

# PLANET HUSTLERS

MISSION 15 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

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BLACK OCEAN: MISSION 15

THE AIR MAY HAVE SMELLED ODDLY of ammonia and the sun in the sky shone brilliant blue, but with a cold beer in his hand and a lounge chair supporting his body, Carl imagined he was on a white sandy beach on some primitive Earth-like.

Roddy had jacked up the output on a datapad's speakers and had it playing steel drum music. Amy, Yomin, and Esper were tossing around a hover disk. Archie had opted to stay on the *Mobius* and skip the fun. Cedric was off taking care of the business that made this little vacation possible.

Carl checked his own datapad, noting the time relative to Earth Standard. 11:58 PM. He scrambled upright in his chair. "Hey, two minutes to midnight."

Yomin tucked the hover disk under one arm after catching Amy's throw. "Really, this is just an excuse for you to switch up your booze for the night."

"Hey, Earth girl like you oughta appreciate carbonated wine," Roddy said with a snicker, popping their makeshift cooler and passing out bottles of the cheapest champagne Ruulon IV had on their last stop.

“As an Earth girl, I resent that. I’m from New Orleans, honey. We invented inventing reasons to drink.”

Bottles popped. Plastic corks flew. Sudsy fountains spurting.

“One minute,” Carl announced.

“Cedric, come on. Get over here,” Esper chided.

The younger Brown left the strange magical anomaly that was providing their breathable atmosphere unattended. “Very well. I must say, as a traditionalist, this is a paltry celebration.”

“Stow it, Oxford,” Yomin chided. “We ain’t got a fancy pub and a hundred tipsy undergrads.”

“Shoni!” Roddy called out. “You’re going to miss it!”

Shoni emerged from the *Mobius* with a stretch and a yawn. “There is no celestial confluence that differentiates the difference in year between—”

“Ten... nine... eight...” Carl counted at a shout, drowning out the killjoy laaku scientist. So what if her planet’s calendar didn’t line up.

“Three... two... one... Happy New Year!” Carl shouted to a chorus of cheers, some more enthusiastic than others. He tipped back his champagne bottle and chugged.

God, this stuff was awful. It was the chintziest, fakest, worst-tasting alcohol imaginable. It was the equivalent of eating a cheese wheel with the wax coating still on it. It was colored, bubbly toilet water. And this was coming from a guy who enjoyed Earth’s Preferred.

Esper burst into a rendition of “Auld Lang Syne” until she discovered she was singing alone. Most of the crew discovered more or less the same thing as Carl had about the flavor and switched back to their original beverages of choice.

Roddy, trying to act like he was tidying up, collected the discarded bottles.

“So,” Esper said. “It’s a new year. What’s everyone planning for their 2562 new year’s resolutions?”

“Guess my old standby of ‘get the fuck off this primitive moon’ gets the old checkbox and a retirement party,” Yomin said. “Maybe something in the range of a payday worth a six-month vacation to Titan. There’s a massage parlor there that I could happily die in.”

“A life outside the convocation,” Cedric grumbled.

“Same as every year,” Roddy said, pausing to tilt back a bottle. “Give up drinkin’. Will be next year, too.”

Carl didn’t want to answer. Anything he resolved always came back to bite him in the ass. Instead, he turned the question back on Esper. “How about you?”

Esper appeared distracted. Her eyes kept tracking something out of sight to the rest of them: Mort. Everyone knew now that he was there. Esper wasn’t as constantly badgered as before, but he still gave her fits now and then, especially when it had been a while since the last bowling night. She huffed a sigh. “*Someone* wants it to be known that he’ll find a way to reconstruct his old body this year. As for me, to stop Mort.”

There was a chorus of laughs at Mort’s expense. They’d all pay for it on league night at the Esperville bowling alley, but it was worth it.

Carl’s datapad chimed and not the kind that reminded him he was forgetting something fun.

“Aw, fer Chrissakes,” Roddy muttered. “Smother that thing.”

Carl shook his head. “Not this time.” His voice was somber. “It’s New Garrelon, trying to get a hold of Rai Kub. He wasn’t answering his line, so they contacted me.”

