

Risk and Reward

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

I write this in the custom of our Guild, as a record and as a warning, but not as advice.

It was the year the planet New Haven was opened for settlement. Some reckon it as the tenth year of the Third Age of Space, and others as the third year of the Diaspora.

I received the interruption while dealing with a matter which should have been handled by a subordinate.

The House running the New Haven immigration Lottery was contacting us for permission to send my niece and her husband notice of their acceptance.

I was surprised, but pleased -- I had not known they had applied to the Lottery. My niece was a Leader in her own right, and could have made application to be a resident Manager for our House on New Haven; we were one of the major developers, after all. But, she applied, as did many others, to the Lottery.

The Lottery was established to help populate new worlds. A new world needs skills, positions. A new world also needs genetic diversity, raw material. Those with skills, with position, can pay the price of passage, a price entitling them to go, and to return. Those who have only hope apply to the Lottery. They are evaluated, and selections made. While those so chosen pay nothing for passage, it is for them a one-way trip -- the ultimate price.

I knew my niece and her husband. They were excellent in all categories -- genetically, mentally, spiritually. She was a Leader in her own right. He was skilled as well, as a doctor, as a scientist, as an artist. By applying to the Lottery, they clearly indicated their dedication to the life ahead.

I called my niece. Her image appeared in front of me. "My Lady," she said in surprise. "How may I serve you?"

I smiled. "Your application to the Lottery has been accepted."

I watched emotions sweep over her face. Finally, she said, "Thank you, My Lady."

I nodded. "Aunt Catherine, please. Why, dear?"

She smiled. "We want to build a new world."

I nodded again. "But you are building a new world. You've helped build several." As the Leader of one of our subsidiary Houses, she ran businesses that built worlds.

She nodded, and her smile deepened. I sensed her resolve. "My Lady, Aunt Catherine, we will build *this* world with our bodies, our seed, our souls."

I was pleased with her response -- she said much, in few words. "I understand. You have my blessing."

She bowed. I could feel her pride. "Thank you, My Lady."

"Allow us to send the announcement?" I asked her.

"Of course, My Lady."

We signed off. I knew my assistants would be preparing the news release even now. This was an important story, the Leader of a House deciding to emigrate, especially through the Lottery. Our people would position it well.

I returned to my other tasks, but I sensed something. I had the sense a Leader has when a critical decision approaches. I told my staff I would review the release personally.

Eleven hours later, I knew what that decision was. I reviewed the news release. It was good. Our systems were already in action, adapting to the change in Leadership of a subsidiary House. My niece and her husband would be valuable contributors to New Haven, representing our House, but they would also have to work hard. They were not taking a temporary assignment. They would live there, and were choosing to die there.

I added a sentence to the end of the release. I called David, my personal assistant, and asked him to join me in my office.

He hurried in.

"Were you sleeping, David?" I asked.

He smiled. "No, My Lady. How may I serve you?"

I shook my head. "No formalities between us. Here." I handed him the pad with the revised release. He read it over. He gasped when read the line I had obviously added.

“My Lady! Catherine!” He looked up to me. He paused and shook his head; he sighed. “Catherine, I would advise against this, but I know I’d be wasting my breath. I know you’ve decided.”

I nodded. “What do you think will happen?”

He sighed. He hadn’t contacted others yet. “People are going to go nuts.” He shook his head. “Catherine, you counsel us to weigh risk against reward. I see nothing but risk here. What are the rewards?”

I nodded. “I believe the rewards are there. I will tell you that I sense that, strongly. I will tell you that’s all I have -- a sense, a Leader’s sense. As to risks, I’m acquainted with them. We recovered the New Caledonia, didn’t we?”

He nodded grimly.

While the Great Ships finally freed Man from the tyranny of the speed of light, the risk of travel was still there. Terror lurked where the Great Ships whispered beneath the stars. The vast majority of the time, ships departed, and ships arrived. But some times, ships departed, and never arrived. The New Caledonia was one of the first of the Great Ships to be recovered after disappearing. The consensus, among the few who had seen what was recovered, was that those who were never found were probably better off.

