

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 11 – The Sentinels

“Mo knew already, he’d avoided that sector during many trips to the outer edge of the empire. If any part of space deserved a sign saying ‘here may be monsters,’ it was that sector.”

∞

Much to Mo’s surprise, the freighter was actually quite comfortable. An empty bulk carrier isn’t designed to fly empty and had bucked about a bit until they were in space. Once they’d reached the craft’s optimum speed in the near vacuum of space, it gave them a wonderfully smooth ride.

“Giros to keep the freight stable.” Rhian had told him. “Just as good as you’d get on any fancy cruise ship.”

There wasn’t much room for the crew, but they did have plenty of food and unlimited water. If you fancied drinking recycled water that had been through everyone else’s bladder. Mo preferred wine, beer or something even stronger and there was plenty of that too.

“Be nice to link into the empire’s entertainment networks.” He said to Silky. “Someone might decide to be clever though and trace our link.”

“It must be midday Mo and we’re still in bed.” Said Silky. “We should at least go and see if Kerr needs help with anything.”

It might be midday somewhere, but it was also probably bedtime on one of the empire worlds. He’d already tried to explain that concept to Silky and failed. She stubbornly insisted on relying on the freighter’s clocks.

“There really isn’t much for us to do until we get there.” He said.

He kissed her neck, hoping she might realise that a few more hours in bed could be fun. No use, there obviously was a point when booze and sex weren’t enough to fill her day.

“No Mo, we’re going to get dressed and show our faces on the command deck.”

“If you say so my dear.”

She did, and it was either get showered and dressed or suffer the wrath of a moody chaos creature for several days. They’d barely left their quarters, when the vessel’s alarm gave three loud siren blasts, before going quiet again. Still no panic though, it was the agreed method for Kerr or Rhian to get everyone’s attention.

“See !” Said Silky. “Good job we got up and dressed.”

“It’s probably just another blip on the long range scanner.” He replied.

It was and Rhian was getting quite excited about it. The trouble was that she and Kerr were just as bored and looking for something to fill their day. For Mo and Silky it was sex, for them it seemed to be blips on the long range scanner.

“It’ll move away, just like the other two or three.” He said.

There was something about this particular dot on the screen though, even if it was still a very long way from them. It had an implied persistence of purpose about it.

“I get a bad feeling about this one.” Said Silky.

“Me too, but you’re usually right.” Replied Mo.

He knew that asking for more information was useless. A blip is just a blip and remains a few pixels on the screen, until it’s quite close. By then it’s usually too late to try and run.

“Can we outrun it ?” Asked Mo.

Kerr made a point of looking at a few screens and putting a few numbers into the navigation system. All for show of course, he'd have already decided if that was a serious option.

"Probably not, The Silky isn't built for speed." He said.

"Can we stop that?" Asked Silky. "Naming the freighter after me was nice, but it's getting a bit creepy. How about it being called Mo's Revenge?"

"Revenge for what?" Asked Rhian.

"Or just The Revenge." Said Mo.

"Are we agreed then?" Asked Kerr. "Is it to be The Revenge?"

Lots of nodding heads, so Kerr continued.

"The Revenge is built to haul large amounts of freight and couldn't outrun anything." He said.

"We could hide though." Said Rhian.

Their course was a long dotted line, which headed across the main screen, disappearing off the far side. Rhian waved her hand, pulling the view across to their next slingshot turn. Large heavy freighters didn't usually slow down once they were underway and they weren't built to turn onto a new course. The Revenge would briefly enter a high orbit on a convenient sun. After going round about two thirds of the sun, it would break away and head off on its new course. It was a trick as old as space travel itself and far safer than it sounded. The navigation software could handle the manoeuvre, even if everyone was asleep at the time. The line changed, as Rhian removed the slingshot course change and let their existing course run on.

"We can enter this sector." She said. "Stop the drive and simply drift, silently. Due to the reputation of that sector of space, it's unlikely that 'they' will follow us."

"If they do, we'll just be another dot among the debris." Added Kerr.

"Tell us about this bad reputation?" Asked Silky.

Mo knew already, he'd avoided that sector during many trips to the outer edge of the empire. If any part of space deserved a sign saying 'here may be monsters,' it was that sector.

