

# MOON OF ODYSSEUS

MISSION 8 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

J. S. MORIN

Moon of Odysseus

Mission 8 of: Black Ocean

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“BLACKJACK, this is Scarecrow. I finally found it. We’re going to be rich.”

Carl Ramsey raised an eyebrow. It wasn’t often anything showed up on this old comm ID. Few even knew he had it. Checking on it had become a habit more than an expectation of getting a message, but that didn’t mean the message was unwelcome. It was welcome as hell. For months the *Mobius* had been drifting around, sneaking in and out of colonies, starports, and scrapyards. Small time stuff. A theft here, a barter there, and once in a while a frantic escape.

Carl set the datapad beside him on the bed, still displaying Scarecrow’s message. This could be the real deal. Plenty of shady contacts out there offered too-good-to-be-true opportunities; Carl’s message dump was filled with them. But this was Scarecrow, his old wingman and one of the survivors of Squadron 333. The day Scarecrow’s word wasn’t good enough for him was the day he didn’t deserve to captain a starship.

There were no details in the message, no explanation pending if he read farther down. The only hint was a set of

coordinates buried in the comm routing code. It would be a rendezvous site. That would be where they'd meet, if Carl wanted in. And Carl wanted in.

The night was silent, save for the thrumming, mechanical background grumbles that he had learned to all but ignore. The holovid playing in the common room had ended nearly an hour ago—some weepy romance that Rhiannon and Esper were keen on. He couldn't hear any signs of activity from beyond the door of his quarters. He had time to think while the crew all slept.

Come morning, he'd need to have a plan to convince them all to go treasure hunting.

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Outside the cockpit window, the pin-speckled darkness of the Black Ocean loomed. As Carl watched, the unfamiliar local starscape faded, blurring into the uniform gray of astral space. Counting in his head, he waited. At fifty-eight, the gray darkened into realspace once more, and the stars reappeared. It had been happening at regular intervals all morning as Esper practiced guiding the ship back and forth between the two planes of existence.

The first time he'd noticed them drop into astral, he'd blamed Mort. A random astral drop by an experienced wizard was an annoyance. Instead Mort had informed him that it was part of Esper's training. Being tossed without warning into a parallel dimension by a novice was downright terrifying. However after a few weeks of not dying, the terror had worn off, replaced by a dull, nagging worry—the same sort of worry as getting onto a decrepit intra-system shuttle or getting worked on by a med tech wearing a “trainee” badge.

“Get out of that goddamn chair.”

The regular pilot of the *Mobius* tore Carl from his musings. “Hey, Tanny. Got a comm last night. Figured I’d run it by you first.” He levered himself out of his seat and offered it to Tanny with a flourish.

She didn’t take her eyes off him as she settled in behind the controls. “What kind of comm we talking? Did you break comm silence?”

Carl held up an oath-swearing hand. “All passive. I promise.” He brought up the message from Scarecrow and handed it to her.

Her brow grew increasingly furrowed, and Carl knew she had read it more than once. “I’ll bite. What’s the scam?”

Carl grinned. “I don’t know. Sounds like a nice break from pillaging deserted relay stations and cleaning up dead-space battlefields though, doesn’t it?”

She tossed him the datapad. “Pass.”

“What?”

“I said ‘pass.’ We don’t need a cockamamie scheme right now. We need something solid; we’re barely scraping by out here. One bad job and we might not recover.”

“You make it sound like we’re taking a job posted to the omni,” Carl said, resting his elbows on the copilot’s chair. “This is Scarecrow. I know you two never got along, but I’ll take this lead over anything we cobble together. This could be the break we’ve been looking for.”

Tanny crossed her arms. “Ask yourself how often you’ve thought that. And how does it always turn out?”

“This is different, though. Scarecrow—”

“Charlie,” Tanny corrected him. “She’s not your wingman anymore. And she’s the craziest of the bunch.”

Carl twitched a smile. “The Half-Devils of Squadron 333,

craziest fuckers in Earth Navy. It was practically our motto. But Scarecrow's no crazier than I am."

"I don't say this often, but I think this time you're *not* the more reckless one. Besides, it could be a trap. Why would she even send you a comm? Everyone either believes you're dead or in hiding."

"Hatchet would have told her," Carl said with a shrug. "I told him to pass the word around to the squad."

"You WHAT?" Tanny threw up her arms. "How were you expecting to fake your death if you had Hiroshi going around telling everyone you weren't dead?"