“What would you have me do, Catherine?”

“Advise me. Let the games begin. I’ve made my request for passage, and have it ready to send at the same time.”

He raised an eyebrow, smiling, and nodded slightly.

I pushed the links. “It is done; they are sent,” I told him. “Will you join me for a meal?”

He smiled, and bowed, “Yes, Catherine, of course.”

At the bottom of the release, a single sentence stated that Lady Catherine, Leader and Head of the Great House of the Southern Cross, had decided to take an Adventure, and accompany the members of her family to New Haven, and then return.

We walked to one of my favorite observation points to enjoy our meal. David did very well, conversing, brushing against me occasionally, distracting me. I almost laughed a number of times. The stated rule of the House is that I do not monitor communications during personal meals and private times, and am not to be interrupted except for dire emergencies. I knew David was communicating with others, at the same time he was being my advisor and consort. What he didn’t know was that I was also monitoring -- I was curious to know how our news was unfolding.

He was feeding me a piece of fruit, cool, succulent and juicy. One hand offered me the fruit, while his other moved softly against my side. The fruit quavered a bit as it neared my mouth; his hand on my side hesitated momentarily.

I accepted the fruit and put my arms around him, holding him to me. “Oh David, I’m sorry to torment you so. I’ve been monitoring. That must have been a good one. What was it?”

He sighed in my arms. Yes he is trained, but after these years, his devotion is real. He sat up again, and kissed my hands.

“Catherine, I don’t want to be apart from you. Transit House has your application. They wish to meet with you, at your convenience.”

I raised an eyebrow. He’d said “meet,” rather than “talk,” implying physical presence. “Very well, where and when?” I asked.

He paused briefly, communicating. “At your convenience, My Lady,” he replied, dropping back into formal mode.

I squeezed him gently. “I will go to them, now. You will accompany me.”

“My Lady! Security!” he cried.

I shook my head. “David, I will be placing myself in their hands. If there is to be larceny afoot, let us find out about it now. I do not see any in my future.”

He paused, then nodded. “Done and agreed, My Lady. We should go. They ...” He paused for a moment, his eyes flicking about as he drew others into the game. “They are requesting a Waiver from you. We are negotiating.”

I nodded. That was to be expected. I picked up a piece of fruit and offered it to him, moving my other hand between his shoulders, supporting him. He smiled, but I could tell he was torn between duties.

“Let us finish this meal in peace,” I suggested.

He closed his eyes with a smile and let me feed him.

Our staff met us outside the observation area, and dressed us for the meeting with Transit House. We dress simply. We are one of the Great Houses, and have no need of lavish ornamentation.

As we were cleaned and dressed, I received a flash link from my head of Security, questioning the trip, and strongly suggesting postponing for a day, or meeting in one of our facilities, where my personal security could be better assured. I flashed him back, telling him I

was going, and repeating what I am sure he heard me tell David -- I would be putting my life in their hands on this journey. I also reiterated my conclusion as a Leader was that I was not at risk.

And that is what makes a Leader, is it not? Making decisions based on imperfect data, partially piercing the veil and seeing, even dimly, into the future? Do we see the future? Or do we, through an act of Will, make it so, *make* the future conform to our vision? That is the task we are bred for, trained for, live for. And even then, I knew that while the Risk in this Adventure was great, the Reward was even greater. I had no idea what they would be, but I knew with certainty both were there.

As we walked to the launch deck to pick up our shuttle, I flashed for an update.

Commentators were expecting a succession battle for my position, tacitly assuming I'd never return. Yet our share prices were up. I was very pleased to see one reference to us as the "Noble House of the Southern Cross."

On the legal front, the negotiations over the Transportation Waiver were going fast and furious. Transit House could not easily refuse my application. Not surprisingly though, they were terrified, and wanted to be free and clear of any liability involved in transporting me to New Haven and back. Our counsel respectfully disagreed, wanting them liable for anything and everything. I expected by the time we reached our destination, much would be agreed, leaving the difficult issues for me.

