

SOUNDING DARK

Jo Graham

PRAISE FOR SOUNDING DARK

Faith, luck, and grit propel this ambitious space opera from Graham (*Black Ships*). // Graham amps up the action, constructs a rich mythology of gods, cultures, and societies, and develops evocative characters that will make readers cheer. This pure sci-fi escape proves a fresh experience for fans who are tired of clichés. — *Publishers Weekly*

Sounding Dark is tremendously exciting space opera. // It's the sort of book you stay up far too late finishing, and then go back to re-read so that you can savor the details. The thing that's hard to express how well *Sounding Dark* blends solid technical SF // with deep myths. // Jo Graham makes both aspects utterly believable and equally crucial to the story. — Melissa Scott, legendary pioneering SFF author of more than thirty novels, winner of multiple genre awards

Jo Graham's space opera is a richly imagined narrative which uses its spectrum of relatable heroes who face overwhelming odds with drive, determination, grit, and most powerfully of all, hope. // With its inventive use of Sumerian motifs in its intriguing worldbuilding, *Sounding Dark* soars to reach a liminal place on the boundaries of science fiction and myth. — Paul Weimer, SFF book reviewer and Hugo finalist

Sounding Dark is a hope-filled space opera with a classic feel. It has space battles, politics, and // vividly-imagined worlds in conflict. Enduring friendships and the deeply-held beliefs of the characters // make it a story with heart, as well. I'll definitely be looking forward to further books exploring this universe. — K.V. Johansen, author of the *Gods of the Caravan Road* epic fantasy series

Jo Graham specializes in writing gloriously epic yet deeply personal science fantasy, and *Sounding Dark* is the beginning of just my kind of saga: generational, political, magical. — E.K. Johnston, #1 New York Times Bestselling Author

Also by Jo Graham (selected works):

Black Ships

Stealing Fire

The Order of the Air
(series, Melissa Scott co-author)

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For Melissa,
who loved this story from the beginning.

CHAPTER ONE

The Steel Captain looked out across the debris field, and her face was still. Yes, the rest of the ship couldn't see her, but the bridge crew could, their couches arranged in a tight semi-circle on the modified merchanter, space that should have been left open for comfort packed tight with missile tube controls and two weapons officers. The main screen showed the forward view; drifting bits of debris, larger chunks that might hold lingering atmospheric or liquids, down to micrometeorites of flash-frozen blood and flesh. Not one person on the bridge of *Steel Nine* spoke a single word.

The Ivory Captain's voice was incredulous on the comm, clear as though he stood at her shoulder rather than on *Steel Nine's* sister ship. "What happened here?" Tal Robber said.

"The Calpurnian Navy," she replied in clipped tones. Adelita Massacre did not trust her voice further.

Tal was scanning. The screens showed the pulse of his sensors, pinging once, twice, three times. *Ivory Three* slipped slowly further into the debris field, larger and older than *Steel Nine*, slower but better able to take the debris strikes.

The cameras showed a drifting arm, hand dangling by strings of flesh, and the officer of the watch cut the scene quickly to another view. Every person on either ship had loved ones missing.

"Drift pattern suggests twenty to twenty-four hours ago," Tal said.

Adelita nodded. “Butcher, scan for any atmospheric bubbles in the larger pieces.” It was just possible, just barely possible, that there were survivors in sealed compartments. Someone might have gotten into a suit. Blast doors might have held. It could have happened.

“Captain.” Butcher adjusted controls, scratching his bald head, for once short on backtalk.

Ivory Three was creeping deeper into the debris field. Adelita was silent, letting the scanners do their work. Tal was reading off numbers, vectors. Adelita turned the main screen to his cameras. A recognizable section swam into view, part of an exterior panel about six feet long. Part of the white stenciling against the black was visible, and a palpable wave of exhalation ran around the bridge.

“I have a section of *Horn Four*,” Tal said. “Lady’s Breath!” he swore quietly.

“*Horn Four* and *Bone Seven*,” Adelita said. Her tones were clipped and formal. “Ivory Captain, we may consider both ships lost.”

