

# POETS AND PIRACY

MISSION 3 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

J. S. MORIN

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TANNY POPPED the pills into her mouth in little squadrons. Two blues and a pink. A yellow with black stripe, a squarish red, and a clear amber. Four clean white ones shaped like torpedoes. A pair of chalky hexagons and a trio of half-brown, half-yellow capsules. The last to go was a single pill in a metallic casing, printed with a red letter R in gothic script and a standard ARGO hazard marker. She chased each swallow with a mouthful of ginger soda, both to settle her stomach and to kill the bitter aftertaste from the chalky pills. The whole conglomeration fizzed and churned in her stomach as they set out on their assigned tasks.

Centrimac boosted her immune system. A constant presence of it in her system had kept her from so much as a sniffle since she joined the marines. Carl and Roddy came down with something every second or third trip planetside, but not Tanny. She had heard that it took the edge off a hangover too, but she wasn't about to abstain to check for herself.

Plexophan improved her balance and reflexes. There was some weird enzyme in it developed by the yishar that altered

her muscle fibers. They no longer used the same chemical process as most humans. Once she had tried research how that all worked, but no explanation made sense unless you had a degree in biochemistry—preferably an advanced one, focused on xenobiology.

Adrenophiline altered adrenaline production and consumption in the body. Any marine with a year's service had adrenal glands twice the size he enlisted with, and they replenished at six times the normal rate. It also eased the jittery feeling that came after the rush wore off.

A few of the pills were simple mineral supplements. Most humans didn't need a lot of molybdenum, selenium, or cobalt, but anyone with a daily regimen like Tanny's required them. The identical white pills were compacted mixes of auto-release hormones, designed to keep her mood level—she had never found them that effective, but she was worse off without them.

Some of the drugs were just included to cancel out side effects of the others. Plexophan increased her metabolism, but also spiked her appetite out of proportion to the increase. Pseudoanorex counteracted that effect, but resulted in light-headedness that Zygrana balanced out. Cannabinol was there to reduce the anxiety and nausea that Adrenophiline induced.

The centerpiece of the whole cocktail was Recitol, which saturated every marine's system. Though the drug's maker used a soft C sound in the recipient-care video, the marine nickname "Wreck-It-All" came to be the more common pronunciation. It allowed the body to use quick, efficient bursts of adrenaline at will, hyper-oxygenated the blood, and slowed the perception of time by an estimated 11 to 12 percent. It also suppressed activity in the ventrolateral frontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for morality and conscience. Tanny had been taking Sepromax to counteract

the latter effect since re-entering civilian life, but she was unwilling to give up the other benefits.

The water from the faucet shocked Tanny alert as she splashed her face. Leaning heavily on the sides of the sink, she watched her reflection in the mirror. Staring into her own eyes, she waited until the stranger lurking there faded away and she could connect the image with a sense of self. The scrawled red lines receded until the whites were clear; the pupils contracted in reaction to the glare of the mirror light.

There was a knock at the door. “What?” she snapped. It hadn’t been an invitation, but the door opened anyway.

“Sorry,” Esper said. The hangdog expression and the apologetic duck drained the venom from Tanny. Suddenly embarrassed, she reached over and snapped shut the case where she kept her pills. “*What was that?*” Esper never said it aloud, but her furrowed brow and the tilt of her head to get a better look said it for her.

“What?” Tanny repeated, holding the case behind her. The Adrenophiline must still have been digging its claws into her brain. She rationalized that if anyone on the *Mobius* was incapable of threatening her, it was Esper. With a conscious effort, she set the case down on the side of the sink and dared Esper to ask about its contents.

“Roddy sent me,” Esper said. “It’s Kubu. Roddy says there is 2.6 kilos of sub-grade fertilizer in the hold. He says if you don’t clean it up, he’s delivering it.”

“Like to see him try,” Tanny muttered.

“... through the faucet,” Esper added.

Tanny glanced to the sink and the churning froth in her stomach soured. The last thing she needed was to vomit up a thousand terras worth of marine biochemicals. Recitol was a weekly, and there weren’t many pills left in her stash. She wasn’t ready to go without until she could buy more.

Esper seemed to notice her discomfort. “He didn’t *actually* do it ... yet.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t make you clean it up,” Tanny said. “Aren’t you his assistant these days?”

“Not today,” Esper replied. “I’ve just been in and out of the hold, moving stuff from the conference room. I’m converting it to passenger quarters so we can make actual money on fares. Carl and Roddy both seemed pretty keen on the idea, so—”

“Fine,” Tanny snapped. She didn’t need an affidavit. It was a simple enough question. “I’ll get right down there.”

Once the door closed behind Esper, Tanny reopened the pill case. Supplies were always hit or miss. Sometimes she’d find a dealer with a glut of Plexophan, or a fence would have a load of boosted Recitol. It was rare to find things in balanced ratios to match her regimen. Since her recent change to a higher dose of Sepromax, she had run her reserves dangerously low, and a few other pills weren’t far behind.

An hour of cross-referencing the itinerary of the *Mobius* (a work of optimistic fiction at the best of times) against known gray-market pharmacists, Tanny concluded that she wasn’t going to stumble across anyone who had what she needed. Her finger hovered over the button for the intra-ship comm as she decided whether she could afford to wait and hope to get lucky along the way, or if she really needed to make this particular call. Deciding that withdrawal symptoms were worse than asking for help, she closed her eyes and pressed.

“Yo!” Carl’s voice came through from his quarters. “To what do I owe the—”

“I’m running low,” Tanny blurted before Carl could get any farther.

The flippant joviality was gone. “Esper came by and

mentioned you were a bit worn thin. I told her not to worry. How low we talkin’?”

“A week,” Tanny replied. “I’d feel better with four days, plus some wiggle room.”

“Gotcha,” Carl replied. He sounded relieved. “We can reroute to Tau Ceti. Ought to be plenty of options there.” Why did he have to be so goddamn understanding? He’d tried to get her to detox more times than she could count. Tanny had hoped he’d be put out, that he’d argue with her about it again, that he actually cared where they were headed and found a detour inconvenient.

But once again, Carl was just going to have them drop everything and head off to find her a seller. All she could think to say was, “Thanks.”

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