

# ADVENTURE CAPITAL

MISSION 9 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

J. S. MORIN

Alien Racer

Mission 5 of: Black Ocean

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THE GAME WAS CALLED Rodek's Revenge, and half the syndicate was addicted. It combined the acrobatic kung fu of Four Fists, No Fear with the brutality of zero-G cagefighting, all trapped inside a slowly rotating cubic arena. It was shamelessly gratuitous, cartoonishly violent, and biologically impossible. Roddy had outdone himself with the programming, to the point where it was getting in the way of organizational readiness. It sucked key personnel out of hangar bays, left hovercruisers without pilots, and threatened sentry rotation schedules.

Carl was dying to play. Sure it was an amateur product, nothing like Runelords of Athos, Kainan's Sword, or even an old-fashioned Typhoon simulator, but it tickled a part of the brain just right. The low detail of the fighting arena and gaudy colors of the fighters' uniforms left the focus where it belonged: on up to eight players trying to vicariously bash in each other's skulls via little holographic avatars. Roddy's key bit of brilliance was forging the typical input devices and using

biometric scanners to let players control their fighters with hand gestures.

Standing in the doorway of the briefing room, Carl watched the bout in progress. The match was a full eight-player free-for-all. By his quick count, he was short the services of a medical tech, three hangar crew, two gunners, a quartermaster, and a cook. Plus Roddy. The laaku watched from behind the players, pacing as he sucked down gulps from an oversized permatherm mug.

Before Carl managed to tear his attention away from the melee, Dr. Akerman startled him by placing a hand on Carl's shoulder. She whispered in his ear. "A word, sir?"

Carl followed the doctor out of the briefing room and into an adjoining office. "What's up? Who needs a hug this time?" Trisha Akerman had been a combat psychologist aboard the *Odysseus*, and she was filling a similar role in Carl's new syndicate. But now instead of post-traumatic stress, she was dealing with crises of conscience, homesickness, and troubles acclimating back to modern life.

"I hear you're shipping out tomorrow," Dr. Akerman replied. She handed him a datapad. "I'd like your signoff to ground one Rodek of Kethlet."

Carl handed the datapad right back. "I know he's going through a rough patch, but Roddy's a pro. Plus, he knows the *Mobius* better than anyone. I'll bring a backup if that makes you feel any better, but Roddy's on the team for this mission."

"It's not the mission I'm worried about," Dr. Akerman snapped before composing herself and resuming in a stern, measured tone. "That laaku's blood is half coffee right now. He's got himself immersed in a hobby. I'm counseling him daily. He's got a support network in place here. Do you see *any* of the players in there with alcohol? And that's a designated

rec area. Rodek has been sober for almost a month. The last thing he needs is a ride on the party barge.”

Carl smirked and stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets. “Well, that’s a new one. Heard the *Mobius* called a tub, a heap, a mule, a turtle...”

“Ramsey, if you’re his friend, you’ll assign him to headquarters until he can handle that sort of environment without relapse.”

Meekly accepting the datapad once again, Carl looked at the medical clearance form. It was an Earth Navy standard document. Main computers on the *Odysseus* were smashed to atoms in the crash, but someone had dredged up medical forms. Not juicy personal correspondence from senior officers that might still have blackmail value. Not classified intel. But the cogs of the bureaucratic machine were fine and dandy.

“We’re not Earth Navy anymore,” Carl protested, but he couldn’t even convince himself.

“He needs you to stop enabling his alcoholism and help him take back control. Put your damn thumbprint on this order. Show Roddy that you’re with him on this.”

*I don’t want to be with him on this. I want to relax on my own ship with my best buddy, throwing back beers and watching holovids. Hell, we got a huge haul of holovids from the Odysseus. Carl sighed and pressed his thumb to the box marked “commanding officer.”*

“Thank you, sir.” Dr. Akerman gave a curt, official nod and strode off. For some reason, it seemed that people got really polite and efficient once they’d browbeaten Carl into getting their way. Was the crew trying to train him or something? They were going to have to try harder if they thought a few salutes and sirs would get them on his good side.

“Shit,” Carl muttered as he moped down the corridor in the opposite direction of the briefing room. The cheers of

players and brutal fleshy noises from the game faded as he went. “Who am I gonna bring to replace him?”

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The briefing room looked different without the raucous gaming. That had been part of the plan. It wasn't often that Carl felt the need for an official briefing, but it had been the best way to ensure the attention of all his underlings—or at least most of them. Not everyone in the Ramsey Syndicate needed to be involved in the planning phase of their next big job.

Carl thumbed a button on the remote, and the holo-projector flared to life. A sector of space appeared in map form, with stars and orbiting planets scattered around in relative location, but horrifically out of scale. “Ladies and gentlemen, I present the Eyndar/ARGO Demilitarized Zone, which I'm now officially shortening to EADZ, for—ahem—EADZ of use. Anyway, welcome to our new stomping grounds. Out here, we're technically closer to Eyndar space than ARGO, so we're ideally positioned to access it from the Eyndar side. There are no stable governments, and ARGO forces are forbidden entry per terms of the treaty. Lucky for us, same goes for the Eyndar navy.”

Jean Niang, former typhoon mechanic, former jungle work detail boss, and current leading candidate for Roddy's replacement, raised a hand. “If there's nobody there, what's the job? We going for salvage, mining... what's the game here?”

Carl grinned. He couldn't have planted a better question in the audience. Niang was kissing his ass for sure. “No one said this region was uninhabited. Plenty of real estate speculators got in while the war was still hot, hoping to turn a huge

profit once their side won. Plus, some loners, freaks, and outlaws had been there long before that. There're little colonies scattered all over. Some of them are just trying to scrape by. Others are turning a tidy little profit on mineral resources and black market transactions."

Amy shouted a question from the back. "So, we're going into the black market business?" Now that question he *had* planted.

"Nah, that'd be too much like honest work. You see... we're going to rob the black market."

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