

## Ripples from the Past

### Chapter 12 – The Gathering

**“Once Leviathan had been an engine of war, before becoming an ark to hold the survivors of a dying multiverse. Now it was just spare floor space, an overflow from the city below, kept in touch by a constant flow of shuttles.”**

∞

Luri couldn't understand why The Chalné would invite her to Mendera, yet allow the sentinels to attack her. Small pieces of rock, rumoured to be pieces of old dead Gods. Rocks holding so much spiritual energy that they brought the gift of insanity and death to any living thing that approached too close to them. Each sentinel temple had one of the rock fragments, rendered harmless by being buried deep beneath the foundations. They still held immense power though, which they seemed to be about to throw in her direction. Her dark side became ascendant, as she raised her right arm.

“I came as a friend, but you attack me..... Feel the wrath of a living deity.”

All old friendships were forgotten, apart from Delmus, Delmuninager from the slums of The City of the Lost God. They'd been lovers for so long that whole universes had come and gone. She kept a tiny part of her attention on him, enough to ensure he wasn't killed in the coming battle. She used a lance of pure dark energy, to bring down the central tower of the sentinel temple, the newest, the one erected to protect the city from enemies entering from the Well of Souls. Still the awful screaming of the sentinels filled her head.

“Stop screaming !” She commanded.

Where were the guard, The Damned ? They should have been attacking her in their thousands and then there were the attack wings with their raptors. None of it made sense, unless it was some strange elaborate test. Sikush loved his clerics though and some of them must have died when the temple walls came down. Two bolts of power flew from the other sentinels, only to be absorbed by the cloud of darkness she'd created above the city.

“Attack me and you just make my creatures stronger.”

Her next bolt of purple darkness cracked the foundations of the temple, but not enough to expose the sentinel stone. Could she destroy it ? Should she ? Exposed it would bring hell to Mendera City, the death of every sentient creature for miles. Luri reached for enough power to rip away the foundations.

“To hell with them.”

She'd expose the stone and return to her own world, taking Delmus with her. The end of everything was still billions of years in the future, she'd return home and wait for it to arrive. Maybe the darkness beyond Leng would survive ?

“No Luri ! No !” Shouted Alyz.

Alyz, of course, her old friend was still too close. Luri merely thought the deed and it became reality. Alyz was flipped in the air, landing safely on the far side of the great desert. Luri pointed at the ground below the sentinel temple and concentrated.

“I'm so sorry Luri, there was no other way.”

Sikush standing in front of her, without a care in the world. As if it was the destruction all around them, was the most natural thing in the world.

“What have you done ?” She asked.

The sentinels had ceased screaming, their spikes of pure energy gone. Clerics were even beginning to recover their dead and wounded from the rubble.

"It had to be real you see."

Minraver now, standing slightly to her right and smiling at her. Luri let her cloud of darkness disperse, the creatures inside banished once again to the dark worlds.

"If we'd asked you, it wouldn't have worked." Said Minraver.

"To look real, it had to be real." Added Sikush.

Chlo was obviously sending The Damned to help, faces she knew, taking the wounded away to be treated. There'd be a mass burial for the dead, a mound erected over the site. That was the way of things in Mendera, always had been and probably always would be.

"You've used me." Said Luri. "I understand that, but to what end?"

"It was an agreed decision." Said Minraver. "We both realised the need for another deity."

"Estrid." Said Sikush.

It all became so clear, the most powerful of all the ancient deities and one aligned with Mendera, or at least aligned on most matters.

"She threatened to kill you, if you woke her again." She said.

"Probably just a threat." Said Sikush. "There simply isn't time to spend billions of years looking for her."

"She will know the sentinels were attacked and come to us." Added Minraver.

Luri knew the old gods didn't wake up that quickly, but a very angry Estrid was going to turn up in Mendera and probably quite soon.

"The multiverse said one deity might be enough," said Sikush, "so we decided that having two was better."

"We often disagree with the multiverse." Said Minraver.

Alyz had brought herself back from the dunes, helping Delmus move rubble to look for survivors. It was carnage, whole families had been enjoying a quiet day out.

"I took an oath to serve you Sikush, yet even I would question your actions today." Said Luri. "You've stepped into the darkness so many times. Do you ever worry that one day, you might not step back?"

"Yes Luri, it is a constant worry. Estrid may tip the balance our way though." He replied.