"How long?" I asked David as our shuttle lifted smoothly from the deck.

He was deep in thought, involved in multiple negotiations. He looked at me and said, "Apologies, My Lady. Approximately half an hour."

I smiled and pulled him over to me, holding him in my arms. He nestled in and sighed. I smiled, knowing that while his body was relaxing, his mind was very much at work.

My mind was at work as well. I requested monitoring, quietly, of those who would seek my position as Leader and Head of our Great House. I would learn much about my family in these coming days.

Oh, David, what shall I do with you? I can't take you with me. I understood that -- it had been part of my decision, that this was my Adventure alone. Yet you've given me so much of your life, and you would gladly give your life for me.

The inkling of a plan formed. I knew that when the time came, I would decide, and decide well. Our House does not forget our friends, those who have served so well.

David stirred in my arms. I squeezed him once more. He sighed and moaned a little, then lifted his head. "We arrive, My Lady."

I barely felt us touch down.

“Secured. My Lady?” David stood and helped me to my feet. I embraced him once more, then let him fuss over my clothing. The shuttle’s outer door opened. The door was flanked on either side by our pilot and one of our security people. An honor guard from Transit House awaited.

We stepped out and were greeted. Our guide bade us follow.

“One moment,” I requested. I turned to my pilot and said, “Thank you for a pleasant flight. Please wait for us.”

The young pilot blushed. She bowed and said, “Thank you, My Lady!”

I bowed to our security person. “Thank you for your concern.” He bowed and smiled.

I turned and we followed our guide into the House.

That’s something others don’t understand. A leader of a minor House once asked me, in some disgust, “Do you thank the walkway under your feet?” I smiled and told him, “Yes, for it gives its all to carry me.” He didn’t understand. Thanking people costs so little, requiring a few seconds at most, and develops such loyalty.

I knew we were being scanned as we walked along the corridor. I didn’t mind.

Our guide stood aside at a door. The door was old, and made of wood, a natural plant fiber. It had the crest of Transit House upon it. Theirs is also an old House.

I nodded to our guide as she opened the door. “Thank you, my dear.” She smiled and bowed as we stepped in.

The room was old, yet accommodated the modern necessities. Three people greeted us. One man was dressed in the formal robes and miter of the Legal Guild. The other two were more of a surprise, wearing Ship’s uniforms. I recognized their insignia, but was also informed by my link that the woman was the First Officer, and the man was the Doctor.

First Officer thanked us for our kindness and presence, and bade us sit around the table. I touched its surface -- another wood product. I enjoy the presence of wood. In spite of its great expense, it was making a resurgence.

We passed the usual pleasantries, accepting light beverages. When the tray was brought in, First Officer scanned them, then passed them to us. David brought out his scanner, but I held his hand, nodding to the others. I picked up my cup and took a sip as a gesture of trust. I could envision my people monitoring this, screaming, jumping up and down at the risk I was taking.

I set my cup down. “Well, where should we begin?” I asked them.

Legal started out. "My Lady, we thank you for your kindness, the offer of your custom, and above all for your trust. We have a small matter we should resolve before you speak with my colleagues."

Ah -- the small matter of the Waiver. "I understand, Sir." I looked to David. "Where do we stand?" I asked him.

He handed me a tablet, which displayed the state of affairs. I looked it over, flicking through the text. Some compromises had been reached. There were large gaps between us still, much red text. I sighed. This could go on for years, if allowed. I laughed a little. It was their role, after all.

And mine was to be a Leader, and to cut through such knots.

I smiled to David. He turned pale, recognizing that particular smile. I saw his eyes flick. Good, he'd warned the others.

I looked to Legal opposite us. "Sir, I have a suggestion for resolving these minor differences."

He smiled and nodded slightly -- minor differences indeed. "We await your wisdom, My Lady," he intoned.