"I know it, or at least I know the official version." He said. "Lots of space debris from the nearby exploding nebulae. Add a few larger minor planets to perturb the debris and you have a lot of rocks, randomly hurtling about at speed."

"Going in there sounds suicidal." Said Silky.

"Chlo has hinted at worse," said Mo, "heavily armed military vessels just vanishing. There has to be an alternative."

"There isn't." Said Kerr. "Rhian and I went through this for hours, while you were..... Sleeping."

"The Red-Tops did leave a few mines when they left." Said Rhian. "We could drop them halfway through the slingshot turn. The other craft will have to follow the same route."

"Or another vessel will find one, five years from now. Or the craft coming up on us is just a harmless freighter, taking the long route." Said Kerr. "That's why mines are banned everywhere."

"Is that it?" Asked Silky. "Our only two alternatives, both bad?"

"We have weapons and they might not expect that, whoever 'they' are." Said Mo. "We could go right round the sun and head back the way we came. If it is a harmless freighter, we can wave and carry on. If it isn't, we fight."

"You'll get one shot, maybe two." Said Rhian. "The closing speed will be ridiculous and we haven't even tested or learned the weapons system."

"Then we start learning." Said Mo. "I do own this vessel, it is my decision."

"I command while we're in flight!" Snapped Kerr.

Everyone underestimated Mo, he had the strength to snap Kerr's neck or force him obey. All as a last resort of course, but he was working out the odds in his mind. Kerr might have a blaster hidden somewhere and it had been a while since he'd done much in the way of rough stuff.

"We should all get a vote." Said Silky.

"I agree !" Said Rhian. "We'll all die if it goes wrong, so we should all have a vote."

It wasn't quite the outcome he'd hoped for, but it was better than fighting his own crew. Mo threw his right hand up in the air.

"Fine, I vote for fighting whoever is following us." He said.

Silky supported him, raising her hand.

"They still might alter course." She said. "If they don't, I'd rather fight than run away."

To his surprise, Rhian raised her hand, while avoiding eye contact with Kerr.

"Sorry, but I agree with Silky. I'd rather fight than run."

Kerr actually grinned, before taking a sip from his ever present glass of something or other, which was always alcoholic.

"I know when to give in." He said. "We have less than two days to become experts on Red-Top energy weapons."

~ ~

Alyz had seen some magnificent illusions during her long life. Every ten years the imperial games were held on Mendera and the providers of weird and wonderful entertainments, brought their tents and pitched them outside of the city walls. A few conmen and thieves arrived too, but they always followed the crowds. She'd seen empty tents, turned into shining palaces of delight. The famous Parisi Brothers brothel had pitched two huge tents one year. Alyz had developed a bit of thing for one of their young girls and visited their tents regularly. Every night was different inside those tents. Furniture made out of solid gold, crystal chandeliers hanging from marble ceilings. Opulence everywhere, even the curtains sewn with threads of the purest gold. All illusion, only the girls and boys were real. Some even talked about some of the courtesans not being as beautiful as they appeared. All done by powerful illusions, transmitted directly into the minds of the customers. All quite safe of course, usually. Very few paying clients had ever experienced lasting mental health issues. The empire ignored it all, the citizens liked their pleasures to be a little gritty, perhaps even with a tiny element of danger. The world Luri had created was real though.

"Oh wow, this is perfect." She said. "Actually..... maybe.... No, it is ! Better than the real thing, nicer than Mendera City."

"Cooler and no sand storms." Said Delmus.

"Please don't say that to Chlo." Said Luri. "She'd be so hurt ! And she might never talk to me again."

"So you're coming back with us ?" Asked Alyz.

Lurisiana, known to everyone who knew her as Luri. Her old friend smiled at her and Alyz knew she was going to say yes. It was hard to think of her friend as a deity, but she had created the near paradise they were sat in. Surely with a Goddess on their side, they had to win ?

"Of course I'm coming, I couldn't do otherwise." Said Luri. "I'm not sure if even these worlds will survive the great switch. Yes, even I cannot be sure of surviving the event that approaches. Besides, I have lots of friends on Mendera. If the multiverse requests my attendance, I will go."

