

# STOWAWAY TO HEAVEN

MISSION 12 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

MORIN





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BLACK OCEAN: MISSION 12

THE *MOBIUS* LANDED amid a contingent of guards. This struck Carl as odd, because he didn't remember employing any black-clad soldiers with tactical helms last time he'd been on Ithaca. But as he made his way down the cargo ramp, there they were. Two lines of six, making an even dozen, flanked the ship's exit at military attention. At the end of the double-line, forming the end of a box that had Carl and the crew hemmed in, was a woman in a security uniform with a short-brimmed hat shading her eyes.

"Mr. Ramsey, welcome home," the woman said with a curt, respectful nod. Her hands were clasped behind her back. Midnight blue, tailored fabric encased her like a second skin, making it clear the body beneath was carved like a statue. Though Carl made a point of knowing all his female underlings, he had a nagging feeling about that voice without being able to match it to anyone in the syndicate.

"When did we spring for new unis?" Carl asked, looking up and down both rows, pointedly ignoring the leader of the group. "Or does someone around here have a hidden talent for

fashion? The animal hides you ran around in before I got here said otherwise though.” He meandered his way down the line as he talked. The *Mobius* crew filtered down behind him.

Just as he reached the end, having received no reply along the way, the leader of the group tipped her hat. “These just came in day before yesterday, sir.”

Carl choked on his next words. By reflex, he had his blaster drawn before he could think of what to say. “Messerschmidt!” She was one of the marines from the jungle, one of Devraa’s followers. “What’ve you done here? Where’s my father?”

To her credit, the former marine didn’t flinch, let alone reach for her own weapon. “Relax, Ramsey. Your father is in his quarters. He’s with your mother. They... asked not to be disturbed.”

Carl squeezed his eyes shut and quickly slapped together a Carl Who Hadn’t Just Heard that. “And why are *you* here? Is Chuck your new god, now that Devraa’s gone? Because lemme tell you, he’s not worth the chanting.”

“Screw you, Ramsey. Come on. We’re heading for the briefing room.”

Carl turned to look back over his shoulder. “Am I the only one seeing this?”

A chorus of shrugs was his reply, with only Amy putting voice to her gesture. “What did you expect? It’s not like your dad had anything personal against them. Why wouldn’t he hire them?”

“Because they’re murderous zealots who tried to set me up as a patsy to assassinate Sephiera Kwon.” Sometimes Carl felt as if he were the only person keeping score of all the corporate bosses, petty crime lords, and tea pot dictators who’d screwed with them.

Amy cleared her throat and cast a sidelong glare at Messerschmidt. Right. Kwon. Probably a sore subject around the

Ithaca headquarters, what with her being taken for a long, slow astral drop in a permacrete space suit.

But if Messerschmidt took offense—or had any opinion at all, for that matter—she didn’t show it. Raising her wrist to her mouth, she spoke into a concealed comm. “I’ve got him here with me.” There was a pause. She must have had an earpiece that Carl couldn’t see. “Yes, sir... Is there a problem? ...That’s all I need to know, sir. Messerschmidt out.” She stepped aside and swept a hand out for Carl to proceed past her. “If you’ll come with me, sir.”

“What’s in the briefing room? You guys sitting on a meeting waiting for me to land?”

“There’s a change of plans. We can stop by the cafeteria first for coffee or whatever else you might want fresh back from the hinterlands. Then we’re heading to see your father.”

She fell into step as soon as Carl passed. Though she took up a position a pace behind and to his right, it didn’t feel like the deferential trailing of a subordinate or even a wingman. He had a distinct impression that Messerschmidt was shepherding him. “What’s so goddamn important that Chuck Ramsey can’t let me even grab some R&R before shanghaiing me? Ever consider maybe I wanted a little time in my quarters with Amy?”

They stormed down the corridors of the *Odysseus*, not pausing as Carl nodded to underlings and acquaintances along the way. “I hadn’t given it any consideration at all, sir.”

“Quit with the ‘sir’ bullshit,” Carl snapped. They arrived at the cafeteria between regular mealtimes. The place was deserted except for a pair of former midshipmen chatting at a corner table near the back. Carl took a tray and scanned the offerings of the food processor. “Last time I saw you, I was being handed off to the navals as a suicide assassin.” He keyed in a coffee with triple sugar and a half shot of whiskey.

Nothing on the food side of the menu tempted him. He stepped aside and swept a hand toward the machine in mockery of Messerschmidt's gesture.

She held up a hand in polite refusal. "Yeah, and look how that worked out for us. Jesus, Ramsey. Get with the times. That Dr. Akerman of yours cleared us all. We had increased levels of serotonin consistent with long-term chemical addiction. It was Devraa, *not* the marine pharma. None of us was responsible for our actions."

"Pretty fucking convenient," Carl muttered as they headed for the Ramsey wing of the ship. It was hard to remember at times that this was a battleship and not a planetside base. Carl had spent enough time in ships that the ubiquitous engine hum was just a fact of life in space. It registered at near-unconscious levels, but he could still tell whether he was in a powered vessel or not at any given time.

Foot traffic, already sparse in the under populated *Odysseus*, thinned to nothing as they entered the officers' wing. Anyone who lived down in this district of the ship had actual important duties in the syndicate or had just come back with the *Mobius*. A recent addition since the last time Carl had been planetside was a section of thick red carpeting in the area just outside the door to his parents' quarters. But just the same time he noticed that, the door to those quarters opened and two officers slipped out.

Ensign Paul Stecker had worked in logistics, essentially a glorified stock boy. Second lieutenant Dakota Ono worked in ship's security. He was tucking in the shirt of yet another brand new midnight blue uniform. She was smoothing down a nest of disheveled curls. The two of them were leaning close, talking and giggling as the door shut behind them.

