

# RETRO VERSION

MISSION 6 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

J. S. MORIN

Retro Version

Mission 6 of: Black Ocean

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Magical Scrivener Press 22 Hawkstead Hollow Nashua, NH 03063

[www.magicalscrivener.com](http://www.magicalscrivener.com)

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**Ordering Information:** Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above.

J.S. Morin — First Edition

ISBN: 978-1-939233-74-5

Printed in the United States of America



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IT WAS a somber duty to inform someone of her brother's death, but it was bizarre to instead notify her that it was all faked. Tanny closed the taxi door, and the petrol-burning relic grumbled and rolled away. She was left standing on asphalt black-top that wound its way through rows of tiny wooden houses, each fenced in by white pickets surrounding bright green patches of lawn. The smell of petrol exhaust mixed with fresh-cut grass and grilled meat from a barbecue taking place down the street.

Checking her datapad to verify that she had the right address, Tanny hopped the low picket fence of 413 Mapleview Terrace and strode up to the front door. The only hint of a control console or door alarm was a single plain button set into a wrought iron fixture. Pressing it caused a two-tone bell to ring inside the residence. Tanny stood at military ease and waited.

Hard-shod footsteps approached from inside. A moment later the door opened. "Hi, Tanny. Funny seeing you here,"

Rhiannon Ramsey said. She wore a floral top with slim slacks and low-heeled shoes. Her bouffant hair was bleached blonde and locked in place with hairspray. Every bit of her looked completely adapted to the retrovert surroundings. Carl's parents' predilection for the middle twentieth century had seeped into her to the bone. But through the veneer of her retrovert trappings, Tanny could see the tension in her shoulders and neck, the quiver in her lip.

"Rhiannon Ramsey," Tanny said, her tone clipped and military. "I regret to inform you that your older brother, Bradley Carlin Ramsey, is alive and well and every bit the asshole he's always been."

Rhiannon breathed a sigh and a weary smile crossed her face. "Come on in. I just made lemonade."

Tanny stepped past as Rhiannon held the screen door. It swung closed behind her, pulled by a spring. "Sorry if he worried you. We couldn't risk broadcasting, since this place has no security encryption."

Rhiannon led the way through a tiny family room and into the kitchen. The lone table was circular and less than a meter in diameter, flanked by a pair of wooden chairs. Rhiannon poured two glasses of the promised lemonade from a glass pitcher with lemon slices and ice cubes floating at the top. "You park the *Mobius* anywhere around here? How's Mort?"

"No, we're at the spaceport," Tanny replied, accepting a glass. She winced at the overpowering sourness as she took an experimental sip. "You're taking this a lot better than I'd expected."

Rhiannon sighed. "Who in the galaxy has a brother who says to wait three months after word comes that he's dead?"

"You knew?" Tanny said. She blinked to make sure she was seeing Carl's little sister, the reluctant retrovert, and not

some ARGO special agent. “He didn’t even tell *us* until the last minute.”

“Typical,” Rhiannon muttered. “No, but he clued me in years ago that something like this might go down. It’s our old man’s rule, really. Carl just tuned in, and I tuned out. He stole the Squall, right?”

Tanny took a long swallow of lemonade. It was refreshing once she got over the sourness. “You sure you’re in the right line of work?”

“Singing’s a lot safer than the shit my brother gets himself into,” Rhiannon replied. “But it makes sense. That whole racing crash while he was out of scanner view was just too fucking convenient. So either he’d died doing something stupid—which is my guess as to how he *will* die one of these days—or he was playing an angle.”

“But what makes you think he could have snuck a Squall out from under everyone’s noses?”

Rhiannon smirked. “C’mon, Tanny. I flew with Mort as long as Carl did, back when he the old man ran together.”

Tanny glanced into the adjacent bedroom and washroom. The bedsheets were rumped, thrown into the middle from two sides. Towels littered the floor beside the shower. “Where’s Derek?”

Rhiannon rolled her eyes. “Get it together; you’re three boyfriends behind. Me and Derek split after the show on Paris VII. Lloyd’s down at the golf course with his buddies.”

“What’s he do?” Tanny asked. Rhiannon was too much like her brother, sometimes.

“Golfs, mostly,” Rhiannon said. “But when he does work, he’s a TV producer. On-world stuff. Between you and me, mostly shit. We don’t even watch the boob tube though; we’ve got a holovid in the basement.”

Tanny bit back a snide comment. Wouldn't Rhiannon ever quit chasing show-biz types? "Living the life, huh?"

"Hey, I don't mind the style, but this place takes it a *little* too far sometimes," Rhiannon said. "Living here's good for my career, but I won't retire here. Hell, even the 'rents couldn't put up with this place forever."

"Any chance we can find someplace local to crash until things blow over?" Tanny asked.

"We've got a spare bedroom, but not enough for your whole crew. Besides, I'm guessing my brother's gotta lay low. You're welcome to stay though. I can never get a straight story from him about what he does between visits."

"Sure," Tanny replied. "I'll just let them know."

"Roddy can blend in," Rhiannon said. "It's not remotely authentic, but the laaku population's going up every year. I think it's close to 15% by now. Mort and Chip can obviously—"

"Chip's dead," Tanny said, feeling the familiar knot twist in her stomach. She hadn't thought about Chip in weeks. "Salvage accident."

Rhiannon had her arms around Tanny in an instant. "No way! I'm so sorry."

Tanny let herself be comforted for the sudden pang she felt. They had been close once, briefly. Each was as close to a sister as the other had ever known. "It's all right. He went quickly, at least." In her heels, Rhiannon was the taller of the two of them. Tanny rested her head on her ex-sister-in-law's shoulder and felt tears well in her eyes. It must have been something in the Ramsey blood that knew how to cut through the leather around her heart. "It was my fault. I promised my aunt and uncle I'd look after him."

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