It was right -- I felt it. I felt the tingle of a myriad of paths collapsing into one Path, the Path I chose. "Hear me, Lady Catherine of the Great House of the Southern Cross," I said formally. "I understand the passage to New Haven and back entails risk. I willfully accept these risks, any and all, known and unknown, and any and all consequences which may befall me. I accept these risks, and their consequences, and hold none responsible for them but myself."

The poor man looked as if he was about to foul his ceremonial robes. I'm sure many of my staff were doing so. It wouldn't be the first time.

I paused and smiled, then asked politely, "Is that sufficient, Sir?"

His mouth opened, but no sound came out. He closed his mouth, blinked, and then bowed his head, the forward point of his miter almost touching the table top. He raised his head, and with a look of wonder, gasped, "My Lady, that is quite sufficient!"

I laughed, and all around the table joined me.

I nodded when the laughter had faded. I stole a glance at David. He shook his head slightly, but smiled.

"Very well." I asked the Legal Guild member, "Do you have any additional concerns which we should address before I speak with your colleagues?"

He looked to his colleagues. “There is the matter of the price for passage.”

First Officer spoke. “One credit.” Legal gasped -- standard contract rates were on the order of ten million credits per kilogram.

I nodded. “Accepted.”

This was getting to be too much for Legal. He took a deep breath, attempting to settle himself. He blinked and shook his head. He looked to his colleagues, then to us. “My Lady, Sirs, and Doctor, my business here is at an end.”

I smiled and nodded. “Thank you for your counsel and advice. You have served Transit House well.”

He stood and bowed, and left the room. We could hear him chuckling softly as he went through the door.

“Well?” I asked the remaining two.

First Officer chuckled. “My Lady, this is indeed an honor. I am amazed.”

Doctor added, “Yes, My Lady. It is a privilege.”

“Thank you, Sir and Doctor. I am looking forward to the journey.” Custom suggests that a ship’s First Officer be addressed as “Sir,” even when female.

First Officer spoke. “My Lady, we understand you have traveled on a Ship before, made jumps before?”

I nodded. I was happy to see they were interested in supplementing information from reports with firsthand information.

“Yes, twice, on small Ships, single crew. A short hop to Mars, one jump each way, and about six months ago, a visit to Ganymede, also one jump each way.”

They exchanged glances. Doctor spoke. “My Lady, our records only show one voyage. Both these were uneventful?”

I smiled. “I’m pleased we are able to keep some things in confidence,” I told them. The trip to Ganymede had been for a very delicate negotiation. “I was fully conscious during all the trips, and found the experience interesting.”

Doctor nodded. I’d anticipated his line of questioning.

“So, My Lady, you would prefer to take this voyage in the same way?” he asked.

Most travelers spent the time aboard ship drugged. Reportedly it made the trip very pleasant. Trinaril, the drug of choice, rendered people very manipulable as well.

“I would prefer that. I am not an expert in this matter, however, and would appreciate your recommendation. If you see medication as likely, we would need time to prepare.”

They nodded. As was common with many holding important office, my body had been altered to render certain common drugs, and many uncommon drugs, ineffective. It would be a simple matter, I was told, to reverse this and allow my system to respond to trinaril.

First Officer asked, “My Lady, do you recall if your jumps to Ganymede were direct, or were they through the well?”

I smiled. “Through the well” referred to making a jump from one side of a star to the other, passing under its gravity well. “Those jumps were through the well, passing under our Sun. Our captain was skilled,” I told them. Such jumps are not favored -- many would choose to make two jumps, or even three, rather than take the direct jump through the well.

Officer and Doctor conferred, eye to eye.

“My Lady,” Doctor continued, placing a crown on the table. “We would like your permission to perform a test. Are you familiar with this instrument?” He held up the crown. The metal band had six oval objects on it, each opal-like, white with fire, almost alive. My own people still debated. Were they alive? They made guiding, piloting, driving the Ships possible.

“Yes, I am familiar with polycrystals. Most likely those were made by one of our Houses. My people still debate whether or not they are alive. Do you have an opinion?”