“Confirmed,” Tal said. “We consider both ships lost.”

Someone let out a sob at their post. She did not turn to see who. “Continue to scan the field,” Adelita said. “We will retrieve survivors.”

Butcher looked up from his board. “It’s been twenty-four hours, Captain! There’s no...”

“We will scan.” She did not sit down on the edge of her acceleration couch. She stood, and she would stand until the scan was completed.



The solar wind had a voice. It begged and pleaded, speaking of heat and the flow of electrons, of warm worlds caressed with light. It lapped at her.

It whispered like a lover, and yet she could not answer. There was Void, and it held her in eternal silence.

Sometimes there were others, her children in their skins of metal and fire, calling to her, reaching for her. She strained. Sometimes she touched them, her hands dark streamers reaching into their dreams, quantum effects of electrons reaching for electrons, firing neurons to show them in their sleep. They dreamed her, accretion disk in one hand, flaring nova in the other, her gown of stars. And yet she could not move. There was only cold. Only silence.

One twisted in emptiness, a tiny spark, slowed heartbeat, fading breath. A spark. A tiny touch. A bridge across the darkness, a chink in the walls of her prison....



“We have a life sign,” Butcher said.

They had scanned for nearly two hours entirely fruitlessly. Adelita bent down to look at his screen. “A single life sign?”

“There.” He pulled up the close view. “Way out to the side of the debris field, near the wreckage of the Calpurnian scout ship.” Either *Horn* or *Bone* had given as good as they got. They’d taken a Calpurnian pinnacle with them.

The Steel Captain frowned. “Pursue.” She opened the channel to *Ivory Three*. “Ivory Captain, we have a life sign. One person in a suit.”

“After at least twenty-two hours?” Tal sounded incredulous. “That’s well beyond the air supply of a suit.”

“Perhaps they were inside for part of the time. We will know when we have them aboard.”

Adelita did not pace as they made their way to the edge of the debris field. She looked around her bridge instead. For all its clutter, it was well organized. Eight acceleration couches were tightly arranged, the arm controls for shipboard functions easily accessible

when strapped tightly in, their reclining seats tilted forward for comfort while the ship was not jump-ready. The walls were pearlescent white between the large screens, though the carpeting beneath was a patchwork of dark red and light tan. *Steel Nine* had been a merchanter before she was taken, and no doubt the original tan flooring had been stained in the melee that took her. Eresh's shipwrights had left the sections that served. Waste not, want not. Now there would need to be *Horn Five* and *Bone Eight*.

"Permission to join," Tal asked. *Ivory Three* was closing. Of course he'd want to see the survivor too, as soon as they were brought aboard. Perhaps they could tell them what had happened.

"Permission granted." It would take nearly twenty minutes to come alongside and extend the guidance drones, then mate hatches. They'd have recovery completed by then.

Adelita watched until sensors showed the drones out, each towing a long line as they swam from *Steel's* side like glowing fish in the dark, magnetic clamps seeing the black painted side of *Ivory Three*. "Adulterer, take the bridge," she said, and nodded to her second as she palmed the door open. She'd greet Tal at the airlock as was proper.

He was not quite aboard when she arrived, so Adelita stood in the corridor with its green stripe running in one direction and blue in the other, patting down her black shipsuit, her energy flail at her side. The airlock cycled and Tal Robber, the Ivory Captain, stepped through. He was a tall man perhaps five years her junior, his shipsuit brown with the grinning teeth of *Ivory* boldly displayed on each shoulder pad. Though he was no more than thirty-five, his pale face was drawn. He'd not been planetside for quite some time—every bit of color had leached from his face. "Permission to come aboard, Steel Captain?"

"Welcome aboard, Ivory Captain," Adelita said. Her smile was genuine. Tal was a true friend, not simply a colleague. "Walk with me." She led him away from other crew, following the green stripe aft.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Tal stopped. “How could this happen?”

“The Calpurnians guessed the jump coordinates,” Adelita said. “They must have caught them at the transition. I don’t see how else.”

“But how would they know that? It’s constantly shifting.” Tal looked harried. “It doesn’t look like *Bone* got a shot off. We found missile debris from *Horn* in a couple of places.”

