

TO ERR IS AZRIN

MISSION 4 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

J. S. MORIN

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Mission 4 of: Black Ocean

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THE BOUNTY HUNTER's ship swerved around a derelict hulk, dodging fire from the *Mobius*. The chase had started out entertaining when the *Remembrance*, thinking he was making his exchange, dropped out of astral. It wasn't ten seconds before he opened fire, ignoring hails as he fled into the Kapos IV scrap yard. But once a lucky shot had knocked out the bounty hunter's auto-cannon, it had devolved into fox-hunt.

As near as Carl Ramsey could figure, the captain of the *Remembrance* had few options. Curious whether his quarry had the same list in mind, he keyed the ship-to-ship comm. "Vessel *Remembrance*, this is Captain Michael Jagger of the independent ship *Rolling Stone*. It's time to consider handing over that cargo of yours while you've still got some leverage to negotiate. You won't shake us long enough to go astral. You won't get us to crash in the scrap-yard debris. It's time to hand him over before we accidentally blow out your life support or breach your hull."

"*Burn in hell, Jagger,*" came the curt response.

Carl clucked his tongue and shook his head. "Such disre-

spect for a noble musician.” Of course, with the comm closed, the captain of the *Remembrance* didn’t hear that.

“Probably too busy evading us to care,” Tanny replied from the pilot’s seat. It was her handiwork that kept the *Mobius* on the bounty hunter’s tail.

“He’s wasting his time,” Carl muttered. With his arms crossed and feet up on the console, he knew he was far from the model of efficient time use, but his ship was winning. Winning bought a captain a bit of leeway.

Tanny twisted the *Mobius* on its axis and they swung around the hull of an Earth Navy light cruiser. There was a hole the size of a small asteroid in the side—anti-matter torpedo, if Carl had to guess—and the *Remembrance* darted through it. The *Mobius* struggled to stay in the turn, but slipped through close behind. There was no sensation, no G-force tugging Carl from his seat—he wasn’t even buckled in. Tanny flew with the safeties engaged. Between the thrust limiters and Mort’s top-notch artificial gravity, her flying felt no different from sitting on a landing pad.

Carl yawned. If he were piloting, they’d not only have caught up with the bounty hunter’s Osprey-class patrol ship, but they’d have had some excitement doing it. A staccato burst of plasma bolts shot across the forward window, narrowly missing the *Remembrance*. Mriy was picking at it with the guns, not wanting to destroy the ship outright. But it was damnably annoying to watch, knowing they were stuck giving chase until the azrin could land a lucky shot and take out the engines.

“Maybe we should give Esper a chance on the guns,” Carl grumbled.

“Yeah,” Tanny replied. “Same girl who won’t fire a blaster and pulls her punches in Krav Maga sparring.”

“I was joking,” Carl replied deadpan. “Might not hurt letting Roddy have a crack at it though. He wouldn’t—”

“Can you just shut up?” Tanny snapped. “This isn’t as easy as it looks.”

“Of course, you know,” Carl said. “If you’re having trouble, I can take over. You’d do a lot better than Mriy in the gunner’s seat.”

Tanny snorted. “We’ve got this won. We’re just running him down now.”

Carl cringed. It was the sort of thing that just wasn’t said. Overconfidence bred carelessness. Thinking one step ahead could cause you to stumble over the one you were standing on. Plus, it was just plain old bad luck.

On the other side of the holey cruiser, the bounty hunter swung around. The cargo hold of the *Remembrance* opened, and something small and silvery tumbled out. Of course, at a quarter kilometer or so, “small” was a relative term. The fleeing ship changed course again, heading away from the vector of the cargo it had dumped.

“All yours,” the captain of the Remembrance snarled over the comm. “You can come after me or it, but it’s headed for the munitions dump.”

Tanny checked the tactical sensors. “Shit! He’s right. We can’t—”

The *Remembrance* exploded with a plume of ignited oxygen as Mriy connected with a salvo of hits directly to the crew compartment. Tanny swung the *Mobius* around on an intercept course.

Carl leaned over and keyed the comm to the gunner’s turret. “We were all set, Mriy. He dropped the pod and was making a run for it.”

“I know,” Mriy replied. “That was personal.”

Mriy strode through the common room, not pausing as she glanced at Mort's holovid. He was watching a historical recreation from his home world. It was factual, if she was any judge of human narrators. The good ones rarely interrupted the action to have someone tell old stories.

Mort looked up as she passed. "We get him?"

"Not yet," she replied.

Down in the cargo hold, Roddy was waiting with Esper, both standing ready in their EV suits. Roddy gestured with his upper set of hands as she approached, but with the EV helmet on, Mriy heard nothing of what the simian mechanic said. He seemed to realize this and removed the helmet. "You gotta either suit up or get out of here. We're intercepting the pod and bringing it in through the cargo bay door, not the airlock."

