

YOU, ROBOT

MISSION 11 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

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BLACK OCEAN: MISSION 11

CARL SLOUCHED on the plush cushions beside Amy. She was sitting cross-legged in a sleeveless beige tunic and baggy black pants with sandals poking out beneath. He'd tried to put his arm around her but couldn't get close enough without leaning too awkwardly to make the effort worthwhile.

Dr. Akerman looked up from her datapad, sitting in a chair pillaged from one of the briefing rooms. "I'm glad you two decided to seek my help. So many couples refuse to admit their problems before they're too late to fix."

Amy nodded along as if this were some profound revelation. Her mop of braids bounced with a rattle of the tiny beads woven in her thick strands. "Thank you for listening."

"First off, let's start by going over the issues that brought you here today."

Amy sighed. "Where to begin. Well, today's about honesty, right? So let's start with that. How can I trust what he says half the time? I mean, he built his post-naval career on lying, swindling, and stealing. How can I be sure this isn't just some elaborate con?"

“It’s not,” Carl said flatly. “And right now you *know* I’m not lying, thanks to Mort.” That two-timer had agreed to sit in the next room and do his damndest to keep Carl’s brain in one piece. Without the dozens of little sub-Carls floating around in his mind, believing whatever they were told, he felt trapped in his own head. He had rarely given much thought to the fact that it was a form of magic until Amy had come up with the brilliant idea of using Mordecai The Sledgehammer to swat his little fly of a magical talent.

It also stuck in his craw that now Dr. Akerman knew about his little trick as well. There was doctor-patient confidentiality and the fact that she worked for Carl, but at some point it was just another hole poked into the ever-growing sieve of his secret. She could use it for her own benefit in dealing with him from now on, even if she never told a soul. And if she did, there was any number of people who’d love to find a way to exploit that little loophole.

“And you, Carl? What concerns do you have?” Dr. Akerman asked with a glance at her datapad. Was she cribbing these questions from a checklist or something? “No topics are off limits here. We can’t fix problems we bottle up.”

“I think she’s losing it.”

Amy whirled on him. “Hey!”

Carl scooted sideways on the couch, raising his hands in defense. “Whoa! Everything on the table she said.”

“I did,” Dr. Akerman clarified. “But let’s try not to accuse one another.”

“Fine. I think Amy is starting to see problems that aren’t there. I was her commanding officer for years. I’ve read her psych profile. I dealt with her professionally and socially. I’m not talking out of my ass here when I say she’s slipping into some bad old habits. When she spent years searching for the fate of the *Odysseus*, we all felt bad for her—all the old

squadron, that is—but we knew that was just... how Charlie was.”

“I thought we agreed that was a masculine nickname we were going to stop using,” Amy cut in.

“Context, sweetie. Anyway, I’ve seen her chasing shadows before, and now she’s reading ulterior motives into everything.”

Amy spread her hands. “Did you plan to murder Hatchet?”

Carl blinked. The sudden pivot caught him off guard. But this was her chance to unload on him while his shields were down. “No. I planned to get him pissed off enough to threaten me to prove he was too far gone to keep in command of the *Hatchet Job*. It was a power play, sure, but you’d been warning me about him all along. You should have been on board.”

“I didn’t want him dead.”

“Well, neither did I.”

“You didn’t seem all that broken up about it.”

“Yeah? Well, I was.”

“And you never said anything about it to me...”

There was a silent moment where the two of them just looked at one another.

Dr. Akerman cleared her throat. “This mutual emotional support is typical in healthy relationships. Carl, maybe it would help if you opened up to Amy about Hiroshi Samuelson’s death.”

Carl snorted. “You can beat around the bush, but just say it: I killed him. The real plan was to get him to pull his blaster on me. I told Samurai—um, Toshiro—that I was going to wind him up, and he suggested draining the charge on Hatchet’s blaster. Well, when the time came, reflexes and instincts took over. I *knew* Hatchet was going to pull that trigger, and I couldn’t trust Samurai enough in that split second I had to react *not* to fire back. If I hadn’t pulled that trigger, we’d have

just locked him up and dumped him on some backwater outpost.”

Amy swallowed. “You... knew he couldn’t actually shoot you?”

“No. And that’s my point. You think *you’ve* got trust issues? I doubted Samurai. He didn’t get that nickname *just* because of his ancestors; that guy practically breathes Bushido.” Carl chuckled softly at himself. “But then, maybe that’s the problem. My plan wasn’t exactly honorable, I guess.”

“All right,” Dr. Akerman said. “Let’s get back to the two of you. Amy, what are your specific concerns about Carl—without turning this into an interrogation?”

“How can I be sure he loves me? I mean, he’s been with plenty of other girls—I remember our navy days, too, you know—and some of them pretty seriously. How can I know deep down it’s me he wants, and I’m not just an easy substitute for his ex, or that purple-haired trollop who stole the *Hatchet Job*? Does he love me, or can he just say it well enough that I’m willing to believe him?”

Oh, the minefield. Cloaked, ship-seeking, anti-matter mines scattered around Carl in all directions. One path lay ahead, clearly marked as the safe way through. The signage said: The Truth. Carl could hardly be more certain that it was a trap. But weighing his options, he took a steadying breath and tried anyway. “July was just a cover. I didn’t hate her or anything, but it was mutual convenience. It was a holovid show, and I needed to be interesting.”

“Gotta download that sometime...” Dr. Akerman muttered, not looking up from her datapad as she took notes.

“As for Tanny? Sure, I’ve got a soft spot for her, but it’s like nostalgia. It’s like seeing light from a star, then hitting the deep astral to see up close that it’s not there anymore—you’re just seeing the light from when it used to still exist. But I’m not

spreading myself thin or pining for some other woman. I'm gonna give you every inch of my love."