“*Horn* probably took out that pinnacle,” Adelita said. “But why they didn’t pick up our survivor...?”

“No Calpurnians in ship suits, no Calpurnian pods.” Tal sighed. “They picked up their own wounded and dead before they jumped. So if they left our survivor—”

“Hopefully it’s someone from *Horn* who can tell us what happened,” Adelita finished. “Two full ships and all their crew...”

“Don’t say it,” Tal said.

“I must. I fear they intend to retake Eresh.”

“We’ve been little enough trouble to them lately,” Tal pointed out.

“We are always trouble to them.”

Adelita’s communicator chimed. “Captain, the survivor is aboard and in Life Services.”

“Calpurnian or ours?”

The medic’s voice sounded perplexed. “Neither. She’s Tainted.”

Tal’s eyebrows rose. “Why would a Tainted be on a Calpurnian pinnacle?”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Adelita said, striding toward Life Services.



She dreamed, and in her dreams there were ships. They voyaged far in interstellar space, far between the warm ionized pools of suns. Beyond heliopause there was the Void.

Yet they danced it bravely, these children in their generation ships, fragile shells holding life within. She was drawn by their joy. She sang to them. Surely such small creatures should not venture into the deep darkness alone!

They answered her. The dreamers in interface heard her, Navigators who followed their course, feeling the flow of electrons down the hulls of the great ships. Artists painted her in pixels and light, the Lady to guide our course, the Lady of the Void with her gown of spangled night and a newborn star in her uplifted hand.

She answered them. So brave, so small, so beautiful in their loving courage. Here were brighter streams. Dreamers felt them, the currents of distant suns. The First Captains were dead. Three generations had passed. She led them to Agni, cold and volcanic, but capable of supporting life at the margin of their needs. They debated then, ships locked in orbit while they explored. Some stayed, unwilling to try the great dark again, or perhaps in love with Agni's fire and ice.

The others put themselves in her hands, pouring wine like blood into the void, its icy crystals sacrifice to her, and with a vast, swelling music set forth again.

She knew better now what they needed: Menaechmi with its twin suns, a planet with vast oceans and desert continents. Some stayed, planting gardens along the shores, singing of the Lord of the Dance and his lover, the Lady of the Void.

Onward still into the night, but the pools were closer together now, rich Inanna, gentle Calpurnia, tide-locked Morrigan, sea-kissed Lono—nine worlds for her children. She sang to them, and they sang to her, dancing her praises as each set of golden solar wings unfolded, at each setting-forth....



“She’s crying in her sleep.”

Bister stirred. There was a voice, a dampness on her cheek. A man’s voice, not the one she had been hearing. Not the voice that filled her dreams. Bister opened her eyes.

Three people bent over her, one in the ubiquitous green of Life Services. The man who had spoken bent closer. "Can you hear me?" His fair hair was cut short for a helmet and his shipsuit was brown, a badge of grinning teeth on the pauldrons.

Bister nodded. She could move her head. That was a good sign.

The third person was a woman perhaps a decade Bister's junior, tall and dark, her eyes enhanced with cosmetics, a contrast with her severe expression and black shipsuit. "Can you tell us who you are and what happened?"

Bister moistened her lips. "I don't know," she whispered. "Where am I?"

"She's lucid," the medic said. "That's a good sign that there's no lasting brain damage from the hypoxia. Our scans suggested little physical damage, but it's hard to tell what the impact has been until they regain consciousness."

"You are in the Life Center aboard *Steel Nine*," the woman replied. She came around to Bister's side. "You are safe aboard ship. There is nothing to fear."

"Aboard ship..." There had been the void, the endless bone-eating cold sinking into her, all other comm traffic ceasing gradually, one by one.

"*Ivory Three* and *Steel Nine* arrived at the site of the battle," the man said. "We picked you up."

"In a suit..." She had been in a suit, tumbling slowly in the dark.

"Yes," the woman said. "I am the Steel Captain. You are safe aboard my ship. Our medics have been treating you."