Alyz held her hand, which was actually warmer than when Luri had been a living creature, one of The Damned.

"When will you be ready to leave ?" Asked Delmus.

For such a simple question, it seemed to be difficult for Luri to answer. She looked about her, as if needing time to make a decision.

“Soon, very soon.” She said. “I need to prepare myself, become less as I am now and more of what I used to be. Is Minraver on Mendera yet ?”

“Yes, her fleet arrived just before we left.” Replied Alyz.

“Good, she will probably have to quieten the sentinels.” Said Luri. “They will scream, hopefully not loudly, but they are sure to scream. I am after all, exactly the kind of thing they’re there to guard against.”

“Will they do more than just scream ?” Asked Delmus.

It was strange to hear a deity sigh, but Luri looked at her feet and gave a long sigh.

“I will do what I can and I did once take an oath to serve the empire.” Said Luri. “It may not be enough though and the sentinels have more power than many realise. I really don’t want to end up fighting my way into Mendera City.”

“Can we do anything to help ?” Asked Alyz.

“Just being here helps pull more of what I once was to the surface. I will prepare and then I’ll take us all to the Well of Souls. I just hope we don’t walk into trouble.”

~ ~

Hol was deeply disappointed with Mingal. She’d given the converted chaos creature a name that suited him. Mingal were carrion beasts that scoured the rifts for anything dead or dying. They were also famous for the foul smell that was part of their defence mechanism. The chaos creature she’d been going around with for several days, seemed to have the same stench about him, the stench of something dead and decaying. She’d taken him back to her quarters in the temple, hoping to jog his memory about events there.

“Any luck with him ?” Asked Minraver.

“Mingal, I named him Mingal. It seems to suit him and I can’t see him complaining. He talks the common tongue perfectly, but remembers nothing about his life, prior to your fingers entering his brain.”

He was sat there, in one of the beautiful ancient chairs that were as old as the temple building. He smiled at Hol, as though pleased with her prognosis.

“I just can’t forget what he did,” added Hol, “all the clerics he killed.”

“You’ve been with him for a while now Hol.” Said Minraver. “In your opinion, is he loyal to Mendera.”

“I am a loyal servant of Mendera.” Said Mingal.

“He is one of us now,” said Hol, “I’m certain of it. I’m also certain that any knowledge he possessed about who was controlling him, is lost to us. I actually trust him now, or I wouldn’t have brought him back inside the temple walls.”

Minraver put out her hands to examine Mingal’s head and he flinched, moving away from her.

“Do you remember the pain ?” She asked.

“Yes, it is my first memory. I accept my guilt for the things you say I did, though I have no memory of any of it. To me, the day of pain was when I was born.”

“No more pain Mingal, I promise. I want to inspect the wounds in your head, lean forward.”

The pain must have been dreadful, even her promise of no further pain didn’t seem to settle him. He obeyed though, even if he did flinch as her fingers touched the holes in his head.

“Don’t be a baby !” Snapped Minraver. “Everything is healing well and a hat of some kind will cover the scars. Consider yourself lucky to be alive.”

"I do mistress, I do."

His robes did have a hood, yet Mingal didn't seem worried about how he looked. Her constant companion of the last few days looked horrifying and had the stench of corruption about him. Worst of all, he seemed likely to be around her for some time yet.

"Bring him with us," said Minraver, "the one who looks like Kittara, may be able to lift something out of his memories."

"So the meeting is today?" Asked Hol.

"It would appear so, though my brother isn't giving away any details of why he's certain it will be today." Said Minraver. "His intuition he says. He can be quite annoying, as I'm sure you've noticed?" Hol loved and respected The Chalné, they all did. Sometimes though, it was nice to hear someone voice his faults, someone who could get away with it. Hol decided to be a little bold.

"Oh yes, Kittara said he was the most annoying person in the multiverse."

"She did! And I don't remember anyone arguing with her."

Hol laughed with Minraver, though she was aware of the need to be careful. Her oath of loyalty to the emperor might allow enough wriggle room for some gentle teasing. Anything more and she'd feel bad about it for quite some time. Hol took her personal oath to Sikush very seriously.

