

# MISSION INADVISABLE

MISSION 13 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

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BLACK OCEAN: MISSION 13

CARL RAMSEY TIPPED his chair back and took a long swig of Mars-brewed ale. The drink seemed out of place among giant rhinoceros-like *stunji* of New Garrelon—maybe vodka would have suited them better. But the Martian brew was the best the *stunji* casino kept on tap, and Carl wasn't keen on playing poker sober.

"I raise," Carl announced. He slid a stack of palm-sized coins forward without counting them. The *zuukas* weren't *real* money anyway, so it hardly mattered the exact amount of his bet. Besides, play long enough, and he was bound to lose them all anyway.

*Stunji* after *stunji* folded. Playing cards the size of placemats frisbeed into the discard pile from all around the table.

Then again, Carl might just clean out these poor *stunji* saps because none of them dared call his bluffs. It would have been tantamount to calling him a liar. He should have been offended. He should have been proud. There was a strange

mix of professional pride and wanting to take credit for being a reckless, devil-may-care gambler warring inside him.

But for now, Carl raked in chips and ordered another drink.

Drinks were on the house.

If Carl weren't such a dedicated spacer, he could have seen himself settling down in a place like this. Aside from the smell. And the lack of human companionship. And the soul-crushing tedium.

The first few bars of Pink Floyd's "Money" thrummed from Carl's pocket. Tugging out a datapad in the middle of a poker game could get you shot in some parts of the galaxy, but the assembly of stuunji gamblers paused respectfully as Carl checked to see who was calling him.

Carl pushed back his chair. "Excuse me. I've gotta take this."

Sliding his placemats to the discard pile, Carl slipped through the press of two-and-a-half-meter bodies and into the alleyway behind the casino.

"Yo, Ramsey here. Talk."

The anonymous voice on the other end of the comm came through a scrambler. "I hear you move cargo, no questions asked."

"Nah, I'm in the question-asking business these days," Carl replied smoothly. "Just makes jobs run smoother. What am I hauling? Where do I pick it up? Who'm I delivering it to? How soon you need it there? And last but not least, why's this going to be worth my while?"

Carl counted on his fingers, thinking he might have missed a question there somewhere, but couldn't pinpoint where.

"Sorry, Ramsey. This is need-to-know. You've got a package to pick up on the 20th on Agos VI. Delivery instructions upon pickup. Standard half-and-half payment

schedule. First payment of 150k will come from your contact.”

Three hundred thousand? Carl could bite into a figure like that and enjoy the flavor. But he had to check one thing. “I’m going to assume you’re talking terras. Been hearing a lot of rebel currency jobs lately.”

“This isn’t the EADZ, Ramsey. This job’s all ARGO.”

Carl raised an eyebrow, though without a video feed from his datapad, his contact on the other end of the comm would never see it. Whoever this was, he was keeping plugged in. Then again, Carl hadn’t exactly kept his *Bradbury* heist quiet. He supposed it shouldn’t have come as a surprise when potential employers knew where he’d been operating. That broadcast had sounded like a good idea at the time...

“What’s the cargo?” Carl asked. Now that the money was cleared up, all that was left was to hammer down the last few nails of this deal.

“Sorry, Ramsey. Like I said. Need to know.”

Carl cleared his throat. “Perhaps you didn’t hear me. I’m in the question-asking business. I’ve gotten saddled with sentient eggs, biotoxins, and weapons so hot that criminal syndicates wouldn’t take them off my hands. I’m through taking junk on my ship without knowing what I’m carrying. My crew is a bunch of pros. We don’t lose cargo. We don’t miss deliveries. We don’t get caught by ARGO, Phabian Investigative Services, or corporate security ships. You want that kind of protection for your cargo, I gotta know what’s in it.”

“You practice that in a mirror, Ramsey?” the voice asked snidely.

“No, I’m this good thinking on my feet. That’s part of the package deal.”

“Fine. It’s a cultural heritage piece. Artwork. You’re pulling courier duty on the back end of an art heist.”

Carl hmm'ed appreciatively. "I must be moving up in the galaxy. I'm getting calls for fancy thefts. I'll pick up monocles for my crew, and we'll fly there with our pinkie fingers extended."

"Can the crap, Ramsey. It's a religious knickknack. Nothing blue-blood."

Carl cringed. He cast a baleful look at the casino back door. Just inside were a bunch of kindly—and rather heart-on-sleeve pious—rhinos. In that moment, all he could envision was the heartbreak they'd experience if someone defiled one of their temples.

Before he lost out on the best-paying job they'd stumbled into since landing on New Garrelon, Carl reached into his mental bag of tricks. He tried to concoct a Carl Who Doesn't Give a Shit About Religious Kooks. Unfortunately, the best he could slap together on short notice was a Carl Who Actually Kinda Cares But Wishes He Didn't.

That was too close a Carl to the original.

Breathing in a deep, steady breath, Carl unmuted his datapad. "Think I'm gonna take a pass on this one. Best of luck cursing your family for ten generations. *Mobius* out."

"What? Since when did you turn into a religious—?"

Carl hit "End Comm" on his datapad before the mystery employer could finish insulting him. Somehow it had never been his style to just let someone verbally abuse him from a trillion kilometers away.

An odd tingle spread from the base of Carl's spine. His soul wasn't squeaky clean, but it had the fresh shine of an old ship that an ensign had been assigned to polish. There was that one spot the ensign would sit there rubbing at with a rag and cleaner until it shone like new. The entire ship could be rusted, moldy, or stained, but one fist-sized circle was—for the time being, at least—perfect.

With the satisfied sigh of a saint on a Sunday, Carl headed back into the casino to rob the locals while getting drunk.

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