"I don't remember."

"You were unconscious when you were brought aboard," the medic said. The medic looked at the wall screens approvingly. "But you seem to be in surprisingly good shape, considering."

Bister lifted her head. She could see the medical pod around her, a white sheet pulled up just below her arms to cover her body,

the tattoos on her shoulders bared. “My things...”

“Your clothing and effects are in the locker there,” the medic said. “But don’t get up just yet. I want to run another electrolyte scan.”

“Can you tell us what happened?” the man asked. “What ship were you aboard?”

Eresh. They were from Eresh. Her thoughts were working so slowly. But then she had been hypoxic. “Not one of yours,” she said.

“The Calpurnian pinnace?” he asked.

Bister nodded. “The *Carulin*. I was a prisoner.” That part was clear. She remembered being taken aboard and why.

“You are from Inanna.” That was the Steel Captain again. “Why were you a prisoner of the Calpurnian Navy?”

“I was arrested on the Adelpha Rim,” Bister said reluctantly.

“Smuggling.” The Steel Captain’s voice was flat.

“It’s illegal for a Tainted to be off Inanna,” the man said. “Come on. Just being there was enough of a reason to be arrested.” He looked at Bister with a diffident smile that women probably found charming. “I’m Tal Robber, the Ivory Captain. And you are?” He waited for a name.

“Bister.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Bister. So you were a prisoner on the Calpurnian pinnace and then what?”

Obviously he was going to play good guy to the Steel Captain’s bad guy. Bister sat up cautiously, keeping the sheet pulled up. “We were diverted. Different orders. I don’t know what. They don’t tell prisoners why the ship is going where it’s going. We were just told to strap down for the jump.” Bister thought back. “It wasn’t a long jump. Maybe seven or eight minutes. When we came out we just sat there for a long time. Hours. And then suddenly we went to general quarters and battle stations. I didn’t even know who we were fighting. You, I suppose.”

The Steel Captain and the Ivory Captain exchanged a look. "You're right," the Ivory Captain said. "They knew the jump coordinates and were waiting."

"They took out two Name Ships," the Steel Captain said. "Nearly four hundred people. One of our ships didn't get a shot off. And to attack without warning...."

"I don't know if there was a warning. I couldn't see any of the ship's business," Bister said.

"There wasn't," the Ivory Captain said. "It doesn't look like *Bone* even went to battle stations. They must have fired the moment our ships came out of jump."

"Somebody fought back." Bister felt like she needed to say it, like it was some odd comfort. "I felt the pinnacle take a hit and the power flickered. Then the power shut down." Alone in the dark, locked in a cell, the sound of the ventilation systems ceasing.... She took a deep breath. "But with the power off I forced the cell door. There was emergency lighting in the corridor. We were obviously breached. I could feel the wind." Wind on a spaceship was the worst possible nightmare. "I went aft because that's where the lock was, so I thought that's probably where the suits were." The Steel Captain nodded. Her face was grim as though she were filling in all the things Bister didn't say.

There had been a young man with a coolant burn on his face. He'd tried to stop her. Those moments in the flickering dark, his shouted words being torn away by the hardening wind, chest to chest, heart to heart like lovers as they struggled. And then the lambent flash as she got the energy flail from his belt, its tendrils against his ruined face.... She'd pushed him and run. The wind took his screams, the wind at her back blowing her aft toward the airlock. She slammed the first set of doors. There were three suits in their chargers. She got in one but stayed plugged in, doors sealed, suit lapping oxygen from still unruptured systems. How long? Minutes? Maybe an hour?

“You got into a suit and got out,” the Steel Captain said. Bister nodded. “There were other survivors?”

“Yes.” Kicking off from the pinnacle’s lock, its systems exhausted, on the suit’s power alone, turning and drifting in the darkness amid a sea of floating debris.... “The Calpurnian ships were picking up survivors.” Black forms almost invisible except where they eclipsed the distant stars, the comm shouts of the others loud in the void, the ships swam through the debris field. “I didn’t have a Calpurnian transponder,” Bister said. “They didn’t pick up anyone without them.”

