical stink of freshly-extracted polymers. She settled in and pulled up the latest repair logs. "How's my ship, Johnny?"

Johnny rippled all three of her primary tentacles in annoyance. "The *Pufferfish* is ninety percent repaired. Despite the extensive damage your crew of semi-evolved primates inflicted upon her."

"That's not fair," chided Mops. "Grom inflicted a good chunk of that damage, and they'd spine-slap you silly at the suggestion they had primate ancestry."

Monroe chuckled without looking up from his station. "Hey, Captain. Remember when our crew of semi-evolved primates and one Glacidae fought off a Prodryan attack force and saved Johnny's home world?"

Johnny let out a series of annoyed, guttural clicks. "The remaining repairs should be complete within nine days. We'll need an additional four days for final testing and inspection, after which you can get back to your chaos and bloodshed."

“Mostly chaos these days,” said Mops. “We’re trying to cut back on the bloodshed.”

“You mentioned a change of schedule,” said Johnny. “I’ve received no such orders.”

“I haven’t issued them yet.”

The engineer was young for a Krakau. Her rubbery green-and-white skin gleamed like wet glass. The skin around her beak and eyes was a soft, flexible gray.

Despite her youth, she was a skilled engineer. Her team had thoroughly catalogued every centimeter of damage to the *Pufferfish*. She had the typical Krakau disdain for humans, but Mops had dealt with worse.

Mops’ only regret was that she’d looked up the song that had inspired Johnny’s Human name. Now, every time the engineer fell behind in her repairs, Mops had to repress the urge to sing, “Go, Johnny, go!”

Mops studied the display at the front of the bridge. Earth and Stepping Stone were centered on the large curved screen. A small blue icon represented the *Pufferfish*, one of several ships docked at the station. To one side of the screen, a live feed from the system’s security satellites listed current threats.

It was a very long list. Hundreds of Prodryan warships waited in the darkness, far enough out to evade any offensive from Earth, but close enough to take advantage of any opening that might present itself.

Mops turned her attention back to the *Pufferfish*. Her ship looked like a chubby rocket with a slender outrigger jutting from the side. She’d originally carried three matching weapons pods, but only one had survived the abuse Mops and her team put the ship through.

Maybe Johnny had a point about that...

Mops focused on the weapons pod. Her monocle tracked her eye movement and sent a quick query to the *Pufferfish*’ system. The pod’s inventory list popped up on her monocle an instant later. The ship carried a complete complement of missiles, A-gun slugs, and fully-charged batteries for the energy weapons. “Your team has been working through the repairs in order of priority, yes?”

“Of course,” said Johnny.

“So that last ten percent is relatively nonessential?”

Johnny drew herself taller. “*All* of my work is essential.”

“What would happen if we took the *Pufferfish* out sooner than expected?” asked Mops. “Say, today.”

Monroe turned in his seat. He kept his face expressionless, but Mops could see the unspoken question in his eyes.

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In contrast, Johnny looked frustrated enough to tear off her own wriggling limbs. She snatched a curved visor from her webbed harness and placed it over her eyes, presumably checking the latest updates from her team. “Two entire decks lack redundant fire-suppression systems. Internal scanners still insist on misidentifying Tjikko as sixty-eight individual servings of broccoli. We haven’t yet tracked down the source of Nusuran skin lotion seeping into the pool in Recreation.”

“We don’t have any Tjikko in the crew, and we can go without swimming,” said Mops. “Are the decks with the fire-suppression trouble in use?”

“Not currently, but once you take on a full crew—”

“Have both decks sealed off and pump out the air. No oxygen, no fires.” Mops switched the main display to a tactical overview of the solar system.

Green splotches were scattered about the edges like mold creeping across an unsanitized shower unit. Each smear represented a hostile Prodryan squadron. “Any chatter from our would-be destroyers?”

“Nothing new,” said Monroe. “Most of what the Alliance has been intercepting is a mix of goading and gloating. Which clan has the most kills, which captain has the biggest wings, that sort of garbage.”

Space was just too damn big. The closest Prodryans were almost ten AUs away, almost an hour and a half for light-speed transmissions, and far longer for ships or weaponry. “Johnny, are we combat-ready?”

“Weapons were our second priority, after life support. Both offensive and defensive systems are up to code.” The Krakau followed Mops’ attention to the screen. Her skin darkened. “You’re considering an attack against the Prodryans?”

“Not all of them. Not all at once.”

“They would see you coming, giving them more than enough time to prepare a counterattack.”

Mops magnified the fleet closest to Jupiter. The screen brought up additional information on the number and type of ships, presumed armaments, speed, crew size, and clan affiliation.

“My sisters used to talk of human bloodlust.” Johnny slapped a tentacle against the floor. “If you were determined to blow yourselves up, why the depths couldn’t you do it *before* I poured my hearts into fixing this ship?”

Mops ignored her. “Monroe, we’re moving up the morning briefing. I want the crew in the Captain’s Cove in twenty minutes.”

“Yes, sir.” He knew better than to argue.

Johnny didn’t. “This is madness. They’ll either scatter before you reach them, leaving you floundering impotently in empty space, or else they’ll

welcome your lone ship into their claws like a tangler crab and crush you. You can't—"

"This is a bad day to tell me what I can't do." Mops stood, anger flooding her blood. "These Prodryans have been circling my home like sharks for weeks. Any one of them would happily burn my planet if given the chance. They're escalating on a scale we've never seen before, a scale the Alliance can't hope to match. I'm—*we're* running out of time. The Tuxatl mission can't wait another two weeks."

"But the final tests and inspections..."

"Inspect quickly." She stepped closer, fists clenched. "You and your team have one hour to finish what you're working on and get off my ship. Anyone still on board is coming with us."

"Yes, Captain." Body flattened to the floor, Johnny slunk toward the lift with surprising speed.

Monroe waited until the lift doors closed, leaving the two of them alone. "Captain—Mops—what's wrong?"

Monroe had been her second-in-command for two years. He'd earned her trust again and again. He was the closest thing she had to family.

And if she told him the truth now, she wasn't sure she'd be able to pull herself together before the rest of the crew arrived. "I'll tell you in twenty minutes."

Terminal Peace, coming August 9, 2022.

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