"Come, the others will be waiting for us at the gathering." Said Minraver. "We should hurry."

~ ~

Turning a vessel's scanners to look inwards wasn't a new idea. The crew tended to treat freight haulage as a way to get their friends past the strict immigration controls on some empire worlds.

Some planets turned a blind eye to it, others handed out brutal punishments. It only takes a few freighter commanders being flogged on the news networks, to make everyone more cautious.

Scanners were adapted to look inwards, a kind of machine based introspection. It wasn't a perfect system, but it could find just about anything if you were patient.

"We have two definite pings." Said Rhian. "For some reason two sealed containers are transmitting, what looks like gobbledegook. Transmitting it at a very high intensity."

"About time." Said Mo.

He'd been like a child, asking her for information on the scan every half an hour or so. True it had taken six hours to find the trackers, but it was a very large craft.

"Where are they?" Asked Kerr.

“One in the maintenance supplies store, just below the command deck.” Said Rhian. “The other at the stern end of cargo bay seven.”

“Should be easy to spot, as we’ve no cargo.” Said Mo.

“Maybe not, the Red-Tops left quite a few containers behind.” Said Rhian. “They seemed to be living out of them. Kerr and I have looked them over, but we didn’t open them all.”

“Are you saying we don’t know what might be in them ?” Asked Silky. “Like maybe a bomb ?”

Kerr was looking guilty for both of them. Rhian knew they should have opened every container and at least run hand scanners over everything. Mo had known Rorkath though, joking with him about old times.

“The internal scan would have spotted a timer.” She said. “Though I can’t rule out a device triggered by other means. Sorry, we should have looked in those containers.”

“We assumed the previous owners were friendly.” Said Kerr.

“Marvellous.” Said Mo. “Come on, we need to get this done. Maintenance area first, as it’s closest.”

Kerr went in front, as they went down several sets of steep metal stairs, which led from the command deck to maintenance. The entire vessel was designed to maximise cargo space, everywhere else was cramped and claustrophobic.

“Over there,” said Rhian, “the door marked Tech Supplies.”

There was room in maintenance for two crew members to work, but only if they got on well. There was an elevator to bring up the heavy equipment from the decks below. The door marked Tech Supplies, opened up a room little bigger than a cupboard. Rhian ran a hand scanner over several sealed crates.

“This one.”

A metal crate about a yard square, the usual size and shape that spares came in. Everything from electronic circuits to engine parts. There was definitely a tracking device in the crate, but maybe something else, maybe a bomb.

“We should move it to an airlock and get rid of it.” Said Silky.

“Let me get a good look at it.” Said Mo. “This is my area of expertise. I was a slum runner don’t forget and a damned good one.”

Mo cleared a few other boxes to one side, giving him space to get right round the crate. It was difficult for them all to fit in the room, though no one seemed to want to wait outside. Mo ran his long fingers over the box and actually sniffed at it for several minutes.

“Hmmm nothing dangerous.” He said.

Before she could ask if he was sure, he had the catches on the lid pulled back. Kerr actually gasped, as Mo pulled the lid off the crate.

“Just a powerful transmitter, with no less than four power packs.” Said Mo.

His fingers went inside the crate and there were several loud snapping sounds as he worked. It all took less than a minute, yet she felt her heart hammering in her chest. Was Mo the best slum runner Ixir had ever seen, or was that just crap ?

“Done, all power packs disconnected.” Said Mo. “Run the hand scanner over it.”

Her hand was actually trembling, as she pushed the scanner into the crate.

“Nothing, it’s dead.”

“Come on then.” Said Mo. “Let’s see if the next one is that easy.”

Rhian had to kiss him on the cheek, mainly as an unspoken apology for doubting him. Mo simply smiled at her and headed towards the stern of The Revenge.

~

~

Hol arrived on the veranda, Sikush's favourite place to do just about everything. The elite even made a joke out of it, calling themselves the sacred defenders of the veranda. Sikush wasn't there though, as she arrived holding Mingal in her arms. Jen was there, standing on her own. Minraver was out by the pool, looking up at the sky. She was surrounded by her pompous Genova though, the ones who refused to give a name. Hol really wasn't in the mood for that, so she joined Jen.

"Do you know who's coming?" Asked Hol.

"No idea, I only got an official invite yesterday."

