

# SIEGE OF MORTANIA

MISSION 7 OF THE BLACK OCEAN SERIES

J. S. MORIN

Siege of Mortania

Mission 7 of: Black Ocean

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## SIEGE OF MORTANIA

SPACE WASN'T AS huge as everyone made it out to be. Sure, it was infinite. That would have been great for someone looking to become a nomad until he ran out of fuel and food, willing to die in the bleak nothingness that made up the vast bulk of that infinity. But for a crew searching for a place to actually hide and *live*, there were fewer options.

This had been the great topic of debate among the *Mobius* crew and her two guest fugitives. They had kicked ARGO hard enough in the shins that the Allied Races of the Galactic Ocean would be putting in some considerable effort to find them. Any part of the Milky Way deemed “safe,” “secure,” or “allied with Earth in any way” was solidly off limits.

The ship drifted safely through a deserted sector of astral space. They weren't aimed at any star system, populated or not. Gathering in the common room, the crew hashed out options. The holo-projector, so often used for mindless entertainment, was now linked with datapads, displaying habitable worlds as they were proposed.

“What about Shephan IV?” Roddy suggested. The chimp-

like laaku mechanic worked the datapad with one foot as he reclined, sipping a beer. The image of a blue-green world was replaced by a barren, gray lump of a planet. “No atmosphere, but there’s an abandoned science outpost there.”

Tanny glanced down at the readouts on her own datapad. “They’d have stripped it of anything we need. Sure, we might hole up there a while, but we need supplies more than a spot to land.”

Over at the kitchen table, not watching the succession of rejected worlds, two women sat on opposing sides of a small electronic battlefield. Each held an assortment of plastic cards in hand, shielding the informative sides from her opponent. One by one, they fed the cards into a slot in the battlefield projector, where each was scanned and uploaded.

“This is the silliest damn game,” Rhiannon muttered. “What the hell is a Yorkan Berserker?” Her flower child lingo had faded rapidly after she had left the New Cali colony and its retrovert interpretation of middle twentieth-century Earth.

“You shouldn’t have given that away,” Esper replied. She sat cross-legged in her chair, wearing baggy pink pajamas. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail high on her head. “Now I know that you’ve got one.”

“So somehow knowing I’ve got this screaming guy with an axe is going to give you an edge?” Rhiannon said. “Please... you’re going to polish the floors with me. Isn’t there anyone else you can practice on?”

“It was either you or Lloyd,” Esper said. “Mort can’t lose to me even on purpose, and everyone else but Carl refuses to play.”

“Then make Carl play you,” Rhiannon said.

“Technically he’s captain, so I can’t *make* him,” Esper said with a sigh. “Besides, he’d beat me every time too, and Mort

said I'd pick up bad habits watching him play. But don't worry, this'll be fun."

There was an electronic ding, and Rhiannon's face lit with a smile. "Oh, I'm sure it will be." She rose and removed a batch of fresh chocolate chip cookies from the food processor. They filled the kitchen with their scent.

"I wouldn't mind a few of those," Roddy said from the couch.

"Me either," Carl added. The captain of the *Mobius* half leaned, half sat on the arm of the couch, paying more attention to the can of Earth's Preferred in one hand than to the datapad in the other.

"I'll pass," Mort added with a smirk. There were times when the ship's wizard knew more than he let on. In fact, there were few times when he didn't. His food-stained hooded sweatshirt and unshaved beard made him look more vagabond than practitioner of the anti-science arts, but it was a sham.

Rhiannon giggled. "Somehow I knew you'd recognize the smell."

"What?" Carl asked, frowning at Mort. "They're chocolate chip."

"And then some," Mort added.

"They're Mom's recipe for adults-only cookies," Rhiannon said.

"How'd you get her to—"

"The day I turned eighteen," Rhiannon replied before Carl could finish. "That's what I asked for on my birthday. It used to bug the shit out of me that I couldn't even *try* them."

"So what's in them?" Carl asked.

"Hey, how about this one?" Roddy said, barging over the confectionery side conversation. "Former prison colony for the Zheen, outside their occupied space and abandoned. ARGO

took it from them about twnety years back and never settled it.”

Mriy accessed her datapad. The azrin had followed the search mainly in silence, napping on and off at the far end of the couch from Roddy. Her felid metabolism didn't take well to long periods of wakeful semi-activity. “Read to the end,” she said. “Believed occupied by the Black Nova pirate ring.”

“That intel's a couple years old,” Roddy said. “Could be anyone there now.”

“Maybe I shouldn't be listening to this. Just pick which desolate shithole we're going to live on. I don't want to hear all about all the pirates, parasites, and methane atmospheres,” Rhiannon said. The game board projected a holographic battlefield atop its surface, as well as the war bands that she and Esper had selected. The two miniature armies approached one another for combat.