First Officer gave me quite a smile, shaking her head slowly. “There are many Mysteries in the Void, My Lady, and that is one of them.” She spoke with strong emotion, as if revealing one of the great secrets to the universe.

I had a sudden, fleeting image of her, floating in a dark space, her head adorned with such a crown, radiating fire, a fire that transcended space, her head arched back, the look on her face one of As I looked into her eyes, I shared her Mystery.

Doctor glanced at us. “My Lady, may I approach?” he asked.

“Doctor, I give you permission to do as you see fit,” I told him. I glanced to David. I knew I was giving them permission to look into my mind.

Doctor approached. “My Lady, long jumps are quite different from short ones, although jumping through the well is close. Some people react differently to long jumps. We are concerned for your well-being aboard our Ship. May I?”

He was holding the crown above my head. While one of our Houses produces the vast majority of polycrystal material, I'd never experienced their contact first hand. "You may proceed, Doctor."

The crown was placed on my head. I felt coolness and warmth both from the crystals. I closed my eyes momentarily, sensing them better.

"My Lady, are you all right?" Doctor asked with concern.

I opened my eyes and smiled. "Yes, Doctor, thank you. It is an interesting sensation. They ... they are most curious."

Doctor sat by his colleague. First Officer asked, "You can sense them, My Lady?"

I nodded, feeling for them a little more. "Yes, to a degree. Very curious."

"May we proceed?" Doctor inquired.

I nodded.

"Very well," he said. "You may experience a brief flash of sensation..."

Oh! A flash indeed! It was brief, so brief, but I had sensations of ... of what?

Doctor and First Officer looked at the tablet between them. Curious looks filled their faces, and First Officer smiled. More silent conversation took place.

First Officer rose, and retrieved the crown, asking permission before touching me. She sat down.

"My Lady," she said, "We look forward to having you aboard our Ship. Your presence will honor us."

"Then the results of the test are satisfactory?" I asked.

Curious -- they exchanged glances again, before Doctor spoke. "Yes, My Lady, quite."

"I look forward to the voyage. I will not be a bother to you," I told them.

We moved on to speak of the voyage, the Great Ship, and my accommodations on board. The voyage would take from ten to thirty jumps, over a period of two to five days. The distance in light-years was immense.

Now the pod ships of the past, while Man was under the tyranny of the speed of light, were large and purpose-built. They had to be, to survive centuries-long transits between near

stars. The crew operated in a drugged twilight, their passengers suspended in cold sleep, encased in hardened pods.

That ended with the Great Ships. Their ship, the Great White House, was fashioned after the White House, the famed historical residence of the Leader of the ancient North American Syndicate, home to ancient heroes, villains, and fools, names from early history such as Lincoln, Kennedy, Nixon, Clinton, Moore.

They flashed a holo of their Ship before us. It was a stately Ship. The main building was surrounded by varied grounds, with large expanses of lawn, and even areas of pleasure gardens. We toured the interior briefly, with its staterooms, and large halls for holding most of the passengers -- eighty to ninety percent would travel in a drugged state, requiring very little attention. We passed to the area of the Grand Staterooms. I was more interested in seeing the operating areas of the Ship, which I knew to be underground -- the massive engines, the Source driving it all.

I interrupted our tour. "If I sleep at all on the journey, I will sleep outside, under the stars," I told them. I knew others had passed similar journeys in this manner. Doctor looked surprised. I thought First Officer was going to cry. They glanced at each other again.

After a moment, and undoubtedly after silent consultation with many others, First Officer looked to me. Her look was an interesting one. "My Lady," she said, softly at first, then clearing her throat some and continuing stronger, "We will be honored by your presence. We lift in seventeen days. Do you have other questions?"

I reached over and held David's hand. I knew he, and the others, were clamoring, bursting, overflowing, with questions.

"Not at this time, Sir and Doctor. You have much to do before we lift. Thank you for your time."

They smiled and nodded. "Thank you, My Lady. This has been a memorable meeting!" First Officer said. We laughed softly.