Jen might have had a proper name once, but it had been lost over the years. Everyone knew the commander of the elite as just Jen. She'd original been an Arcadian, though that planet had long gone. That was another cost of being an immortal, losing everyone you knew. Even planetary systems didn't last forever. Minraver was watching the sky, when the sentinels began to scream.

"Are we under attack?" Asked Hol. "There are no orders coming up from Chlo."

"I'm being told that everything is under control." Said Jen.

It was difficult to see the sky from where they were. Hol walked out into the garden area, Jen following her. From there it was possible to see the sky over the city, the growing ball of dark energy.

"Are you sure I'm not needed Chlo?"

"Stay where you are, the situation is under control."

It didn't look under control, as the first sound of an explosion reached her ears. No one had any idea how many of The Damned existed, apart from Sikush and Chlo. The last official figure had been just over three hundred thousand. The council had begun questioning the expense of such a large force, so Sikush had stopped giving out figures. There were rumours of vast numbers, trained and billeted at the edges of the vast Menderan Empire. All those vast numbers of the guard could have been there instantly, only Chlo was holding them back. Call it following orders, or blind obedience, The Damned were good at it. The screaming of the sentinels was making Hol nervous, without the second loud explosion.

"Could someone have taken over Chlo?" She asked.

It was unthinkable, yet so much was happening that was unthinkable. Jen actually looked worried and she was normally fearless.

"It's under control." Said Minraver.

Hol had almost forgotten the eternal was there, she'd seemed to intent on watching the sky.

"Maybe a little excessive, but all according to plan." Said Minraver. "Now is the time to calm things down."

Minraver vanished, though her small group of Genova remained behind. Chlo was now logging emergency help orders on the common channel, calling in aid for the sick. There were dead to be removed too, dead clerics on a sunny day in Mendera City. That too was unthinkable, or at least it had been.

~ ~

The cargo holds were so large, that no matter how well the atmosphere systems worked; there was always a little mist up against the ceiling.

"Like tiny indoor clouds." Said Rhian. "They can be a real problem, if your cargo is perishable."

Large titanium struts separated the vast hold into bays. Containers were usually stacked ten high in the bays, but now most of the bay was open space. The only containers on board were right at the stern end, up against the rear bulkhead. Beyond that there was the engine pod, which could be jettisoned in an emergency.

“Why are we walking ?” Asked Mo.

He had nothing against exercise if there was a purpose to it, but there wasn't and they were in a hurry. The container storage was automated, but there were a few electric buggies up against the wall, still plugged into their charging slots. Mo pulled the cable from the wall and sat in one, knowing the others would follow.

“Can you drive it ?” Asked Rhian.

“How hard can it be ?” He replied.

Mo let the brake off and put his foot in what he assumed was the pedal to go forward. The buggy's rapid acceleration surprised them all, especially Mo. It hurtled off at some speed, narrowly missing a titanium bracing strut.

“Do you want me to drive ?” Asked Rhian.

“No, I'm getting the hang of it.”

Once he was used to the foot pedal being either full on or nothing, he coaxed the buggy across the cargo hold. He stopped about twenty feet from the nearest open container.

“The air purifiers have had days to work on it,” said Kerr, “but I still get the unmistakable aroma of unwashed bodies.”

“I think this is where they dumped all their junk.” Added Silky.

Mo now understood why the rest of The Revenge was so clean, every piece of junk had been collected up and dumped at the far end of the cargo bay. It was the deep space equivalent of lifting the edge of the carpet and pushing the dirt under it. Old tins, empty bottles, even used clothing no one could be bothered to wash. The atmosphere systems had worked hard, but it still smelt like a Thraag's backside.

“Comforting in a way.” Said Mo. “Hardly the campsite of someone likely to be our arch-nemesis.”

Rhian was running the hand scanner over the two large containers, which the Red-Top crew had been using to sleep in.

“Nothing, clean.” She said. “It stinks far worse in here. Why sleep in here, why not out in the open cargo hold ?”

“It's natural for warriors to sleep where they feel safe, rather than out in the open.” Said Mo. “It's like domestic cats and their fondness for boxes.”

“Well, nothing here, apart from dirty blankets and empty liquor bottles.” Said Rhian. “I suppose we should open the locked container now.”

Mo was dreading it, yet also excited. Something inside was telling him to be careful, which was confirmed by Silky's expression.

“I have a bad feeling Mozim.” She said.