"What about Mo?" Asked Hol. "I heard he'd gone off on some sort of private enterprise."

"Mo is something else that my brother is being annoying about. He's a showman at heart, that's the trouble. I see nothing along the time lines, neither does Chlo. My brother tells us his intuition informs him that it will be today, the moment when the fate of the multiverse is decided. As for the whereabouts of Mo? He just smiles and tells me everything will be fine. He'll create some smoke and pull Mo out of a cabinet, I'm sure he will."

Genuine laughter that even Mingal joined in with, probably out of politeness.

"Anyway, we're all summoned to his favourite veranda in the royal palace." Said Minraver. "Bring your creature and follow me there."

Minraver vanished, before she could tell her that Mingal wasn't her creature. The only place she had to keep him was her quarters in the temple and he had to be kept hidden from the clerics. A few had panicked and screamed, after just glimpsing him through an open door. Ideally she wanted him away from the temple, given to someone else to look after. He could be locked up somewhere of course, it just seemed such an unfair thing to do. Deep down she trusted Mingal and accepted that he might be useful.

"I have an idea to make you less..... Conspicuous." She said.

There was nothing to be done about the smell. Chaos creatures were technically dead tissue, even if they could walk and talk like real people. Some were gently decaying and gave off a stench. Like bad weather and holidays with relatives, it had to be endured. As to his appearance.....

"Desa Ubari, my predecessor, was vain and bald." She said. "She was also the proud owner of several wigs and quite a few hats. What do you fancy Mingal, blonde hair maybe?"

"I only seek to please you mistress."

"I believe you, which is why I want to look more presentable. I'm taking you to see the multiverse."

A few drops of gum on his bald head and the blonde wig fitted perfectly. There was a definite feminine look to the cut of the hair, but it would have to do. A large wide brimmed hat and her creature looked..... He actually looked like a tall thin woman.

"Perfect." She said.

Hol held onto him and transferred both their realities to the royal palace.

~

~

Trying harder was useless; she'd taken the changes as far as she could. Luri stood in front of a full length mirror and liked the look of herself in her old uniform of The Damned. All real, the uniform she'd once worn into battle for the empire and the Nurigen blade she carried. They'd been lovingly placed in a box which replicated by magic, the same effect as Chlo's stasis field. Uniform and sword looked as good as the last day she'd worn them. It was the day when the old Luri had died.

"I am what I am." She muttered. "They invited me and will have to accept that."

She'd thought of the years when she'd lived on Mendera, the lazy days in bed with Delmus, the shared laughter with Kittara and Alyz. It was no good; it would only shift her so far. She was now a creature of the darkness beyond Leng, the worlds that no one liked to speak about. That was what she saw in the mirror and it was what the sentinels would see. Even a deity can miss something when they're totally wrapped up in their own thoughts. Luri hadn't heard Delmus enter her dressing room.

"You look gorgeous." He said.

She slid her arms around his back and kissed him. She carried on kissing him, until she felt him trying to breathe. Usually Delmus made her feel more like the old version of herself, the living creature who'd been his lover for countless millennia.

"That was nice, but didn't help." She said. "I am now as much of the old me as I'm ever likely to be." She twirled in front of the mirror, before putting her hands on her hips and facing him.

"What do you see?" She asked. "Be honest and look carefully."

It was almost impossible for Delmus to be serious, he pulled faces and squinted at her, making her laugh. The laughter was good, creatures in the dark worlds rarely laughed.

"I see Luri, the woman I've known since I was a thief on the rifts." He said. "I do see something else, if you really want honesty?"

"I do, it's essential."

"Beyond the face that still takes my breath away, I see a darkness that sometimes scares me a little."

"Delmus, I'd never do anything to....."

"I know Luri. You did ask for the truth though and occasionally I do get a glimpse of the deity inside. It will probably always scare me a little, but I can cope with that."

She hugged him and much to her relief, he hugged her back. She closed her eyes and hoped there would never come a day, when he was too scared to hold her.

"Fuck!" She said. "If you get worried by that part of me, the sentinels will go crazy."

