

ETERNITY OR BUST

MISSION 16 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

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BLACK OCEAN: MISSION 16

A PALE BLUE sun hung in a black, star-speckled sky. It moved visibly as the tumbling planetoid rolled through its five-year orbit. A day there lasted just over two hours, short enough that there was never a thought of adapting to its rhythms. For no natural reason, the planetoid had gravity that felt just like Earth's and an atmosphere that cleared the lungs. The perfect mixture of nitrogen, oxygen, argon, and carbon dioxide was also filled with the sound of guitar music.

Carl strummed the chords at half tempo—D-chord, A, G, D, A, E-minor. He tapped his foot in time with the chill beat. He was seated on a crate that had never been packed away inside the old mining headquarters a tenth of a kilometer away, which now belonged to him.

This wasn't the asteroid belt he'd won playing poker in orbit of New Garrelon. That place had changed hands the next day as Carl ran through a series of celestial real estate transactions that divorced him completely from the events of that felt table. A man with Don Rucker's connections *might* have a shot at tracking down the owner of this asteroid—and

Carl had to admit, this was little more than a self-important asteroid amid a field of mined-out rocks—but no casually curious criminal would stand a chance.

He'd named it Pleasant Valley.

"Huh," Roddy grunted as he ambled through grass just tall enough to cover his toes, making his way over to Carl's perch. "Coulda sworn you were on playback at half speed. Don't tell me you're actually learning to *play* that thing."

Carl stilled the ring of the nickel strings with his fretting hand. "If I sold this guitar, I could buy another island in the stars like this one. Seemed kind of disrespectful to play it without knowing how." He bumped a datapad with his foot. Lying in the grass, screen lit, it was showing the proper playing technique. "Figured it was time I took some omni lessons. That was—"

"Knockin' on Heaven's Door," Roddy finished for him. "Yeah. Believe it or not, I could tell. Dylan's not your usual speed."

"Got stuck in my head at the poker game. Hard thinking up bullshit poetry when your life is summed up in rock. Dylan's more poet than songwriter. Born a century earlier, he wouldn't have bothered with music."

"Well, you're improving," Roddy said, dragging over a crate and taking a seat beside Carl. "Back in my gig days, if I'd had you show up from a replacement service when my rhythm guy was sick, I wouldn't have kicked you out of the place."

With a grunt of feigned gratitude, Carl resumed his fretwork and picked up the song again.

"Kinda homey," Roddy remarked as he listened companionably. "Kid woulda had a future at this."

Indeed, Cedric had terraformed an old mining outpost into a country estate. There was no scientific reason for atmosphere to cling to a ball of rock this small, no reason for it to have more

than a token amount of gravity. And yet, it behaved like a proper planet—one with a horizon that dropped like a cliff a couple kilometers out.

“Bet Mort couldn’t have done it,” Roddy added, punctuating the statement with the popping of a beer top.

“I’ll tell him you said that come bowling night,” Amy said as she approached from the main structure. “I’ll be sure to remind you.”

Carl would hardly have recognized Amy as Scarecrow. The cocky swagger of a fighter pilot had been replaced by the awkward gait of an expectant mother who hadn’t read the fine print to know what she was signing up for. Amy was barely showing but acted like she had gained two hundred kilos in the past month. Her features had softened. She’d let the mop of braids loose and trimmed it short for easier maintenance.

Carl gathered up his guitar and let her have his seat. “How’d you sleep?”

“Better, once you got up,” she said. Carl winced. “No. I don’t mean it like that. Um, Roddy, can you give us a minute?” Amy rested a hand on her stomach.

“On this boulder?” the laaku asked, scanning the horizon in all directions. “Maybe. I’ll see what I can do.” He ambled off, snickering as he chugged his breakfast beer.

Carl stole the seat Roddy had vacated. “You OK? Say the word, we’ll get you back to that med station. Esper can drop us deep; get us there in an hour.”

Amy closed her eyes and shook her head. “It’s not about the baby. Well, maybe. Indirectly. But that’s not why.”

“Why what?” Carl asked, struggling to stay afloat in the conversation.

“Do you want to get married? You know... do this whole thing right. I mean, not *right* right since we got things out of order. But traditional. Shotgun wedding, minus the shotguns.”

Carl shrugged. “Sure.”

“On Earth.”

Carl’s brain blinked. His eyes followed suit. “Clear the barrel on that one and fire it again? Did you say Earth?”

She smiled. “Yeah. You know, the Earth-like minus the ‘like.’”

Carl ran a hand through his hair. He wondered offhandedly how long it would be before having kids cost him his locks. Chuck still had a full mane, but that was less heredity than cheap cosmo. “Lemme get this straight. You want to get married.”

“Yes.”

“Great. I’m on board that shuttle. But you want to do it on Earth.”

“If by ‘do it’ you mean the ceremony and not just the wedding night, then yes.”

Carl rubbed his eyes with his fingers and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Earth. The one at the heart of the Sol system. The one with hair-trigger security. The one that’s home to Earth Interstellar and ARGO High Command? The one where the warrants for our arrest get approved? The one with the Convocation headquartered on it? *That* Earth?”

“Consider it a wedding present to me,” Amy said with a smile. “I mean, I’m marrying the galaxy’s top outlaw. I ought to get a little show of his prowess.” Then her face grew solemn. “Plus, my mom lives there, and she’s not fit to travel.”

Carl swallowed, then nodded. “Sure, babe. I don’t know how yet, but I’ll make it happen.”

Grab a copy of *Eternity or Bust*, book 16 of *Black Ocean*, and continue your adventure now.