“Me too, me too.” He agreed.

Rhian ran the hand scanner over the walls of the container, carefully avoiding going anywhere near the handles and locks.

“There is a transmitter in there, which we knew anyway.” She said. “Apart from that, I have no idea what might be in there.”

“Would they track us, just to blow us up ?” Asked Kerr.

“They might leave a bomb behind, just in case they're offered enough to kill us all. It's what I'd do.”

The others were looking at him strangely, which didn't surprise him. Mo had never worried about having no moral compass, they seemed to get in the way of self-interest. He placed his hands on the doors of the container and sniffed at metal.

“What do you smell for ?” Rhian asked him.

“Shush, I see all the colours of the rainbow.”

He did, yet there was no quick way to explain his senses to her, or any other pure blood humanoid lifeform. When he sniffed he saw colours in his head, which ranged from white to a heavy violet colour. Part of his unconscious had to be decoding the colours, because something was telling him to run away and keep running. He stopped sniffing.

“Definitely an explosive device of some kind.” He said. “Might be a good idea if you all took one of the shuttles and moved some distance away from The Revenge.”

“And go where if it blows up ?” Asked Kerr.

“We’ll stay.” Added Rhian.

Silky just stood there, her tiny wings beating to a slow steady rhythm, her tail twitching. Mo put his hands back on the metal and more of his strange hybrid senses kicked in. Sounds now, like strange musical instruments, played by unskilled hands. Good, the lower notes were to the right of the door, about two feet up from the ground.

“Be thorough.” He muttered to himself.

He took his time, working his way over the container, easily clambering up and over the top, to examine the roof. Good, apart from near the door, it was all a boring shade of off white and deep notes.

“I’ve good news and bad news.” He said. “The bad news is that there is a bomb inside.”

“The good news ?” Asked Silky.

“Is that it’s tiny, just there to give a really bad day, to anyone opening the door. We can simply cut a door sized hole into the side of the container. Well away from the device of course.”

“We have cutting equipment, but it’ll take a few hours.” Said Kerr.

“More hours hurtling in the wrong direction.” Said Mo.

Silky had been looking at the container, running her own claws hands over the surface.

“I can get us in Mo, using a portal.” She said. “Only a small one and even if they do trace it. They know where we are anyway.”

“Sounds a good plan.” Said Mo. “Start spinning up a portal, while I find a light of some kind.”

“There’s a hand held light in the tool box in the buggy.” Said Rhian. “Can we come too ?”

“I am a creature born of flames.” Said Silky. “Mo will scorch a little in my portal, but you might well lose your hair.”

“I’ll stay.” Said Rhian.

“Me too.” Added Kerr.

By the time he had the lamp and tested it, Silky had spun up a portal of spinning purple energy. It hummed in his head, something any hybrid within several light years would hear. She was right though, the transmitter was already broadcasting their position. Mo turned on the lamp and entered the portal, feeling the heat bite his skin for a fraction of a second. Silky followed, bumping into him.

“I’ll check the device by the door first.” He said.

Silky followed him, her expertise had ended once the portal was created. Now the technology was his and his alone to disable.

“Damn, a military device with several anti-tamper additions.” He said. “Best to leave it alone for now.”

The transmitter was larger than the previous one. The only clue that it was doing anything, was the glow of a tiny yellow light on the front. Mo carefully checked the power packs for traps and found none. He had faith in his own ability, but it was still a relief when the first power pack came away in his hand and he was still alive. Five more, all stacked on the floor of the container.

"They're useful." He told Silky. "I'm just worried that your portal might make them explode." That was it, the yellow light was gone, the transmitter turned off. On the return trip through the portal, his right cheek was scorched a little. Nothing bad enough to complain about though. "That's done." He said. "Let's get back on course for Medrona."

~ ~

Sventa had arrived early for the meeting, though no one apart from Sikush seemed to know any details about it.

"If he says the multiverse is coming, it's coming." Said Chlo. "He can be infuriating, all part of his infallible super being act. I've never known him to get something like this wrong though, ever." Haan was still her constant companion, mainly in an effort to keep him alive. Sventa was beginning to get an inkling of an idea, a suspicion that the dark forces threatening Mendera, were the same ones stalking Haan. If she was right it was a huge breakthrough, but she was going to keep it to herself for a while. Even immortal dark angels don't like to look stupid. She was currently stood in the lower regions of the imperial stores, looking at two biological specimens. Both had been put inside stasis fields by Chlo.

