

MORAL AND ORBITAL DECAY

MISSION 14 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

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BLACK OCEAN: MISSION 14

FEW PLACES in the galaxy respected a bounty hunter. At best, they were a necessary evil; at worst, they were thugs playing cops and robbers with live ammo. Carl Ramsey had never been big on hauling human cargo. Even with all the charges against Zim Soren, Carl still felt dirty handing him over to colonial lawman wearing overalls and farm boots.

“Reckon this is him all right,” Officer Obie said, squinting one eye and looking Soren up and down. “Tell the big feller to heap in back of the hover.”

Rai Kub looked to Carl with a somber question in his eyes. Carl sighed and nodded to the stuunji to comply. With a quick jerk, Rai Kub hoisted Zim Soren into Officer Obie’s open-backed, closed-cabined hover-hauler.

Jameson IV was a backwater among backwaters. It was rich in nitrates and strange purple scrub grasses that cattle seemed to love. By all other standards, the planet was useless. It was desolate wastelands dotted with pockets of passable farmland. The colonists were mainly subsistence farmers and retroverts of an earnest sort that grated on a technophile like

Carl—that was to say anyone who liked holovids, high-speed access to the omni, and regular showering.

Carl tried to lighten the mood with a little humor. “Say, with a name like Jameson, does this bounty pay out in whiskey?”

Officer Obie’s eyes widened. “Hey now, stranger. I can whistle that tune if you hum a few bars. Lemme drop this here feller off, and I’ll come back with some of our best four-year-old stock.” When Soren squirmed in the back of the hoverhauler, Obie casually drew his blaster and swung it into the back.

Carl winced at the hearty crunch of the impact.

Roddy tugged at Carl’s jacket. He didn’t need any more elaborate signal that he was on board with getting paid in booze.

Holding up his hands, Carl forestalled a payment that would earn him no good will among any of his friends aside from Roddy. “Just joking, officer. We’ll take cash. Just like the posting said.”

Officer Obie lifted the brim of his cap with the barrel of his blaster. “Don’t that beat all? Who’d a thunk this varmint would come back in irons from a few tipitty taps on the omininny.” Reaching inside his overalls, Obie pulled out a sack that looked hand-sewn from burlap and tossed it to Rai Kub. “All in there. Rainy day fund’s out for the season, but leastwise we won’t have to worry ‘bout the womenfolk no more. Not from this yellow-belly, anyway.”

To punctuate his comment, Officer Obie reached into the hauler’s back and took another slug at Soren.

Carl forced a smile. “Pleasure doing business.”

As a cloud of dust kicked up, Roddy took custody of the payment sack from Rai Kub and sifted through the scattered hardcoin.

“Look about right?” Carl asked. “I’m not eager to chase down Obie and his buddies if they came up short.”

“Looks like what we agreed on,” Roddy confirmed. “Whether that’s right or not... ask me again after we make the split official. There’s a reason why bounty hunters tend to work alone. Decent money split nine ways stops being decent money.”

“Aw, quit yer bellyachin’,” Carl said in imitation of Officer Obie. “You heard the stuff that guy was guilty of.”

Roddy snorted. “You heard eight counts of rape. I saw a smooth human who got a few colonial girls pregnant. How hard’s a guy gotta try to look like a better option than *these* toothless radish farmers?”

Carl shrugged. “Hey, they’ve got an ARGO charter out here and everything. Local judge was born on Titan. Not like this is some kangaroo court.”

Rai Kub brightened. “I have the greatest respect for the jurisprudence of the Yanti people.”

Roddy rolled his eyes and shoved the heavy sack of hard-coin back into the stuunji’s hands.

A chime in Carl’s earpiece was followed by Amy’s voice over the comm. “*Get back to the Mobius. On the double.*”

“Just finished up here, sweet thing,” Carl replied with a grin that accompanied hearing Amy’s voice. “How’s about you rev up the *Mobius*’s engine and I’ll rev up—”

“*No time for that,*” Amy snapped. “*We’ve received a distress call. Us. Personally.*”

Carl had left Roddy and Rai Kub with custody of the bounty they’d collected. It was an odd sum for a bounty—27,352 terras—but it made sense when Carl worked out that they’d

taken up a collection at a community potluck. Nice to know a wholesome, salt-of-the-earth colony could pool their piggy-bank hardcoin for a little retail justice.

On his way to the bridge, he heard the ship's engines powered up from idle to lift-off. Carl got intercepted by Esper.

"It's Cedric," Esper said hurriedly.

"What's Cedric?" Carl asked. He'd long since gotten past the naive stage of falling for open-ended statements. That sort of ham-fisted trick worked on lowlifes now and then, but even Carl was above using that unartful ploy.

"The distress call came for me," Esper said with a huff. "Cedric is in trouble. He didn't have anyone else to turn to."

A lump formed in Carl's throat. *No one else to turn to* probably hadn't meant *You got my father killed, so I'm out of options*, but Carl heard a hint of that anyway. Swallowing past the lump, Carl poked the most obvious hole in Esper's premise. "What about the Convocation? They have a whole division for bailing out wizards in jams. They're practically on duty to help terramancers."

Esper flashed one of those priestess smiles—the kind meant to reassure. Carl wasn't buying it. "Well, Cedric gave the impression that he might not be on the best terms with the Convocation hierarchy at the moment," she admitted.

"For the love of whatever theological concept of God you currently believe in, spit it out!"

Esper's eyes darted aside. "Well. It may be possible..."

Carl was growing exasperated. "I don't have time for this." He turned and headed for the cockpit. At least Amy would give him answers without making him stand there watching her blush.

"It's Mort's past catching up with him," Esper blurted.

"Huh? Since when does the Convocation go after a son for his father's crimes?" Carl asked with a furrowed brow. "Cedric

was a little kid when Mort ran off, and they still let him become a terramancer.”

“He might—possibly—have indulged in one of Mort’s old vices,” Esper replied with hesitation.

“What?” Carl snapped. “Read the wrong book? Burn a book? Murder a few dozen wizards? Cheat on his taxes? Mort had plenty of vices. I’m not even sure I could list them all.”

Esper turned aside and scowled into the corner of the room. “I’m not here to defend Mort. I’m just saying Cedric needs our help. With the Convocation against him, he really does have nowhere else to turn. We’re the only other people he knows.”

Family.

If Mort had been like an uncle to Carl, that made Cedric a younger cousin. But as Carl headed off to the cockpit, he wondered if Mort had triggered some sort of familial curse.

Would Carl spend the rest of his days cleaning up Mort’s messes?

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