

COLLUSION COURSE

MISSION 10 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

J. S. MORIN

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MORT STRODE ACROSS THE HANGAR, hand outstretched. There was a small gathering at the base of the shuttle's ramp. Familiar faces all, but it was the man front and center who drew Mort's attention and shook that welcoming hand. He was solidly built, hard old muscle gone to firm flab, with a jaw like a galleon's prow and a jutting brow that hung an awning over his eyes. The hair atop Don Rucker's head glistened, and didn't budge as he moved. The pearly white smile gleamed fit to shame a shark.

"Mordecai, good to see you again."

Mort looked the old gangster in the eye and had the satisfaction of seeing arguably the most powerful man on Mars flinch and avert his gaze. "Don. It's been ages."

But if the head of the Rucker Syndicate had been Mort's primary concern, his guests were both a surprise and a far more welcome addition to their little moon-side hideaway. Chuck Ramsey was a scarecrow of a man. He had a round face perpetually fixed with a smile and a tall, gangly frame with wide shoulders and little meat. Until he spoke, it would

have been hard to imagine that this man was Carl's father. "Hey, Mort! You old hobo! Heard you finally picked a spot to settle down and I couldn't help coming to see the world that finally had enough gravity to keep you planetside. Keeping all these starch-collared button pushers in line, I hope?"

While Don Rucker had warranted a handshake, Chuck Ramsey got a bear hug. "Chuck, they let you off Luna? I thought that's where they—"

"Keep all the lunatics," Chuck finished for him. "I'm not *that* old, Mort. I still remember my own material. And that's not even A-list stuff. I only break out those sad-sack jokes for retirement parties and political shindigs."

A woman with blonde hair gave Mort a peck on the cheek. "Chuck's been insufferable the whole way here. You should have heard him go on. Said it was going to be like old times again. If he gets on your nerves, all I ask is that you return him in working order." She gave Mort a sly wink.

Mort hugged her as well, though more gently than he'd greeted Chuck. "Becky. Retirement's looking good on you. I'd swear you were still 40. How's my girl been these days?"

Becky's smile diminished. "Nancy's fine, best I can tell. Convocation's getting harder and harder to squeeze for information. All your old friends are important people now, with secretaries and bodyguards to keep busybodies like me at bay. But I saw her on a news feed attending a benefit event with your Cedric."

Mort's next words caught in his throat. The mention of that name flashed an image across his mind of a boy in red flannel pajamas being trundled off to bed. That was how he'd last seen Cedric The Brown. Clearing his throat, he found his voice. "So, how's the little rascal these days?"

"He's a terramancer, apparently," Becky replied with a tilt

of the head that flounced her dyed locks. “Go figure. You burn planets to the ground; Little Cedric builds them back up.”

Mort scowled. “That jumped-up asteroid was barely habitable when we got there! Anyplace that needs gadgets to make the air breathable isn’t fit for living on.”

Sliding into the morass of reminiscence, Don Rucker insinuated himself between Mort and Becky. He reached an arm around and was inches from settling a hand on Mort’s shoulder when he caught himself. Phony glad-handing and forced familiarity were second nature, but even Don Rucker knew better than to lay hands on a wizard. “Sorry. Old habit. But, um, Mort, I’m looking to see my daughter, and your yappy-dog navy castoffs are telling me I can’t. They tell me she’s not here. Fine. Give me a comm ID where I can reach her or tell me when she’s getting back. I’m not used to being kept waiting.”

“Don, you came a long way. I can respect that. But Carl’s got the *Mobius* on the trail of some... oh, who the hell knows? It’s Carl. Might be a fifty-thousand terra payday or a lead on a job that’s a setup by some corporation we’ve pantsed. Flip a coin. Point is, he’s not here, and they’ve been quiet the last few days.”

Chuck wandered over to the edge of the conversation. “Let me get this straight. My boy’s set himself up as head of a new enterprise, with a hundred men and women under him, and he’s out there risking his neck working heists?”

Mort gave a firm nod. “Chuck, you always had a way with words. Lots of green wood around here, not quite fit to burn, if you know what I mean.”