"I don't think it will be that bad." Said Delmus. "You are invited and both of the eternal will be in Mendera City. Do you think they haven't thought about the sentinels? They'll be waiting for you to arrive and have a plan. I guarantee it."

He was right of course. She had to go anyway, it was her fate and there was never any way to avoid fate.

"We'll go now." She said. "Get Alyz and collect your things. Bring her to where the Lummel vessels land."

Luri strode through the version of Mendera she'd created, hoping to spend more time there in the future, many more nights with Delmus. She'd seen two deities boil away into the wastes of eternity though and understood that even immortal Gods could die. One of those deities had been the great Sevril-Narge, known to many as the bug goddess. Creatures on many legs, with hard carapaces had been her favourite weapon, sent in their millions against her enemies. Luri had absorbed some of Sevril to become a deity, perhaps too much.

"He sees you in there Sevril, hiding inside me. I know that now." She muttered.

No vessel of the Lummel could cross the gap between worlds to reach Mendera. She dismissed the waiting craft, watching it float up and out into the darkness. She needed to create a gate of fire to take them to the Well of Souls in Mendera City. Luri had often wondered why Sikush had left the open doorway into his city. Anyone with power could simply arrive at the Well with an army and a few had actually done just that. Once she'd believed it to be hubris and bravado that made him keep an open doorway into the empire. Then she'd understood, it was his way out. If the unthinkable ever happened, he could drag the prison out of the ground and take it anywhere.

"That looks uncomfortable." Said Alyz.

The portal of fire was now twenty feet across and about the same high. It was hot, the heat was scorching the nearby plants.

"It doesn't burn once you're inside." Said Delmus. "This is my regular way of being sent home. Singed hair maybe, but I usually even end up standing on my feet."

"I usually send you to a rift gate on the 1st rift." Said Luri. "Arriving at the Well of Souls is likely to be a little less dignified and a lot more risky. I can protect you both from the flames though."

Luri entered the flames, putting her hands out towards Delmus and Alyz.

"Hold my hand and trust me." She said. "We'll be at the well in a few seconds."

It wasn't seconds though, something was resisting their entry into Mendera. It was the sentinels of course, attempting to stop the arrival of something originating from the darkness. It took several minutes for Luri to win the contest and deposit them into a sunny afternoon in Mendera City.

"Crap !" Said Delmus. "Not the most stealthy of arrivals."

The fiery portal had been on Mendera while she'd fought and won the battle to arrive. A large area of grasses and shrubs had been reduced to scorched ground, with several trees still burning. To their right was the temple structure, built over the well when Thrax had constructed Mendera City. Not far to their left was the sentinel temple, the one assigned to guard the Well of Souls.

"We have to move." Said Luri. "I never thought there'd be this many people here."

A cool wind was blowing from the south, making it an unusually pleasant day by the southern city wall. Families had come out to enjoy the fine day, many families. They were all trying to cover their ears to avoid the scream of the sentinels. Alyz too, was down on her knees, her hands pressed hard against her ears. No use though, the sentinels were pushing their message directly into people's minds. Luri felt it slightly herself, though she could easily push it away. Directly into the anxiety centre of their minds, it was shouting while it screamed.

'An enemy is here ! Run ! Run ! Get away !'

There was no instruction on where to run and most of the families were running round in circles.

Delmus was by her side, using willpower to resist the screams of the sentinels.

"They are going to attack." He said. "Many of the people here will die. You have to stop it."

She understood and pushed him gently away.

"Get back, take Alyz with you." She said. "I will stop this madness."

The sentinels were declaring war on her, something unseen by anyone for countless billions of years. Lances of pure energy were striking up into the sky, receiving an answer from forces only they understood. The towers of energy grew, becoming edged with gold and orange. When the power was strong enough, the sentinels would send it against her. It might even kill her and it would most certainly kill all the families who'd been enjoying a day out.

"I know you for what you are sentinels." She called. "Bits of old dead gods, remaining in this world long after you should have gone. You're not wanted here, you're not needed. Go, or I will destroy you."