"Why wouldn't we just—"

"Out!" Roddy shouted. "We're on the clock. Get pissy later." She envied the laaku his ease with the human language, but her ears flicked at his tone.

Esper, still wearing her EV helmet, shrugged an apology. It was just like her to avoid confrontation. She was like a bird, quick to chirp and quick to flight. Mriy showed a quick flash of fangs to the both of them and made a hasty retreat back to the common room.

The door between had a small window, enough for Mriy to watch Roddy and Esper. Red light strobed, and a klaxon blared; it was loud even muffled by the steel door, warning that the air was being pumped from the cargo bay. Mort's holovid grew in volume as the wizard sought to drown out the annoying noise. Against the assault on her senses, Mriy flattened her ears against her head.

“... *the Roman senate was growing wary of Caesar’s rising influence...*” *the narrator droned on.*

The klaxon faded as the air left the cargo hold, but the human-deaf wizard left the holoivid blaring. “Turn that down,” Mriy ordered. She fought the urge to attach a bodily threat to her command. Commanding Mort in the first place was an error of riled temper. The wizard’s own counter-threats ran far fouler than her own, and she had little doubt he could carry them out.

“*Don’t make me geld you, wizard.*”

“*I’d have your claws turned to butter before you cut through my jeans.*”

She shuddered at the memory of that particular threat. A declawed azrin was no longer fit to be a warrior. She might still fight with blades or guns, but her hand-to-hand fighting would make her a jesting target among her own kind.

Her own kind. Mriy returned her attention to the cargo bay, and looked out the open cargo bay as the *Mobius* matched speed with the cryostasis pod. The wreckage in the salvage yard was the only reference to show how fast they were traveling.

The pod was a silvery, flattened sausage. It tumbled through the darkness, shimmering with the light of Kapos, the sun of the system by the same name. The silver sausage grew larger as Tanny tapped the maneuvering thrusters, allowing the pod to catch up now that the *Mobius* was ahead of it. As it turned over, Mriy caught a flash off the glass window, covering a quarter of one side of the pod. The glare made it impossible for her to see in at a distance. Indicator displays glowed below the window, a good sign even if she couldn’t make out what they said. At least the cryostasis pod had power.

Roddy and Esper prepared an inflatable mattress—one of the useless wonders of the ship’s clutter—and lashed it to the

cargo ramp. Roddy must have been coordinating over the comm with Tanny, because the *Mobius* sped up, slowing the pod's arrival and lining it up such that it would not enter the ship so high above the mattress.

The pod landed without a sound, but the mattress burst beneath its weight as Mort's gravity took hold of it. Esper hit the controls to close the cargo door, and Roddy began harnessing the pod to attach the tow cable. Moments later, the klaxon began to sound once more, growing in volume as air returned to the cargo bay. Mort increased the volume of the holo vid, but this time Mriy didn't care. She tore open the door and rushed down to check on the cryostasis pod and its occupant.

The metal of the cryostasis pod was cold enough to burn, as Mriy discovered when she reached out to touch it. The glass had frosted over with the ship's humidity. A status display panel was visible and functioning, but she didn't know enough about the device's workings to tell anything useful from it.

"So are you ready to tell us who's in it?" Esper asked. She tucked her EV helmet under an arm as she sidled up to Mriy.

"I don't know," Mriy replied. It was an answer she had learned from Mort, who could put so narrow an edge on a question that it would cut. Uncertainty was merely a form of ignorance.

"Come on. You can't expect us to believe you gave up a share of our next job when you had no idea who we were rescuing." Esper leaned around to interpose her face between Mriy and the pod. "Who do you *think* is in there?"

Mriy flattened her ears back. This one spent too much

time listening to Mort. Esper knew the trick in that reply. “I would rather not say until I am sure. I would look foolish.”

“Yeah,” Roddy interjected. “That’d be a first around here.” He hopped onto the pod, walking across its surface as if it were level ground. With one gloved foot, he wiped away enough of the frost to see the face of the occupant. There could be no mistake.

Mriy sighed and let her shoulders slump. The frozen form was azrin, with fur coloration not so different from her own. He was young, not quite yet adult, but few non-azrin would have been able to tell. He was large for his age and quite muscular. “This is Hrykii Yrris.”

“Wait... as in Mriy Yrris?” Roddy asked.

“My nephew,” Mriy confirmed. “Son of my brother Soora.”

Esper swallowed. “The one you—”

“Killed,” Mriy said, nodding. Now that she knew it was Hrykii, there was no avoiding the topic. “Yes, the same brother. Hrykii is the eldest of his generation.”

Grab a copy of *To Err is Azrin*, book 4 of *Black Ocean*, and continue your adventure now.