The Ivory Captain ducked his head. “They left our people.”

“Yes.” Bister’s voice sounded harsh even to her. “They deliberately left anyone without a Calpurnian transponder. They even picked up their dead. But they left us.” Suits clutching at the drone lines as they pulled them in, lines slipping through their fingers as the great ships cruised silently through the night, as though they didn’t hear the curses and pleas. “Did you get them? Did you pick them up?”

The Ivory Captain and the Steel Captain exchanged a look again, but it was she who spoke. “You were the sole survivor.”

“What?”

“It was twenty-four hours before we arrived at the jump point. There were no life signs besides yours,” the Steel Captain said.

“That’s...” Bister could think of no words.

“We don’t know how you survived.” The Steel Captain shook her head. “Perhaps you remained attached to the pinnacle’s systems longer than you thought.”

“No.” She shook her head. “It can’t have been two hours. I don’t think it can be.”

“Then what other explanation is there?” the Ivory Captain said. “A regular suit, even one that was full and topped up when you put it on, wouldn’t last more than sixteen hours at most. Certainly not an entire day. You should have died long before we arrived.”

“As the others did.” One by one, the comm voices ceased. One by one, until she was alone in the void, drifting in and out of consciousness....

“As the others did,” the Steel Captain said starkly.

Here. Now. “What are you going to do with me?”

“You’ve committed no crimes in our jurisdiction,” the Ivory Captain said. There was that disarming expression again, even if it seemed a bit forced. “And frankly I don’t care what the Calpurnians wanted you for.”

“We are bound for Eresh,” the Steel Captain said. “You are our guest, not our prisoner. I hope that when we get there you will tell the Council what happened since you are the only witness. And then you are free to return to Inanna or wherever you choose.”

“Thank you,” Bister said, breathing an inward sigh of relief. It could be much worse. “I will of course be delighted to testify as to what happened. And I appreciate your aid and hospitality.”

“You need to stay in the Life Center for at least another four hours,” the medic said. “Preferably more. I want to be sure you have no organ damage.”

“I’d be a fool to refuse Eresh’s life treatment.” Bister lay back down in the medical pod.

The Ivory Captain looked at the Steel Captain. “I’d better get back to my ship. And prepare some things to say. They’re bringing remains aboard.”

For a moment the Steel Captain’s face was still. “Yes, Tal,” she said quietly. “That’s best. We’ll coordinate the jump times. Let me know when you’re done.”

“Of course.”

Bister rubbed her arms with her hands, watching them. “If you’re cold I can get you a blanket,” the medic said. They had a reassuring smile. “You’re going to be just fine. I want to run another course of mitochondrial stimulants. You’ll be walking out of here by the time we get back to Eresh.”

“A blanket would be lovely,” Bister said. “I am tired. Would it be all right if I slept while you did the course?”

“Absolutely.” The medic tucked a warmed green blanket around her. “You’re perfectly safe.”

Bister closed her eyes. There were the comforting sounds of the medic moving around, the electronic sounds of their equipment. Beyond it, she heard indistinguishable voices in the corridor outside, probably the two Captains conferring. Warm. Sleep. And beyond that, the sounds of the ship, the low subsonics of the engines at one quarter as they moved slowly through the debris field, the whisper of ventilation systems, the faint sad pings of micrometeorites against *Steel Nine’s* skin.... How could she hear that? Bister wondered for a moment, hovering just this side of sleep, but the warmed blanket was so comfortable, so unlike the void. She slept.



Adelita Massacre only hesitated a moment before she keyed open the bridge door. Her face was calm. She stepped in. Every head swiveled to face her. The screen showed the debris field. Butcher’s big nose was red from crying. Oxa Usury had streaks of tears down his face.

“Adulterer, put me on shipwide,” the Steel Captain said, stepping up to her post. “Visual and audio both, please. Usury, calculate the soonest jump window for Eresh.”

“Captain,” Adulterer said. “You are live in three seconds, two, one.”