Stecker glanced up and made eye contact with Carl. His expression went blank in an instant and he stood bolt upright.

Lieutenant Ono caught on quickly and followed suit. Stecker took her by the hand and towed her past Carl and Messerschmidt, both averting their eyes on the way by. Carl tracked them, watching over his shoulder for some clue as to what had gotten into the two of them. They were up to something, that much was obvious. Exactly what, Carl had an inkling he didn't want to ask.

Messerschmidt hit the door alarm when they arrived. "C'mon in," dad's voice boomed from the far side of the door.

Carl stepped inside, but Messerschmidt didn't accompany him. She offered a sardonic salute as the door slid closed between them.

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Roddy heaved a sigh and dropped the case with his portable belongings on the bed. Home, version 2.0. Well, if he were keeping proper track, his quarters on the *Odysseus* probably should have been in the mid-twenties, at least. But these days, it was only in competition with the *Mobius*. A quick glance around the room confirmed that nothing had changed in his absence. His first few times offworld since taking residence, there had been minor acts of trespass involving overzealous housekeepers and at least one of his own maintenance techs. But a DNA scanner beside the door alarm had put a stop to that.

The quarters were two-level, built up within the confines of a human-sized room fit for a commander. With a good meter and a half of useless overhead space, Roddy had installed a mezzanine level. It held a small office with a computer terminal, holo-projector, and a mini-fridge. With a casual swing, Roddy latched onto a protruding bar and pulled himself to the top level. If there was one thing he needed to check, it was

whether any intruders had been the “for your own good” sort who might confiscate his stash of booze.

It was all there. Earth’s Preferred removed from the six-packs and restacked to minimize the space it took up. A few bottles of assorted hard liquor of various quality and age. One bottle of cheap champagne in case he ever had something truly worth celebrating.

His comm chimed on Roddy’s datapad.

“Can’t a guy have an hour’s peace and quiet with his own beer?”

Roddy hopped down and dug the datapad from his case. If it was Carl, he had planned to just shut off the notification. If it was Niang, he was prepared to drill him a new ear-hole. But Roddy hadn’t been prepared for it to be Shoni. “Um, hey. How’s it going?”

*“I heard you were back,”* Shoni replied. *“I was hoping to speak with you.”* There was a question buried in that simple statement.

“Sure. I guess. I’m just taking a load off in my quarters.”

The door alarm chimed.

Roddy’s head snapped around. He glanced down at the datapad, then back to the door again. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice carrying in stereo from both the datapad and the door. “May I come in?”

Roddy shut off the datapad and hustled to the door, pausing momentarily to compose himself. “Hey.” She was standing there, slipping her datapad into a pocket. Her other hand held a cooler. There wasn’t a hair out of place anywhere on her, and she looked at him without meeting his eye.

“We need to talk,” she said, stepping through the door. Roddy closed it behind her and followed her with his eyes. Those weren’t words he ever liked hearing, but they didn’t carry the usual ominous foreboding he was accustomed to.

“Sure. How’s the gravity business been treating you?” Roddy was 90 percent sure this visit *wasn’t* about anything scientific, but it never hurt to be polite.

“Horrible. The sister moon’s artificial gravity effect was apparently doing very little to Ithaca’s ecosystems. Its absence has been remarkably unremarkable. But that’s not why I came. Our last encounter was contentious—perhaps needlessly so. Ever since, I’ve been suffering depleted dopamine levels, coupled with fixed ideation focused around...” She fluttered a hand vaguely in Roddy’s direction.

Roddy crossed his arms. “Well, things were contentious because you let me know I was a disgrace and a waste of talent. You can’t get me off your mind because I’m such an amazing guy—or because I’m the last laaku you’ve seen in forever. Seriously, you university sorts overspecialize. Even an amateur psychologist could puzzle this one out.”

“Be that as it may, I considered the likelihood of reciprocal difficulties and decided to take a chance. After all, what’ve I got to lose besides my reputation and the esteem of my peers?”

“You’re losing me.”

Shoni shot him a look of consternation. “Already? I hadn’t even gotten to my proposition yet.”

“Huh?”

“You’re clearly missing my point. What I’m saying is that, in lieu of a pharmacological remedy to my chemical imbalance, I’d like to attempt a home remedy.” She popped the top of the cooler and a gentle fog puffed out. Inside were several beer cans and a glass wine bottle. “Recreational copulation is contraindicated for being mildly addictive, but I trust that I can handle it. And its effectiveness for regulating endorphins is well established.”

Roddy pulled out one of the cans and read the label. “Mac-Leod Ale?”

“Everyone knows you enjoy Earth’s Preferred. I did some research and found this is commonly enjoyed by adherents of Earth’s Preferred, and I wanted something you’d remember. This,” she said, lifting the wine bottle and twisting it so the label faced Roddy. It read: Verre Carte Blanc. “Is made by a laaku firm that specializes in artificial alcoholic drinks. Supposedly it tastes like the real thing.”

There was a lot more than taste involved when it came to alcohol and “recreational copulation” as Shoni put it. As Roddy was about to point this out, he stopped himself. What the hell was he thinking? If they could put aside whatever differences they had for an hour or so a day, he’d have it made.

They drank and made small talk, exchanging gossip from the *Odysseus* for tales of adventure, larceny, and failure from the *Mobius*. Roddy had finished two beers, and Shoni half her bottle of faux wine before she decided they’d waited long enough. With clinical professionalism, she turned to offer Roddy convenient access to the fastenings on her coveralls. Before reaching out to get started, Roddy took a quick moment to shut off the comm in his datapad.

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