We stood. They bowed to us, and we to them. "In seventeen days, then," I told them. I exited the room, with David following.

He was quiet until we got into the shuttle and lifted off.

"What was that test? What happened? What was going on between them? My Lady, I want Doctor O'Connor to examine you most thoroughly when we return to the House. I insist!"

I held his hand. "David, it's all right. I don't know what was going on between them. Possibly they're lovers. The test? It was so brief! Yet it almost felt like a jump. David, everything will be fine. This is something I know."

That didn't placate him. That didn't placate any of them. Yet, they knew it would have to do. I subjected myself to their tests, which revealed nothing. I had them readjust my system so trinaril would be effective, if needed. They objected, but did it anyway.

Of the remaining time, I'll say little, save that it brought out the best and the worst in some of the House, and I took the actions needed. My responsibility is not only to the House, but more importantly, to the people comprising it.

I communicated with my niece almost daily. Eight days prior to lift, she was excited, and showed me her boarding pass, which had just arrived. When I had not received one two days later, I sent a polite inquiry to Transit House.

Three hours later, I heard a knock on my door. David was elsewhere for me, handling delicate House matters. The staff knows I prefer the old approaches. "Come in," I called.

A young aide entered, bowing profusely. He wasn't used to direct contact with me.

"Well?" I asked. I expect he'd still be bowing if I hadn't prodded him.

Eyes down, he said, "My Lady, a woman is here to see you! Actually here! From Transit House, My Lady!"

"Look at me, Victor, when you speak to me. Who is she?"

He looked up, timid. "First Officer Delaney, of the Great Ship White House, My Lady."

I nodded. "Please show her in. Here. Now."

He bowed and scraped his way backing out the door. "Yes, My Lady. Right away!"

I didn't know if I was pleased or displeased at his manner. I was certainly displeased at what happened half an hour later.

To another knock on the door, I stood to receive my guest, and said, "Come in."

The door opened, and First Officer entered, accompanied by one of our security people. She was wearing a guest robe. She didn't look too happy. I knew what had happened -- our security people had stripped her, screened her, undoubtedly quite extensively.

"Where is this Officer's uniform?" I shouted out. "Don't you know how to show respect for others?"

"My Lady," the security man started, "We thought ..."

"You didn't think," I interrupted. "David would never have let such an unfortunate incident occur. Where is her uniform?"

“I...” he started.

“You nothing!” I told him. “Go get her uniform, and anything else she may have brought with her, and bring it to my private quarters. Now! Go!”

He opened his mouth, but my gaze and pointed finger gave him the only explanation he was going to get, unless he received additional information from my foot. He skittered out.

I walked over and took her hand. “Sir and Officer, I apologize for the actions of my staff. Please, come with me.”

I took her by the arm and led her down the hall to my private quarters. Staff members cleared out of the way, seeing the look on my face.

We sat, and as I apologized once again, a knock sounded on the door. I answered it, to see the security man and one of my private staff, with the Officer’s uniform and a small package wrapped with a ribbon. It looked to be wrapped in actual paper! I took them and dismissed my staff with a gaze, and not a pleased one.

I placed her uniform and the package on my sleeping pad. I turned to her. “Sir and Officer, again I beg your forgiveness. Please return to your uniform, and make whatever use you wish of what I have to offer.” I waved my hand about my quarters. “I will be waiting outside the door for you.” I bowed, and stepped to the door. I stood outside, closing the door.

My head of security came running up the hallway, followed by two other officers. “My Lady!” he cried, “You’ve left an outsider alone in your personal quarters?”

I shook my head. They needed to learn. “I left in my quarters the First Officer of the Ship I will be traveling on. You did her, her Ship, and her entire Guild, a great disservice, and disappointed me greatly.”

He bowed his head. He reached for the emblem on his chest, starting to remove it. I stepped forward and placed my hand over his.

“You will not leave my service. You did this to protect me. I understand that. I do not expect you to leave my service, and I do not expect others to be disciplined. I expect you to learn. This is an unusual situation. Do you understand?”