“Crew of *Steel Nine*, Ship’s Company all, I am sure you are aware of the attack that destroyed *Horn Four* and *Bone Seven*.” The Steel Captain’s words were measured. “It is my duty to inform you that we know with certainty that the attack was carried out by the Calpurnian Navy, and that the state of conflict which has waxed and

waned between us has now escalated to open war. We are certain of this due to the eyewitness testimony of the attack's sole survivor, now aboard *Steel Nine*. Sadly, the survivor is not one of our Company, and so I must dash the hopes of all who held out faith that it was someone in particular." She paused for a moment. "The survivor is, however, one of our allies rather than a Calpurnian, and is willingly cooperating to help us get a fuller picture of what transpired. What is certain is that we must count both ships lost with all hands."

Adelita glanced around her bridge. Solemn faces, but no more tears. No curses. They were holding together, something one could not always count on. *It is not anyone you wanted it to be*, she thought. *It is not any of your friends, your lovers, your kin. You are hearing the cruelest thing I can say.*

"As soon as we have recovered what remains we can, we are jumping for Eresh at the first opportunity. We will mourn the lives of our *Horn* and *Bone* siblings when we have left the field of battle. In the interim, I know that we shall act with the strength and fortitude that *Steel* is known for." She nodded sharply, and Adulterer cut the comm. Adelita took a deep breath. "Usury, give me an estimate as soon as possible."

"Captain."

Adelita sat down on the end of her couch and pulled the swinging control arm to her. Usury would send her the options, and until then she would check the rest of the systems. She did not look up. They did not need her to watch them. They needed to see her going about her work, and they would go about theirs.

It was a good five minutes before Usury sent her three options, and she opened the external comm to send them to Tal without comment. One was too soon. She doubted they'd be ready in eleven minutes. The second, forty-three minutes out, was most likely, and Tal would probably come to the same conclusion quickly. Technically each ship was an independent entity. She could not appear to order Tal around without causing him to lose face.

He had only been elected Captain the year before, and that after Marisol's breakdown. He'd done a good job of rebuilding *Ivory's* crew and morale, but his authority was a great deal more tenuous than hers. She'd served aboard *Steel Seven*, then *Eight*, and now *Nine* for nearly twenty-six years, since she had reached the minimum age for service at fifteen. She'd been elected Captain four times, two before her brief break stationside and two after. Only Butcher had been in the bridge crew longer, and he'd probably stay until they had to carry him out.

Butcher cleared his throat. "Captain? How do we know the Calpurnian fleet isn't at Eresh already?"

She looked up. "We don't," Adelita said simply. "That's why we're going to jump prepared for the worst. However, it isn't likely. That's not their protocol, and the Calpurnians are very, very wedded to their protocols."

That caused a whisper of amusement to run around the bridge. Everyone knew the Calpurnians would stick to protocols, sometimes even when it made no sense. They might call the Ships' Companies pirates, but there was no denying that one-on-one Eresh's ships were much more nimble and less orthodox. It made up for the technological lag.

"We'll jump at battle stations and we'll choose a run-in point that puts Inanna between us and Eresh so that we have time to see what's going on, and to deploy and integrate into whatever situation awaits us. Remember, *Silk Five* and *Salt Seven* are insystem. They're not going to just surrender. If we get there and they're engaged, we'll support them."

Butcher nodded. Behind him, she saw Distribute nodding at her post. Distribute was the youngest of the bridge crew.

"*Ash Five* may be there too," Adulterer said. "They may already be in."

"So we may have as many as five Name Ships. That's quite a fleet." Adelita smiled with more confidence than she felt. They

wouldn't be outnumbered by more than two to one. "So we can handle it if the Calpurnians are there. But I don't expect them to be."

The comm binged. "Steel Captain," Tal's voice said formally, "Would you care to coordinate our jumps for the second jump window?"

"It would be my pleasure, Ivory Captain," Adelita said. "If you would care to jump first, we will follow you—" she glanced down at her screen "—the recommended seventy seconds later."

"Acknowledged and agreed," he replied.

"Butcher, sound the first chime at fifteen minutes until jump," Adelita said. "And the second at three minutes."

"Yes, Captain."

"Captain, we have a ping from *Bone's* logbox," Usury said.

