

SALVAGE TROUBLE

MISSION 1 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

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Salvage Trouble (formerly titled A Pilot's Pilot)

Mission 1 of: Black Ocean

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SALVAGE TROUBLE

THERE WAS something unsettling about being inside a dead ship. Darkness filled corridors where emergency lighting should have glowed. Anything to be seen existed within the claustrophobic radius of the hand lamps. Bare steel corridors devoid of air snaked their way through the inert hulk. Mag-boots snapped against the floor at each step, the pull to break them free keeping the pace slow, but safe.

It could have been worse. With a ship dead in the Ocean, sometimes they lost gravity as well, but whatever wizard set the ship's internal gravity had done a better job of hardening it than the engineers who built the onboard systems had. The mag-boots were just a precaution for all the places where the passenger freighter had been blasted open to space; without them, Carl and his crew could still have walked against the floor—but also might get thrown out into the void if something structural gave way.

“Got another one,” Chip's voice came over the comm, popping and crackling with static. The voice filled the EV suit

helmet and was starting to give Carl a headache. “Gimme a hand.”

Carl backtracked and found Chip with one of the door panels pried open and a tangle of wires hooked to a handheld power supply. With the lock powered open, the two men were able to manhandle the door. Inside, a bunk and a footlocker were wedged into a ragged hole in the wall with the stars showing beyond.

“Must’ve lost everything else when the hull failed,” said Carl. Fortunately his own voice merely echoed within the shell of his helmet.

Chip stomped into the room—he couldn’t help stomping with mag-boots on—and gave the footlocker a tug. It fell from the hole and slammed to the floor. There was something Carl never could wrap his head around—the silence in vacuum. He felt the little tremor in the deck plates, but that was it. Chip struggled and dragged the footlocker to the door.

“I’m gonna pop a gut moving this thing,” said Chip. “Can’t we just get Mort over here and kill the gravity?”

“Can you even picture Mort in an EV suit?”

“Naw, guess not. Wouldn’t want the cranky old bastard along anyway,” said Chip. “He’d manage to find some way to make this corpse a bigger hazard than it already is.”

Tanny’s voice popped over the comm. “You know this is an open channel. Mort can hear you.”

“Dammit,” said Carl. “He’s not in the cockpit with you? Get him the hell out of there before we have to—”

“Relax,” Tanny said, her voice calm and measured. “I’m down in the galley making some lunch. I keyed the comm to ship-wide. Mort’s right here, eating a sandwich. Want to say anything to him?”

“Um, sorry, Mort?” Chip said. “You’re not a cranky old bastard? Except that you are and you damn well know it.”

“Can you all shut up?” Mriy interrupted. Her voice was scratchy even without the interference over the comm. “The sooner we finish, the sooner we eat.”

“Beer’s on me,” Roddy’s high-pitched voice agreed. “I’m not seeing anything worth salvaging among the mechanicals. Ship was unarmed; engines are slag. Computers might have seen an EMP, might not have; I’ll let Chip figure that out back home. We’ve already cut them out and made a trip back with them.”

“Hear that, Tanny?” Carl asked. “We’re hard at work over here while you’re chowing down bacon cubes. Grab something quick and get back to the cockpit. We’ve got an asteroid coming in a couple hours and I want someone watching for it. I got better things to do than become a decorative splotch on a space rock.”

“Two hours, four minutes, thirty-one seconds. I’ve got a timer set. Twenty minutes out, you’re either back on board or I leave without you. And I’m having the chicken cubes. The bacon’s three months past expiration.”

“You wouldn’t,” Carl replied. “And the bacon’s fine. Those dates are just rules and regs. Total bullshit.”

“Yeah, the bacon’s fine,” Chip agreed.

“I don’t see what you find so appealing in that dry, bloodless meat,” said Mriy.

Carl waved his arms for quiet, even though Chip was the only one who could see him. “Wait, wait, wait. First, bacon is humanity’s crowning achievement in food. Second, you’re not leaving without us. Mort would never let you get away with it.”

“Mort’s always liked me better than you,” Tanny replied. Carl could picture the smirk on her face without needing to see it.

“Everyone likes you better than me,” said Carl. “That

doesn't mean he's going to let you strand us here to get dusted. Besides, you can't just take my ship."

"I'm still listed as your next of kin."

"Fuck." Carl just mouthed the word, not wanting to admit over the comm that she was right. Sometimes avoiding paperwork caused the most inconvenient problems. "Fine, but give us until ten before the asteroid."

"Twenty."

"Fifteen?"

"Twenty."

"OK, twenty. Give us a heads up at ten and five before then, so we're not caught with our pants down."

"The *hell* are you doing over there?" Tanny asked.

"Is there atmo in your section?" Roddy asked. "What are you and Chip—?"

"Nothing!" Carl snapped. "Just, everyone get back to work. And thanks for the extra time over here, sweetie."

"You *don't* get to call me that anymore!" A thump over the comm cut out halfway through as someone switched hers off with a fist.

"School drama's over, kiddies. Back to work."

"Yes, sir," Mriy and Chip answered in discordant unison. Carl didn't need to hear Roddy's reply. He would just get back to work. Roddy was good like that.