“It's not the worst we've looked at,” Tanny said, rubbing her eyes. “I'll add it to the 'maybe' list.”

“Why can't there just be a nice, warm, uninhabited world with a fuel depot and an unlimited supply of food?” Carl asked. “I mean, there's got to be one out there somewhere.”

“Fuel depot might be going over the falls,” Roddy said. “But the rest, yeah. Probably not on file though, since the minute someone finds a place like that, some rich fucker buys it and installs an orbital security system.”

There was a tiny electronic scream as one of Rhiannon's troops was impaled by one of Esper's spearmen. “Ha! That's classic,” Rhiannon said through a mouthful of cookie. “It's like cartoons fighting each other. Come on, little man, stick 'em right back. Find an anvil or a baseball bat or something. You can do it.” She giggled as she cheered on her forces.

“Can I try one of those?” Esper asked, pointing to the cookies.

“No,” Mort said before Rhiannon could respond. “Last thing you need is Becky Ramsey’s ‘special’ cookies mucking up your head. I tried them once and couldn’t work a proper spell for hours.”

“Oh,” Esper said.

“Here’s one,” Carl piped up. “Geronn Minor!”

Tanny threw her datapad at him, but Carl was already ducking for cover. It bounced harmlessly off his shoulder. Tanny had been stranded on Geronn Minor once during her service in the marines. She’d spent days wondering if Earth Navy was going to be able to either win the orbital battle going on far above, or at least open a window for an extraction. In the end, they’d gotten off world, and the *ENV Supremacy* had devastated the biome. If there was anything left to eat or breathe on the surface, Tanny wanted no part of it.

“Well, that’s about it,” Roddy said, dropping his datapad to the cushions. “I can run a new search with wider parameters, but we’ll only be looking at shittier places than we’ve already got.”

“We could always hunt for our food and fuel,” Mriy suggested, showing a lazy flash of fangs.

“No piracy!” Tanny insisted. “Maybe we raid someplace for supplies, but we’re not hunting ships.”

“If only we could trust connecting to the omni,” Carl said. “But we’d need someone to cover our tracks, and we’re lacking in the computer support area these days. Hey Rhi, any chance that Lloyd of yours would consider taking a course in omni security? He’s sort of ruined the whole lawyer deal with being a fugitive.”

“Lloyd?” Rhiannon asked. “He wasn’t tuned in on the tech scene in New Cali, never mind modern stuff.”

“Worth a try,” Carl said with a shrug.

“Where is Lloyd, anyway? He still playing with Kubu?” Roddy asked.

Esper didn’t look up from watching her holographic troops slaughtering Rhiannon’s. “He’s teaching him English. It’s not playing. Once Kubu learns, we don’t all have to rely on translator earrings to understand each other.”

“Is he really that interesting that you’d want to hear him talk?” Rhiannon asked.

“Which do you mean?” Carl asked. “Kubu or Lloyd?”

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Lloyd slipped quietly into the cockpit. At the helm, Tanny sat with her feet up on the arm of the co-pilot’s chair, reading from her datapad. Outside the forward windows, the uniform gray of astral space was all the eye could see.

“Did you people come up with a place for us to hide out?” Lloyd asked softly.

Tanny glanced up. “You don’t have to pussyfoot around. I heard you coming.” She shut down the datapad and dropped it on the ship’s controls with a clatter. “And no, we didn’t come up with shit. Everyplace is either too desolate to sustain us or filled with people who’d happily turn us over to ARGO for the right price. There’s probably a hundred worlds out there where we could let Mriy and Kubu hunt for food to support all of us, but not a fuel rod, thorium core, or anti-matter reactor within a dozen lightyears. We got to talking about defecting to a non-ARGO aligned system, but no one could agree on a race to go begging for sanctuary. We’re not exactly a sympathy case, and humans don’t exactly have a lot of friends outside ARGO.”

There was a fire in her that Lloyd could feel from a meter away. “I see... maybe this isn’t a good time then.”



Tanny seethed out a sigh. “Don’t pull that passive-aggressive shit on me. What is it? I don’t need another thing hanging over my head. Spit it out.”

Lloyd laid a cautious hand on Tanny’s shoulder. “It’s about Carl...”

With a sudden jerk, Tanny shook Lloyd’s hand from her shoulder. “I haven’t been responsible for him for years. If he and Rhi can’t work out their own differences, that’s their problem.”

“It’s not that. I was walking past his quarters... the doors aren’t really all that thick... he was talking to someone. It sounded like... possibly—”

A wall of hands went up between Lloyd and Tanny. “I don’t want to hear it. What Carl does in his quarters is—”

Lloyd grabbed her by both shoulders. “Look at me! He sold us out.” Tanny stared up into Lloyd’s eyes. “He’s working out a deal to save himself and turn the rest of us over to ARGO.”

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