

# A SMUGGLER'S CONSCIENCE

MISSION 2 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

J. S. MORIN

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### BLACK OCEAN: MISSION 2

WITH AN IMPACT that drove the breath from her lungs, the cargo bay stopped spinning around Esper. An uncomfortable pressure released from her shoulder socket, and her arm slapped limply to the mat. Overhead lights shone down into her eyes, forcing her to close them. She heard footsteps, and a shadow passed over her; a hand grabbed hers and hauled her to her feet.

"You try scratching me in the face again, I'll dump you even harder," Tanny said.

Esper slumped forward, hands braced against her knees as she caught her breath. Tanny was dripping with sweat, but otherwise seemed unbothered by the exertion of throwing her around. "Sorry," she replied. "It's an old habit. I never got into fights as a schoolteacher. I mostly just broke them up."

"It shows," Tanny said, putting her hands on her hips. She wore padded fingerless gloves and a padded helmet, along with aerobic workout gear and bare feet. Esper was unprotected,

but trusted Tanny not to actually *hit* her. “You fight like a little girl. I’m guessing you only had sisters.”

“Nope,” Esper replied between breaths. “Two older brothers. Never laid a hand on me.”

“Must have been a lot older.”

“Eight and twelve years,” said Esper. She took one huge breath and forced herself upright.

Tanny nodded. “Usually it’s the only children who never learn how to fight, or the ones who grew up in space aboard ship. Spend enough time around kids your own age, you learn how.”

“I’m not sure I’m cut out to be a marine,” Esper said.

Tanny cracked her knuckles and settled into a defensive stance. “Well, no shit. This isn’t about making you into a boxer; it’s about keeping you from being a liability.” Esper threw a punch, but Tanny caught her by the wrist. Poking a finger inside Esper’s fist, Tanny popped her thumb out. “You’ll break your thumb if you hit someone like that. And use an open palm trying for my jaw. You’d bruise your knuckles if you hit someone like that.”

“You didn’t care about me being a liability when I was a passenger,” Esper pointed out. She bounced on the balls of her feet like Tanny had shown her and threw another punch, which Tanny batted aside.

“I’d written you off. I knew if anything happened, I’d have to save you,” Tanny replied, throwing a slow punch meant to force Esper to duck out of the way. “Now that you’re part of the crew, it would be nice if you weren’t such a pushover. It’s bad enough how often I had to bail out Carl or Chip.”

“I thought Carl was in the navy,” Esper said. She swung her foot around in a clumsy kick that Tanny accepted to the side with a grunt, not even bothering to defend herself. “Shouldn’t he have learned all this stuff?”

"Navy and tough don't belong in the same sentence; at least not without an 'ain't' thrown in somewhere," Tanny said. "Carl was the biggest wimp on board until you showed up."

Esper pulled up short, taking a tap on the cheek from Tanny's gloved right fist for her lapse. "Even Roddy? I mean he's so—"

"Stronger than he looks, and quicker, too," Tanny finished for her. "Chip wasn't much better, but he was ten years younger." Tanny's expression went flat for a moment, and her shoulders slumped. "Anyway, me and Mriy are the ones who keep everyone safe planetside."

"You had all this equipment on board," Esper noted, pointing to the protective padding Tanny wore. "Do you and her fight like this?"

Tanny laughed. "I could maybe take her in a points-only boxing match, but marine conditioning can't make up for azrin physiology and a lifetime of hunting her own meals."

Esper sighed and stepped back off the edge of the mat, the cold steel of the cargo hold floor icy against her bare feet. "It just makes me wonder what I've gotten myself into. I mean, Carl said I'd find a way to fit in, but I just don't see anything I can do that you need."

"This really isn't a ship," Tanny replied. "This is an asylum where the patients all pitch in to fly."

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Carl and Mort sat on the couch with Roddy as the laaku introduced them to one of his species' greatest cultural exports—the action holovid. While human audiences had tended to move either up or way, way down the scale of sophisticated entertainment, the laaku people had been turning out the best

unapologetic, mind-numbing adrenaline pumpers for decades. Carl had seen real-life laaku fight—even Roddy once or twice—but it looked nothing like the physics-defying acrobatics filling the holovid field. Quadridexterous bare-fisted masters were slugging it out with some sort of demons taken from the mythology of a lost sub-division of the laaku species. The battle was playing out at a temple perched on the edge of a smoke-belching volcano, giving Carl a hint as to why this particular people might have died out.

When the door to the cargo bay opened, all heads in the room turned to look. Tanny and Esper stumbled through, their workout clothes and hair soaked with sweat. Carl looked from Tanny and her glistening bare arms to Esper with her shirt plastered against her skin, then back again. Without taking his eyes from them, he leaned close to Roddy. “Think you could install some security cameras in the hold? I think we’ve been watching the wrong feed.”

Roddy made a rude, flapping noise with his lips. “Face it; you blew all your chances with Tanny. She’s probably warned Esper off by now, too.”

“Whatever they were doing down there’s still better holo than what’s on now,” Carl replied.

“What are you kiddies whispering about over there?” Tanny asked, inclining her head in Carl and Roddy’s general direction. She grabbed a can of ReCharge from the fridge and cracked it open, then offered a second can to Esper.

Esper’s face was flushed from exertion, but the redness deepened and she turned and whispered something to Tanny.

“No shit,” Tanny replied loudly enough for everyone to hear. “I just want them to cop to it. I don’t care if you watch us or not, but I catch any cameras in the shower or my quarters, I’m airlocking you ... both of you.” She added a pointed look in

Roddy's direction. It wasn't as if Carl was likely to manage any modifications to the ship without the laaku's help.

"The humors spilleth over," Mort said with a chuckle. "Been cooped up too long in this little box. When we get planetside, take care of yourselves, the lot of you."

"Yeah," Tanny replied. "Whenever *that* might be. We've been floating aimlessly for five days. Be nice if our *captain* would do some captaining and get us some work."

"I'm working ..." Carl replied with an easy smile. His statement at odds with lounging on the couch with his feet on the base of the holovid.

"Yeah, bullsh—" Tanny said.

"He found something," Esper interrupted, perking up. "Didn't you?"

Carl pointed a limp finger in Esper's direction. "Give that lady a cashier's chit. Yeah, I'm waiting to hear back from a guy, but we're headed his way."

"What guy?" Tanny asked, her brow furrowing. She took a long swig of ReCharge as she waited for his reply.

"Well, technically not a 'guy' guy, but she's—"

Tanny spluttered, spitting half a mouthful back into the can. "Not that creepy old bitch!"

"Lay off. She's fine. And she pays," Carl replied. "Mriy's already punched in the heading, just in case."

"You let Mriy—"

"Mriy can work the nav computer," Carl snapped. "It's not yours. Roddy can work it, too. Hell, even I know how to use it. Mort's the only one on board who ..." Carl turned to Esper. "You know how to plot a course in the navcom?"

Esper shrank back from the sudden attention. She shrugged.

"Everyone but Mort and Esper can work it," Carl said.

“Fine,” Tanny replied. “But you can go meet her by yourself. Or just take Mort; she likes *him* well enough.”

Mort cleared his throat. “Not this time. I’ve got something to look into when we set down.”

“Since when have you got business?” Roddy asked. “Not that it’s any of mine.”

“Whose business is any of this?” Esper asked. “Who is this mystery person you might be meeting?”

A few notes from an ancient song chimed from Carl’s datapad. “Speak of the devil,” he said. “This is her.” He turned the datapad in Esper’s direction as he hurried to his quarters.

The name on the screen read: Keesha Bell.

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