Esper nodded. “Fine. I’ll get him. This is something worth breaking a fast over.”

Rai Kub opened his eyes a squint. Maybe the knock had been his imagination. Everyone knew he was meditating. The beginning of a new year was an opportunity for renewal, for changing ways and mending fences, for reconnecting with the soul of the universe. It didn't matter that the date had shifted when the humans had come to Garrelon so long ago. New Year's Day wasn't a celestial event; it was a metaphysical one.

The knock repeated.

Rai Kub squeezed his eyes shut. He had no wish to imbibe in the human tradition. They looked forward with reluctance and drank to erase the prior year. Rai Kub pitied them that empty philosophy—but only to a point. Their species *had* conquered his homeworld, after all.

The knocking grew louder. Carl's voice carried through the door. "OK, big guy. I was *trying* to be polite about this—you praying or shit in there. But answer your damn comm. The bigger big guys on New Garrelon wanna talk to you in the worst way, and I don't think it's to wish their off-world citizens a happy new year."

Floor groaning beneath his bulk, Rai Kub climbed to his feet and answered the door. "They do?"

Carl's head tilted. "No. I just bruised my fucking hand knocking on your door as a prank. My new year's resolution. Of course, they do. What I wanna know is what they want you for that they wouldn't tell Savior Carl."

"I... have no idea."

Carl jabbed a finger that aimed at the datapad on the floor of Rai Kub's quarters. "Then look!"

Rai Kub turned. From the corner of his eye, he saw Carl move to follow. A flick of his wrist sent the steel door slamming

shut in the captain's face. If Tuu Nau didn't want Carl over-hearing, neither did Rai Kub.

Messages, messages, messages.

The New Garrelon High Council had been trying to get in touch with him for over an hour. Everything sounded urgent. So many capital letters. So many exclamation points.

*Urgent! NEED to speak NOW!!*

*YOUR people NEED YOU!!!*

*Answer IMMEDIATELY! DO NOT WAIT!*

It went on and on with no explanation. Each had a contact comm ID that Rai Kub didn't recognize. Steeling himself with a long breath, he punched it in and waited.

There was a response in seconds. "Rai Kub?" It was Tuu Nau.

"Yes. I was meditating on the new year. Savior Carl alerted me."

*"We've been invaded!"*

Rai Kub's brain shut off. Was he receiving a message from a past life? Was this a dream brought on my meditation? He could imagine such a message before he was born, broadcast to anyone who would listen, on the day that humans arrived on Old Garrelon.

*"Do you hear me? We've been invaded!"*

"I don't understand."

*"A fleet showed up. The Clapton was no match for them. They said we won't be harmed, but the planet is under their control now."*

"Are you all right? Where are you now? Are... are you looking for us to sneak in and rescue you?"

Rai Kub wracked his brain. This was a matter for the omni news feeds, not a secretive message to a smuggler ship. Planetary invasions—and their reversal—weren't on Carl's list of approved commercial ventures. They had a few guns and a

small ship. Even the *Clapton* had only been taken through extensive planning and great loss. Anything that could chase that ship off was a matter for a galactic navy.

ARGO wouldn't help the *stuunji*. They were the original oppressors. Perhaps with a mutual enemy, the *Eyndar* could be persuaded to intervene. Rai Kub was no political scientist, but the "enemy of my enemy" line sometimes worked out.

*"No. I need you to convince Savior Carl to negotiate."*

"But, you commed Carl and told him to find me. Why not address him directly?"

*"Rai Kub, as the duly appointed representative of the New Garrelon Exiles Government, I hereby charge you with ensuring the cooperation of Savior Carl in what may well be a hopeless effort. Nonetheless, we have no choice."*

Rai Kub cleared his throat. "I hesitate to even mention this, High Councilor. But... you *are* aware that Savior Carl is a criminal, not a diplomat. Why him?"

*"We weren't invaded by a government. We were invaded by pirates. These are his kind of people. We need someone who speaks their language. We need a con man."*

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