"Close enough to recover," Adelita said. "Bring it aboard. And be wary of debris." And mines, she thought, though *Ivory* had been wading through the debris field without any hint of ambush. She was more worried about accidentally hitting unexploded munitions from *Bone* than a Calpurnian mine.

"I'll put the docking drones out to clear a path," Usury said.

"Good plan."

It took most of the time before the jump to recover the logbox. They maneuvered it aboard just as the chime sounded. For a moment Adelita considered waiting for the third jump window, but thought better of it. It was nearly a full hour later. If there was any chance the Calpurnian fleet was at Eresh, that was time they didn't have.

"Adulterer," Adelita said. He opened the comm. "*Steel Nine*, we will jump in fifteen minutes. At your stations, everyone." She glanced around the bridge. "Secure for jump."

Oxa Usury was putting bowl and drinking flask into the compartment by his station. Adelita checked her own for stray objects. Nothing. She hadn't eaten anything on the watch today.

No one had except Usury. Well, who felt like it? By the time the second chime sounded she had folded her couch back from the sitting position to reclining at seventy degrees to the floor. With practiced hands, she fastened the straps, first the shoulder belts and the sternum pad where they crossed, each buckling at her waist on the opposite side, then the lower belts that started at her waist and fastened at opposite sides of her lower thighs. Lastly, she secured the neck piece that cradled her head and prevented the kind of spine injuries that were the most common mishap in jump. Reaching up, she pulled down the heads-up display and swung the control arm so that her right arm rested comfortably along it, controls beneath her fingers.

“Captain, we are secured for jump,” Usury said.

“Adulterer, you may engage when ready,” Adelita said as the third chime sounded. There was the sudden sensation of pressure against her chest, the rumble of the engines beneath her, a powerful purr rising to a roar with the enormous energy required to accelerate into the gravitational slingshot for subspace travel. “The clock is running,” Adelita said.

Light flared behind her eyes and she closed them, the momentary pressure on her eyes making it seem as though there were sudden flashes. There was the sudden sense of unreality, of being held, pinned, caught between. Jumps were always like this. This was a short one, as they were less than a light year from Eresh, only a minute of subjective time in the jump. Short jumps were preferable. While jumps lasting hours or days were theoretically possible, it was too hard on humans both mentally and physically. Anything over thirty minutes was considered a long jump, grueling and painful. She’d had to make a few in her lifetime, but the Captains much preferred to make several shorter jumps rather than one long one, skipping from one jump point to another, from one convergence to another, like an insect making its way across a pond.

Adelita opened her eyes. The ship's systems would bring them out of the jump automatically at the elapsed time. Ten seconds to go. "Prepare for reversion in ten," Adelita said. "Confirm battle stations readiness."

There was a chorus of responses, sections confirming. For a moment the sensation of distortion increased, and then as abruptly as it began, it ended. There was a profound silence. The main screens flickered, then came back to life. Ahead was the familiar starfield, Inanna rising three-quarters full ahead and to the left, Eresh out of sight behind it, eclipsed by the larger world it orbited. Inanna's seas and green continents were dotted with clouds, beautiful and welcoming.

Adelita resisted asking for a scan. Butcher would be scanning as she spoke, Usury monitoring the auditory channels. "Captain, I am seeing no unusual traffic," Butcher said. Adelita's control arm screen shifted, showing a schematic of insystem traffic. With Eresh obscured, there was only the flare of a small ship rising from Inanna and what looked like a mining shuttle about its business. *Ivory Three* was off to their beam on the right.

"Captain, we are being hailed by Eresh control," Usury said.

"Put it on speaker."

"*Ivory* and *Steel*, we have you insystem," the controller said. "Welcome home."

"Control, we are inbound to Eresh," Tal Robber said from *Ivory*.

"Understood." There was a brief pause. "*Ivory*, you are cleared for Greengate. *Steel*, you are cleared for Glitter Port Two."

"Acknowledged," Adelita said. "Please give my regards to the Captains and Elders. And request that the full Council meet in session as soon as we have docked. We have urgent news."

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