"You moved them out of the workshops quite quickly." Said Sventa.

Mendera had some of the best laboratories and workshops in the multiverse, Sventa had seen several of them. It seemed odd for Chlo to have stopped analysing the specimens so soon.

"There was an incident with the silicon lifeform." Said Chlo. "One that I still don't claim to understand."

They were both there, the body of a woman split apart to remove the silver coloured creature within. The light green hue of the stasis field made the internal organs glisten, as though the body had just been opened up. The other creature looked like a statue a child had made from silver clay. Two arms and legs, but no neck, the squat head coming straight out of the shoulders. A small creature, no larger than a child's doll.

"The technology for creating host organisms that look and behave like people, isn't new." Said Chlo.

"A similar idea was used millennia ago, in an attempt to assassinate key figures in the Menderan Council. They had rudimentary intelligence, but this one has almost no brain tissue."

Sventa rested her forehead against the stasis field, looking deep into the dead woman's opened skull. Instead of a brain, it held nothing but a few pieces of connective tissue.

"So the creature inside was driving the body, like a transport shuttle?" She asked.

"Exactly, though the few silicon base lifeforms we know about, are mindless creatures, similar to plants and fungi. Our silver friend here is unique, unknown on all the trillions upon trillions of explored worlds."

"You mentioned an incident." Said Haan. "What happened?"

Chlo sighed and joined her, head pushed up against the unbreakable stasis field.

"It looked dead." Said Chlo. "Killed by unknown means during the battering by your man Arran."

"He's not my man." Said Sventa. "Though he does seem useful on occasions."

"I ran tests, scanned it with everything I had and found no signs of life, but what is a sign of life in something so alien to us?"

"I can almost guess the next bit." Said Haan. "It moved about when no one was watching."

"That I almost expected, I had a suspicion it was pretending to be dead." Said Chlo. "It escaped out of the workshop, breaking through a metal door. It ran, the imaging probes followed it the whole way up and out. It might have made it into Mendera City, if the Growler screens hadn't zapped it."

"That thing got through a metal door?" Asked Sventa.

“Yes, made out of the same alloy we make raptors out of.” Said Chlo. “It crystallised a corner of the door, no idea how. Mendera City has had a Growler problem for years, they breed in the storm drains. The sensors saw something low on the ground and zapped it with enough power to fry a growler. The first guard on the scene found it, as you see it now.”

“It looks dead.” Sad Haan.

“It looked dead before.” Said Chlo. “It can stay in stasis until I know more about it. I’m hoping the multiverse is feeling talkative.”

Sventa looked at the thing little bigger than a child’s doll. It seemed idiotic to her, yet she felt a need to tell Chlo her suspicions.

“Where it was, the kind of forces it was controlling. I think this is one of our enemy Chlo, our would be nemesis.”

“I’m beginning to think the same thing.” Said Chlo. “Or at least one of its foot soldiers.”

“The multiverse must know.” Said Haan.

The sound of explosions didn’t penetrate the depths of the imperial store, but the vibrations did and a weakened scream from the sentinels. Sventa was ready to answer the call to protect Mendera, yet Chlo held her arm.

“No, it’s all part of his plan to bring Estrid out of hiding.” Said Chlo. “I’ve been told to keep well away from it all and I advise you to do the same.”

“Whose plan ?” Asked Sventa.

“Sikush of course ! Only he would be arrogant enough to unleash Luri against his own city.”

“We can’t just hide down here.” Said Haan.

Sventa wanted to answer the scream of the sentinels and join the battle. But against Luri ? It sounded madness, but Sikush had been to know to come up with strange plans in the past. She remained where she was, waiting for Chlo to decide on their next course of action.

“The meeting isn’t in the palace.” Said Chlo. “Everyone will be moved to the command deck of Leviathan. There’s more space than on his veranda and our enemies might know about the meeting.”

“Surely no one could attack the imperial palace ?”

“I thought that was impossible, but I also thought nothing could break a hole through Menderan spacecraft alloy. We might as well go straight to Leviathan.”

Chlo took them, moving their reality to the spacious command deck of Leviathan, as it orbited Mendera.