"Hey, I owed it to them," Carl said. And he did. The Half-Devils weren't just old navy buddies; they were family. Same as they told Rhiannon, Carl had to let the news get around that he wasn't actually a dead man. "Besides, who knows what those crazy fuckers might have done to Silde Slims for vengeance."

"You see? You see?" Tanny said, pointing. "*That's* what I mean. They're loose cannons. Hiroshi might have been the most stable of the bunch. But Charlie's gone nuts."

Carl took a step back and put up his hands. It wasn't the time to get into Hatchet's personal history to refute her point. "You know what? Fine. I don't need consensus on this... just a majority."

The race was on. Carl bolted down the short corridor to the common room as Tanny extracted herself from the pilot's chair to give chase. She was quicker than him, thanks to her chemically enhanced physiology, but he had too large a head start.

"I found us a lead on something huge," Carl blurted out as he skidded to a halt.

All eyes turned toward him. Esper and Rhiannon looked up from their breakfast. From the couch, Roddy stopped flip-

ping through the holovid database to glance over. Mriy opened the door from her quarters to peer out, her feline ears swiveling in Carl's direction.

"What's this all about?" Mort asked, stepping out of the shower in a bathrobe. The wizard was still sopping wet.

"I got a comm," Carl said, glaring over at Tanny. "No details, but I've got coordinates for a meeting."

"Good." Mriy shut her door. That was the nice thing about her sometimes. She could just take good fortune at face value.

"Lemme guess," Rhiannon said with a mouthful of cereal. "This isn't the sort of gig where I sing and people pay us, is it?" Her career had been put on hold while the *Mobius* crew was in hiding. Skulking along the outskirts of the civilized galaxy wasn't conducive to an aspiring singer's prospects.

"Where's the lead from?" Roddy asked. "I've about had my fill of garbage picking, but I'm not working for a question mark if I can help it."

"An old navy buddy," Carl said.

"Hatchet?" Esper asked, perking up. They'd worked with Hiroshi 'Hatchet' Samuelson on the heist that got Carl his own toy racing ship—one that was a civilian racing model based on his old military Typhoon IV. "He was nice. I'd work with him again." Carl had to give Hiroshi credit; he had that effect on a lot of women.

"No, not him," Carl replied. He looked over his shoulder, checking himself before he made eye contact with Tanny. "My wingman, Scarecrow."

Rhiannon chuckled. "You pilots and your call signs. I couldn't believe my ears when you told Mom and Dad the guys you flew with."

Scarecrow, Hatchet, Brick, Wolfhound, Rib-Eye, Vixen, Cricket, Samurai, Juggler, Jackhammer, Wallaby, Biscuit, Athena, Vegas, Dynamo, Knuckles, and Prune Juice. And one

Lieutenant Commander Blackjack Ramsey to lead them. The names cycled through his head in seconds as Carl's eyes lost focus. Nearly half of them were dead, but he could still hear their voices over the comm, calling the role.

Roddy snapped his fingers. "Yo, *Mobius* to Carl. We lose you there?"

Carl blinked and shook his head to clear it. "Nah, just thinking. Anyway, I trust Scarecrow."

"What if it's a setup, and it's not really her?" Tanny asked. "Ever think of that?"

Carl replied with a shrug. "I always think of that. But my gut tells me this is legit."

"Your gut's about as reliable as Kubu's," Tanny said.

"Speaking of... how's Kubu's food supply?" Carl asked, veering from the subject at hand.

"Still got two giant carcasses stinking up the cargo bay," Roddy said. "Can smell the rot clear back to the engine room."

"How long's that going to last him?"

Esper cleared her throat. "The hippo lasted him three days. He'll probably get another three out of two moose. We've got some odds and ends that might hold him over longer, but you know Kubu... he loves to eat."

"Sounds like we need a source of income to buy him some more, and soon," Carl said, sounding very concerned. Tanny had adopted Kubu, a puppy of a sentient canid species. But while he had come aboard the size of a large dog, he was growing at a frightening rate. He was already too large to fit through the ship's doors without risk of getting stuck, limiting him to the cargo bay.

Tanny set her jaw. Carl watched her eyes scanning the crew, looking for signs of support, or at least that's what he imagined. Sometimes there was just no telling what was going on in that head of hers.



“Fine,” Tanny snapped. As she stalked back to the cockpit, she yelled without turning. “Send me the coordinates. Let’s get this over with.”

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