Amy stabbed an accusing finger at him, though her expression remained blank. "Rolling Stones. The archaic units were a dead giveaway, even if I didn't know that one."

Dr. Akerman looked up from her notes. "Hm?"

"It's one of those old songs he's obsessed with. Early digital history rock music. All that old music is full of overblown philosophical schmaltz. And he uses it when he can't think of anything real to say and wants to sound deep and complicated."

"Hey. I *am* deep and complicated."

"Complicated, maybe, but you're as deep as a beer advert."

That stung, but it was fair.

"Well, that line was from Led Zeppelin, anyway. Not the Stones. But I've got a better one: would you cry if I told you that I lied, and would you say goodbye or would you let it ride?"

Dr. Akerman tapped furiously at her datapad. "Just a minute, please."

Carl reached over and grabbed the datapad away from her. "Look it up later. Amy knows that one." He cast a surreptitious glance at the built-in chrono. Time was passing far more slowly than he'd hoped.

Amy was watching him, he realized, eyes boring into him like an exploratory mining platform on some asteroid. Her jaw was set, her eyes blinking a little too often. "I just want to know. Have you been with another woman since we've been together? Have you wanted to?"

"I haven't touched another woman since the first time I kissed you. As for wanting to... only in the caveman sense. You know, blind hormone stuff that doesn't mean anything and doesn't come to anything. I love you."

Just then, Carl's datapad chimed with an incoming message, playing a few notes from "Message in a Bottle."

Just as Carl dug the datapad out of his pocket, Amy lunged across and snatched it from his grasp.

"What the—?"

"You put Roddy up to this, right? To bail you out. You planned it ahead and..." She handed the datapad back.

The message was from Niang, not Roddy. Carl turned it so Dr. Akerman could see it. There was a particle leak in the *Mobius's* antimatter reactor. "See? Ideally, she'd be the sympathetic shoulder to lean on when I've got burdens building up. Instead, I get suspicion."

"Sorry," Amy said, looking down into her lap. "It's just that usually... you know... you've got an angle. You have to admit, you love convoluted plans that avoid honest work."

Well, that much was true. He just wasn't enough of an amateur to put Roddy up to sending him a text comm. Too obvious. Giving Niang something quick to check on and report back—something Carl knew would warrant an urgent comm—was less exact, but certainly more subtle. Amy demanding to know who was on the comm was just too obvious a response not to plan around. She was right about him loving subterfuge. It was as much a habit as gambling or drinking, and unlike those other two, it often came with a net profit.

"Apology accepted. Now, if you two ladies will excuse me..."

But Amy caught him by the arm as he tried to bow and gracefully depart. "Oh, no you don't. Not that same old song and dance. That business with the particle leak can wait. Sit."

Well, shit.

Carl sat. This wasn't part of the plan. "But I'm in charge around here..."

"You're not that important."

Dr. Akerman clucked her tongue. “Amy... that’s not how we argue.”

Amy let out a sigh and brushed a stray braid out of her eyes. “Fine. You know you have people who can do their jobs. Take thirty seconds and send him a note to take care of it how he sees fit. Or hell, delegate it to Roddy.”

“If I don’t handle this stuff myself, people will start going to my dad.” It was bad enough Dad had taken over in his absence. The last thing he needed was for Chuck Ramsey to become the problem solver of Odysseus Base.

“Oh yes, because it would be so horrible if an older, more experienced version of you was in charge.”

“We’re nothing alike.” If ever there were a statement to test whether not being able to magically disguise his lies even from himself was essential to his falsehoods, it was this one. Carl knew damn well that he’d learned most of his cons from his father.

“What’s the matter? Cat’s got your cradle? No, never that... Chuck was *always* around when you were a kid. You couldn’t get away from him fast enough, could you? Enlisted the day you turned eighteen. But it was too late; you’d already absorbed his personality. I mean, you talked about him a little but having just met him... holy moly! He’s you with a bigger head, wider shoulders, and old-man gut. Except he’s also got twenty years maturity on you, which puts him mentally at about thirty.”

Quick math led to a consternated frown. “I don’t act like a ten-year-old.”

“Fine. Make it fourteen, since you’re always horny.”

Dr. Akerman smiled. “You two certainly argue like an old married couple.”

They turned to her in unison. “Stay out of this.”

“Oh yeah? Well, if I’m such a man-whore, how come I’m a

one-woman guy? There's thirty-seven women in the syndicate, counting you, and most of them aren't with anyone. I've got game. I could land another woman if that's what I wanted. But I'm not even looking. Hell, aside from that little expedition for the *Sokol*, we've hardly been apart. What've you seen in all that time? Ignore what I've said and go by what I've done."

Amy clenched her teeth a moment before answering. "Fine. You haven't actually *done* anything, unless you hooked up with July while I was gone."

"In case you hadn't noticed, she was sleeping with Hatchet. Putting a plasma burn through his chest ended with her stealing a starship from me, not jumping to the next bed over."

"It was a joke. I never thought you'd actually *do* it."

"I thought this wasn't time for joking. I've got a syndicate to run if this is just comedy hour."

"And that's another thing. Why is this even a good idea? I mean, Mars would be better off without the Ruckers. Why are we such a benevolent force out here?"

"We're not. Just like the Rucker Syndicate is good for the Ruckers, the Ramsey Syndicate will do right by us. We're not a charity organization." Carl's chest was heaving. This might not have been what Amy had in mind, but it felt good clearing the air instead of sitting around each other nervously.

"It's not only the good who die young, you know."

Grab a copy of *You, Robot*, book 11 of *Black Ocean*, and continue your adventure now.