Wrapping an arm around Mort’s shoulders, Chuck led the way out of the hangar. Don and Becky remained behind as the rest of Don’s entourage disembarked. “Mort, old buddy, I think we ought to do Brad a favor and spruce this place up while he’s gone.”

“Carl,” Mort corrected him.

Chuck waved away Mort’s pedantry. “Brad, Carl, whatever he wants to call himself. All the way here I had these grandiose visions of what he could do with these kinds of resources. Turns out, he’s planning to let them rot on the vine. Can’t let that happen, Mort. We’re gonna save Brad from himself.”

As Carl aimed the tip of his plasma torch at the bulkhead, it was plucked from his hands. The *Mobius* was in truly dreadful condition, and it was all hands on the repairs. Or at least, that was how Carl envisioned it.

“Whaddaya think you’re doing, peachfuzz?” Roddy snapped, slapping the neck of the torch against a bare hand. “This ain’t quite a wreck. Get your ass in front of the holo and don’t bother the repair crew.”

“But—”

“Yes, the repair crew is everyone else but you.”

“BUT—”

“NO! We want this mess back in flying shape, and you’re... not... HELPING!”

Carl grabbed Roddy by a fistful of his coveralls, near the collar. “I know how to use a fucking plasma torch.”

“You use it on salvage jobs. Dead ships. You don’t even do much of a job then. I sure as hell don’t want you working on anything we need to live. You couldn’t weld a straight line if you had cybernetic arms, and you cut more corners than a mob accountant. You have the attention span of a stim addict, and you understand the ship’s systems only *slightly* better than Kubu.”

“That’s a low blow.”

Roddy snorted and stuck the plasma torch into a back pocket of his coveralls. “Rather bruise that ego of yours than hear you swearing the same time the hull breach alarm goes off.”

The door slammed shut, leaving Carl alone with his thoughts. He stared at the crack in the wall of his quarters. It was only a few centimeters long, and there was a quarter meter of space beyond that to the outer hull. There was practically zero chance of venting the ship to vacuum, no matter how shoddy a job he made of it. Plus, if he'd done it himself, any time he had a guest in his quarters, he could show off his handiwork. Of course, with Amy sharing these quarters, those sorts of guests would probably be few and far between. But it never hurt to plan ahead.

Carl laid his head back against the foot of his bed and sighed. The air was a little stale in all three ships. The *Hatchet Job*, *Mermaid*, and *Mobius* were all docked together as repairs continued. *Mobius* had taken the worst of the beating in their battle against the *Sokol*, but was best designed to take one. His systems were simple, intended to weather wizardly tantrums with minimal long-term damage. Carl's ship was providing most of the life support for crews working on the other two.

He was tempted to take Roddy's advice, just to spite him. The couch had come through the battle like a champ, without so much as a spill or scratch. He could plop himself down, crack open a beer, and watch old flatvid horror movies about dead ships in space. That'd show them how much he cared about helping.

There was a quick knock on his door. It opened before he could respond, and Yomin's head poked inside. “We've got a problem.” Her hair was soaked with sweat, and there was a smudge of grease across her cheek. She was out of breath.

“What broke this time?”

She shook her head, raining droplets of sweat onto the floor of Carl's quarters. "We fixed the nav com on the *Hatchet Job*."

"So what? Without engine power, we're not going anywhere." The *Mobius's* nav computer was little better than a datapad, but it had been online since yesterday.

"It's the *Sokol*. The wreck is drifting toward the Habogad System."

Carl shrugged. "Never heard of it."

"Neither had I until I found out that our payday is on course to crash into its third planet."

"Oh."

Yomin's eyes widened in an exasperated frustration. "That's it? 'Oh'? You're the one in charge. What do you want us to do?"

That was a loaded question. Carl wanted a lot out of life, but there wasn't a lot on his list that any of his crew could deliver on short notice. He could use a little less condescension in the repairs department and a little more attention paid when he gave orders. "I want you to fix a ship so we can do something about it."

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