~ ~

Leviathan was now permanently kept in orbit, a vast eight mile long piece of orbiting real estate. Two schools used space within the mighty craft, as did a group of clerics who wanted to stay away from the noise of the empire. Sventa had often used one of its massive cargo bays as a training ground for her dark angel warriors. Once Leviathan had been an engine of war, before becoming an ark to hold the survivors of a dying multiverse. Now it was just spare floor space, an overflow from the city below, kept in touch by a constant flow of shuttles.

“Still quite a few yet to arrive.” Said Minraver.

“No rush, our guest of honour will arrive once we’re all here.” He replied.

He saw her looking at him strangely, still wondering how he knew when the multiverse would be back. In reality she’d visited his veranda one evening, leaving a note on his breakfast table. A little cryptic, but he had understood her meaning.

‘Luri now likely to agree. Will attend the gathering when she arrives on Mendera.’



That was it, written in Kittara's awful handwriting. To be fair though, Kittara had been born into a family of warrior hunters. He looked out of a viewport at the city below, seeing smoke still rising from the damage he'd engineered. He hoped they managed to rebuild quickly, the wounded city made him want to weep. So much lately had been painful, but it had to be done. He had to keep the persona going, of an omniscient leader who toyed with people's lives. They might be scared of him, but they also respected him and trusted him to bring them safely through the crisis. The destruction on Mendera would be accepted as one of his whims that produced result. In reality it was an act of desperation and emperors could never admit to acts of desperation. He almost linked with Jen, but saw her at the rear of the growing crowd. Few were invited, but many wanted to see the multiverse, especially as they knew it looked like the famous Kittara. He beckoned Jen over.

"Use as many resources as you need." He told her. "Just get the fires out before nightfall."

"Yes of course Sikush."

A burning city on the news channels would look worse after dark, as if the entire city was in flames. His act of desperation would work though, he was sure of it. Hol arrived next, leading the converted chaos creature she'd been looking after. He smiled and waved her over, hoping she'd leave the creature behind. Sadly, she didn't.

"Sikush, this is Mingal." She said.

"Mingal?"

"Yes, I know, but he's used to it now."

The creature certainly had a strange odour, though he knew his etiquette and gave a slight bow after being introduced.

"I hoped Mo would be here." Said Hol. "Everyone is worried about him after all that trouble out in Redemption."

"Novra-An, Hol. You're as bad as Mo, using names centuries out of date." He said. "Would you like to know a secret about Mo?"

Instead of curiosity, Hol seemed amused, actually chuckling.

"I knew he was alright. You sent him on a mission, didn't you?"

"Yes, but Mo always does best if he thinks things are his idea. A little shove here, a bit of information fed there and Mo was off to where he needed to go."

"I knew it. Where is he going?"

He leant in close to her, whispering. All part of his persona of course, no one else was within earshot. "He's gone to the rifts to recover something precious to him. What he doesn't know, is that he's also bringing back something vital to our plan."

A plan indeed! A plan would be nice, though he was beginning to get the shape of one in his mind. Mo wasn't just a vital part of that vague plan, he was essential. Probably for the best that Mo hadn't been told though, he worked best when he thought of it as going rogue.

"So he never really shot anyone in Novra-An?" Asked Hol.

"No, though none of that was part of the plan. When Mo returns, he won't be in trouble with the militia."

Hol was grinning at him with obvious joy. Everyone loved Mo, even if he could be difficult to get on with. Sikush realised everyone was now sitting or standing on the command deck, their guest was late in arriving. It gave him a chance to look over the hundred or so members of The Damned, who'd arrived to see the multiverse, probably a once in a lifetime opportunity, even for an immortal.

"I thought you'd cleared the engines and control systems out of Leviathan." Said Minraver.

Leviathan was old, but still far better than most technology on the other empire worlds and the unaligned ones. Periodically it was as though the ancient craft sighed, her command deck systems momentarily coming to life.

"I was going to." He replied. "Chlo ran quite a few simulations though and Leviathan can be cleared of clerics and ready to go to war in less than two days, if the need arose. Much less than that, if the need was desperate."

"Almost immediately if I put the clerics into stasis and take them with us." Added Chlo.

Minraver looked shocked at the idea.

"You'd take a hundred thousand or so civilians to war?" She asked.

"In stasis of course, they'd be unaware of it." Said Chlo.