They went door to door, overriding locks where they could and going through with plasma torches where they could not. The salvage team kept in contact, giving a running account of the dregs left behind when the survivors abandoned ship. Standard issue footlockers with standard issue locks—some weighed more than others, but none was heavy enough to be stacked with gold or any other form of hard currency. It was like visiting relatives off-world for Christmas, except the presents were a uniform matte stainless steel. No

one knew you well enough to get you what you really wanted, so what you ended up with was a crapshoot of ill-fitting clothes and knickknacks that would get tossed in a corner or sold off the first chance you got. Best case, there might be magic in one of those knickknacks, but there was no way to tell until Mort had a look. Odds ran against finding anything enchanted though, since the passengers had abandoned ship—most magic was worth the space in an escape pod.

Carl was panting, fogging the bottom half of his helmet's mask with each breath before the recirculator cleared the moisture. His back was aching from dragging plunder back to the *Mobius*. Thirty-two was too young to have an old man's body, creaking and protesting after a few hours of manual labor.

"That's it," Carl said over the comm. "No more holovids until I get back in fighting shape. How long have we got left?"

Tanny's voice squished and chomped. "Just over half an hour until the asteroid makes a sweating, scruffy paste out of you." The sound of her chewing made Carl's stomach grumble.

Roddy's comm opened. "I didn't know you navy boys even *had* a fighting shape. 'Fits in the seat, fit enough,' right? *Eee, eee, eee.*" Carl gritted his teeth.

"Captain!" Chip's use of his honorary title caught his attention. It meant someone was taking things seriously. "There's a pod jammed over here."

"Hey now! There's a bit of a break. Bulky, but portable if we can get it out of the ship's gravity. Nice work."

"There's *people* in it!"

"Of course there's people in it. You don't eject an empty—oh shit! We've gotta get them out of there quick."

"On it!" Chip replied.

"Mriy, Roddy, get back to the *Mobius*. Ready a winch and

tethers for full EV. Me and Chip'll take care of things from inside."

"But Captain, we just spent five minutes cutting into the med bay—" Mriy whined.

"Anything not in your hands or your packs now, leave it! We can make another run in if there's time." Carl knew there would be no time to spare.

Carl flipped off the switch for his mag-boots and ran down the corridor, hand lamp creating a jiggling spotlight along his path. They had been on the ship for hours, and he had an idea where the hull was open to space and what sections were largely intact. He rounded a corner and found the wall of escape pod cradles, the safety doors all closed in a neat line, keeping the ship safe from the vacuum left when the pods were launched. Chip had already cut the hinges off one of the doors. He stood bent awkwardly over where it lay on the deck, the stance of a man whose mag-boots were stuck where he last set them and had neither the time nor inclination to move them. The bright flare of the plasma torch in his hand bit into the docking clamps that secured the pod to the ship.

"What've we got in there?" Carl asked, hanging back far enough to keep out of Chip's way. Two could work side by side with plasma cutters, but most times just got each other's elbows to the ribs.

"Locking clamp didn't release. Probably software, but it's quicker cutting than debugging it."

"Inside. I mean inside."

"Woman and a boy. Saw them waving from the window. Shit, if I'd have been looking the wrong way, we'd have left them here and never known it."

Carl peered through the entry hatch window. "Don't see them in there."

"I think I got across that they needed to belt in. Who

knows if the grav in there is any good? They might be on ship's—"

Chip's next words were lost when a jet of compressed gas burst from a ruptured line. It looked like nothing more than an aerosol spray, scaled up to a size that would send an escape pod clear of a doomed vessel. As the pod snapped free of the half-cut docking clamp, Chip was bent over backward by the blast until his mag-boots came free of the deck. He slammed into the far wall of the corridor head first and slumped to the floor in a heap, the lit plasma torch burning into his leg with no reaction. The only sound had been a *thump* heard through Chip's open comm.

"Chip!"

"What happened?" Tanny shouted into the comm.

Carl rushed to Chip's side, pulled the plasma torch from his hand, and shut it off. "Chip took a blast from a launch jet." The EV suit had sealed around the skin where the torch had burned, keeping it from losing air pressure. It was a good sign. He looked to the life support panel on the chest of Chip's suit, and the heart rate and respiration indicators were reading zero. Damaged in the blast? No, they would have been dark; they had a reading on Chip and the reading said he was meat. "No pulse, no breathing."

"I'll double back to the med bay and—" Mriy growled into her comm. She always sounded angry when she was nervous.

"No." Captain felt around under the back of Chip's helmet, below the base of the skull.

"But captain—"

"His neck. Nothing in the med bay's gonna help him."

"Oh God, Carl," said Tanny, her voice choking off in a sob before the comm closed.

Carl's own vision blurred as he looked down at Chip's body. He blinked away the saline build-up, unable to wipe it

away from behind his helm. “Get that pod on board the *Mobius*. I’ll get Chip out with me.”

Whatever treasures the last pair footlocker might have held, Carl would never know. It was just an obstacle away as he carried Chip out, slung over his shoulder, back aching the whole way back to the *Mobius*.

Grab a copy of *Salvage Trouble*, book 1 of *Black Ocean*, and continue your adventure now.