Where was The Chalné ? Where was Minraver ? Were they going to allow the slaughter about to be unleashed ? The sentinels didn't reply and seemed to increase the towers of energy, which would soon be hurtled in her direction. Luri did the only thing she could think of, she used the Well of Souls to call on her own worlds. She uttered a few words in the language of Leng, causing a wall on the closest sentinel temple to shatter.

"I gave you fair warning." She shouted.

Just the beginning, the words had created a conduit, her own way of pulling power from the darkness beyond Leng. Luri had more power to call on than the sentinels, enough to shatter them and the temples built over them. She called on that power, until a cloud of darkness hovered over Mendera City. Not just darkness, strange creatures seemed to squirm over each other inside the swirling ball of power. Purple lightning too, which was already reaching down towards the city. Luri lifted her right arm towards the cloud of darkness.

"Stop screaming ! Stop attacking me !" She commanded. "Or I will make you stop !"

~ ~

Mo had allocated control of the four Ion blasters to himself. They were the forwards blasters, the only weapons of any real use. They'd found two state of the art AI torpedoes and pushed them out of an airlock, but they were strictly a dead man's revenge weapon. Rhian had discovered them in a cargo hold and insisted on them being used. It had been hot and tiring work to get them outside of The Revenge, even with power loaders. The torpedoes used their thrusters to stay close, only moving to home in on any craft firing energy weapons at them.

"These will take them out, no problem." Rhian had said.

He had to agree, the torpedoes had a good record of hitting their target. Almost a 100% guaranteed destruction of the attacking enemy vessel.

"Oh yes, they'll get them." He'd told her. "They're tough, with superb targeting systems. They'll swerve about and hit the enemy vessel, turning it into an expanding cloud of space debris. The problem is....."

"We'll have been destroyed by their Ion blasters by then." Kerr had said.

Torpedoes were slow and energy weapons moved at the speed of light, or close enough to it to hit the target the second you fired. The rear blasters were useless, so Mo was sat in the chair, next to the controls for their only useful weapons. Not that there hadn't been some dispute about it. Kerr was quite happy to pilot the vessel and leave firing the energy weapons to Mo, Rhian wasn't.

"I've the best score in my year with targeted energy weapons." She'd said.

Mo fell back on his best asset, when he wanted to win an argument. He used his unerring ability to lie convincingly.

"All simulation of course."

"Well yes, of course." Rhian had replied. "No one gets to do it for real. Well yes, I know we're going to, but that's really rare."

He had her flailing and it had been so easy.

"I've done it for real, in vessels from planets now long dead. The Maran Group built some of the best weapons ever made and I've used them all. Not in simulation either, in real life or death combat."

"He has !" Added Silky.

It was only a sort of lie, more a distortion and expansion of the truth. True, he had used Maran Ion weapons in a battle, but The Old One had come along and saved his arse on that occasion. It didn't matter, he had no intention of using the weapons. Silky was going to fire them.

“Here, take the seat.” He said. “Just let me do all the talking or Kerr and Rhian will probably have a seizure.”

Silky hated technology, energy weapons in particular. Anything she couldn't use her claws or tail on, she tried to ignore or run away from. There was no way the others would have allowed her to control the forwards blasters, so Mo had lied and lied well.

“I have faith in you my dear.” He said. “Just don't miss. The closing speed with their craft will be so high, that I'm too scared to calculate it. You'll get two shot, no more. Actually you have to hit them hard with the first shot and use the second to finish them off. Really we're just relying on their first shot going wide, or.....”

“Mo, I love you, but shut up !”

He shut up, moving his chair so that he could watch her targeting screen. He understood the theory about her demon reaction times being something like fifty or sixty times faster than his, but he was still worried.

“I don't need the targeting system either.” She said.

Silky turned it off and half a second later, Kerr turned on his comms with them.

“I've noticed you've turned off the targeting AI, why ?”

He had an idea why she'd done it and decided to improvise.

“The automatics get too easily confused by decoys and chaff. And some craft now have devices to scramble the targeting system. Much better if I do it on manual.”

“Fine !”

The strange thing was that Mo had contemplated death many times, often putting his own life in danger, yet he was worried. It was not being in control, not being his finger on the oddly delicate firing trigger.

“That's why it needs to be me doing this.” Said Silky.

“Why ?”