He wanted to explain that it was just one of thousands of scenarios that Chlo constantly thought through. It was actually unlikely that Leviathan would ever move out of orbit, it just made sense to look at all options. Muttering on the command deck gained most of his attention, it seemed that their guest had arrived. He'd wanted to be stood beside Luri when the multiverse arrived, able to gauge the reaction of a living deity. Luri was some distance away though, folded around Delmus and deep in conversation.

"That's not Kittara." Said Hol. "The walk is wrong."

A figure in a clerical robe, striding towards him with a strong purposeful stride. He used Chlo's senses to look at the figure with a hood over her head and found nothing. He could clearly see the figure, yet every sensor Chlo could call upon, was saying nothing was striding towards him. He understood, a few seconds before she stopped and pulled the hood back.

"It's Estrid." He muttered.

Estrin-Okanan, known to most as Estrid, had answered his unconventional summons. Most powerful of all the living deities, she still looked like a young human woman with flowing red hair. Only rarely had he known her to use her true form. Her eyes looked angry, but he wasn't dead. Nor was he being thrown down the timelines to boil away in the wastes of eternity. She came close, putting her cheek against his.

"You attacked your own city, the holy city, just to get me here?" She asked, in a whisper.

"The need was urgent."

"I left you clues, in case you needed me."

"You left me threats and cryptic nonsense that might have taken a billion years to solve Estrid. The need was very urgent."

Gods take a while to gain their full strength after waking, he knew that. There was confusion in their minds, until their vast store of information and power, organised itself properly. As she moved back and looked into his eyes, he saw confusion.

"Yes, I remember." She said. "I'm sorry. Is Kittara here yet?"

How did she know about the multiverse? The deities knew everything it seemed, even while they slept. A thought struck him.

"Kittara is dead Estrid, you do remember that? The multiverse just looks like her, has her memories."

"Yes, of course. I need time to get my thoughts together, yet there is no time. Strange, when you consider that I have eternity at my disposal."

Crap! He just wanted all of Estrid back, with her keen mind and the powers of a living God. She was right though, there was no time. The form of Kittara appeared on the command deck, the gathering was about to begin. Estrid claimed his attention by kissing him on the cheek.

“She isn’t really dead Sikush. You do know that, don’t you ?”

Her eyes bright, no sign of confusion, yet her words seemed madness.

“What ? I don’t.....”

No use, he was being beckoned forward to address the gathering, people were cheering. No time to ask Estrid to explain herself, his people needed a plan and orders to follow. He greeted the multiverse, who still looked frighteningly like his dead lover, Kittara.

“Two living deities.” She said. “Even I didn’t think that could be done.”

He turned towards the growing crowd, hoping he wasn’t about to send them all to their deaths.

~ ~

Everything was better after you’d been victorious in battle. Food tasted better, kisses were sweeter, sex was far more intense. It might have been them vaporised instead of the enemy, which always brought the moment into sharper focus. They were in bed again, post coital yet again.

“I like The Revenge.” He said. “Nothing like fighting on a vessel to make it yours. Shall we keep it ?”

Silky opened her sleepy eyes.

“I thought you hated it ? Plus there’s no proper living space.”

“We could convert part of the cargo hold.” He said. “There are thousands of square feet that’ll never be used to hold cargo. Enough space for luxury accommodation, far better than any expensive cruise vessel.”

“Rhian and Kerr expect their cut when The Revenge is sold.”

“I have money, more than I know what to do with. I’ll give them more than enough imperial credit to keep them happy.”

Silky was fully awake, her eyes flicking over his face.

“Do you really want to keep The Revenge ?” She asked.

“Yes, I really do.”

“Then I have just one request, if you want me to travel in it again. You get it registered with the empire, so that we can travel to anywhere in just a few days.”

“But.... Chlo will know where we are... All the time.”

Silky was settling herself into the pillows, her position on the matter clearly stated. He knew her well enough to know she wasn’t going to budge on the matter.

“I don’t like space travel much Mo.” She added. “A few days on The Revenge is fine, but no longer, no matter how luxurious you make it. Get an empire ident.”

It wouldn’t be that bad, he told himself. Having a link to Chlo might actually be useful.

“Fine, I’ll get her registered with the empire.”

The inertial damping worked well enough to remove any trace of The Revenge changing course. The hull cooked slightly though, as they used a sun to slingshot back onto their course for Medrona. The strange clanking as the hull heated up, told him they were at last going in the right direction. Mo snuggled up next to Silky and was asleep within seconds.

~ ~