Silky shook her head and sighed.

“Humans, people, norms, there are lots of names for you and the multiverse is full of you. Even you Mo are half human, though it sometimes feels more like ninety percent.”

“Hey, hey, what did I do ?” Asked Mo.

“You fuss, you fuff about, which is why your reaction times are so bad. Your eyes see things, but before you can react to, there's all that stress and angst getting in the way.”

“I hadn't really thought about it like that.” He admitted.

“I'm different.” Said Silky. “My eyes see and my brain passes the information straight through to my hands. Unless they have a converted chaos creature as their pilot, which is unlikely. My reaction time will mean them dying today and not us. And tell Kerr to give the main thrusters a three second burn.”

He was thinking about what she'd said so hard, that he almost missed the last part.

“Why ?”

“They obviously have better long range sensors than us and will have already entered a firing pattern into their systems. By accelerating we'll remove that advantage.”

Mo kissed her on the cheek and connected with Kerr.

“Fire the main thrusters for three seconds.”

“Why the hell would I do that ?”

“It'll fuck up their targeting systems. Trust me.”

“Oh crap ! Fine.”

There was a long audible sigh, before Kerr let the comms link drop. He obviously wasn't happy, but obeyed the order. The main thrusters made everything vibrate slightly, even the metal floor beneath their feet. Mo felt the vibrations stop after three seconds.

"I feel them." Said Silky. "Five seconds until they enter the range of our short range scanners."

Silky had an odd relationship with the time lines. Not as reliable or as close a relationship as Chlo enjoyed, but sometimes Silky just seemed to know what was going to happen. Mo had it to some extent, but he often made mistakes. Silky didn't always manage to obtain pre-cognition of the future, but when she did, she was always right. Five seconds later, Kerr and Rhian were getting very excited.

"Large craft, twice our size." Said Kerr. "Running with no ident. Safe to say they're unlikely to be friendly."

"They're firing decoys." Said Rhian.

Mo could see it too, several decoys and a massive amount of chaff and other items designed to fool their sensors. It looked like an entire fleet was coming up on them and coming up fast. Silky was actually chuckling.

"You don't fool me with your decoys. I see you." She muttered.

There was no warning before Silky fired. Mo was looking at the screen, bewildered by the sheer amount of junk that looked like viable targets. Silky fired three times, actually moving her aim slightly for the third shot. He heard a whine as all four Ion blasters began to recharge and almost instantly they were past the enemy vessel.

"You're right, no human could have reacted in time." He said. "We're alive, so I assume you hit them?"

The mass of craft, decoys and chaff was on the rear screen now and moving away at speed. There were explosions among the junk though and a few pieces hurtling away at a different angle.

"I got them, a clean kill." Said Silky. "They fired late and missed us completely."

"Is that it, did we win?" Kerr was asking.

A few seconds later and their torpedoes finally found something to hit. The rear screen showed a flash of light so severe, that the outside optical sensors closed for a second or two. When they could see again the screen was empty. Enemy vessel, its decoys and the entire cloud of junk... Gone! Vaporised as though it had never existed.

"Yeah, we won." Mo told Kerr.

Mo had no idea where Rhian had been during the battle. She was now in the doorway, looking amazed to find Silky at the weapon controls.

"We had a change of plan." Said Mo. "Silky's reaction times are a bit faster than mine."

Rhian didn't seem that concerned, they had won the battle. She was looking at the empty rear view screen.

"We'll probably never know who they were." She said.

"Talk to me people." Said Kerr. "Is that it? Shall I look for another sun to slingshot and get back on course?"

"Not yet, we need to find the tracker first." Said Mo.

"What tracker?" Asked Rhian.

It had started as an idea in his mind after the attempt on Rorkath's life. He'd put it down to one of his milder paranoid delusions, until the enemy craft had so unerringly crept up on them.

"The one the Red-Tops placed somewhere, after selling us out." He said. "It's the only way they could have found us so quickly and it might explain why someone wanted Rorkath out of the way."

“Actually, now you’ve said it.” Said Kerr. “That makes sense.”
“I’ll start an internal scan of The Revenge.” Said Rhian.

~

~

© Ed Cowling – December 2017