He looked up. I could see tears in his eyes. “Yes, My Lady. May I remain to apologize to our guest?”

I smiled. “Thank you Kevin, you may.”

He turned to two others, carrying equipment, and said, “Dismissed.” They scattered quickly. I had no doubt they would return discreetly later, and sweep my quarters most thoroughly.

Soon, the door opened. First Officer stepped out, once again in her gray uniform. She had brushed out her hair. She looked to the security officer standing in front of her.

He went down on one knee, bowing his head. “Sir and Officer,” he said, “I am Head of Security for this House. Please accept my humble apologies for the manner in which you have been treated. We beg your forgiveness.”

To her credit, First Officer put a hand on his shoulder. “Rise, please. I accept your apology. I have received worse treatment from my own Guild.”

He rose, and bowed. “Sir and Officer, I thank you. My Lady?”

I nodded. He bowed once again, and left.

“Again, I’m so sorry. Do you have time to join me for refreshment?” I asked.

She smiled. “Yes, My Lady, I do.”

“I would prefer if you addressed me as Catherine. Once aboard your Ship, I will be but another passenger.”

She smiled. “I understand, My Lady. When we are aboard my Ship, I will.”

I laughed. She understood the forms well. I took her arm in mine and led her down the hall. “Refreshment for two,” I called out.

We sat in my private study. It’s a small area, comfortably furnished. As I sat down, I looked around, and somehow knew....

With a knock on the door, our refreshment arrived. The tray was placed on the table between us, the tea steeping. My aide made a move to pour, and I told her, “I will take care of that. Thank you.” She nodded and left.

I sighed and picked up the teapot, an antique thousands of years old. One of my vices, that. I poured two cups, raised mine, and took a sip. She raised hers and did likewise. I smiled - at least we still had trust.

“I’m forgiven, then?” I asked.

She laughed. “My Lady, yes, of course.” She cast a glance out to the hallway. “I’m surprised he’s still alive,” she said softly.

I frowned, slightly. “That is not the way this House operates.”

She dropped her eyes. “Now I must beg your forgiveness, My Lady. I wish more Houses operated as yours does.”

“Thank you, my dear. Please, in this room formalities are not needed,” I told her.

She looked to me, and smiled. There was a knowledge in her smile.

We spoke for a while about preparations. They were going well, with all the confusion and last minute changes one would expect.

“How long have you been First Officer?” I asked.

“Four and a half years, My Lady, Catherine, since the first of the Great Ships.”

I nodded. She was as seasoned a veteran as there could be.

“Do you expect your own Ship, some day?” I asked.

She brightened and saddened at the same time. “Yes, I will captain a Ship of my own.” Her voice was filled with emotion, and strength. “Pardon me, yes, it’s so difficult to find officers.” She paused, then took a breath. She picked up the package and handed it to me. “This is the reason for my visit.”

It was small, a little larger than my hand. It was indeed wrapped in paper, with the usual synthetic ribbon around it. I unwrapped it carefully, yet quickly, remembering birthdays as a child, many, many years ago. I looked up at my guest.

“I don’t know whether to laugh or to cry, it’s been so long since I unwrapped anything!” I told her, one woman to another, one girl to another.

Inside the wrapping, which I set aside carefully, was a box. I opened it. Inside was a folded piece of paper. Inside the piece of paper was a standard plastic transit card, embossed en holo on one side with the crest of Transit House, and on the other with an image of the Great Ship White House.

I picked up the paper. It was real paper. It had been written on, by hand, with an ink pen. This is an ancient instrument which is used by hand to leave stains on the paper in the shape of letters. The writing read, “Earth to New Haven, and Return.” It was signed by the Captain.

I held the note in my hands and let them fall to my lap. I looked to my guest, feeling the moisture in my eyes. This was such an honor. I sighed and stood up.

“Please, come with me,” I said softly. I took her hand, and took her down the hall. We took the lift to another floor, to part of the Family archives. We entered.

Here we held the history of our Family, our House, going back to when it was called Jardines, a trading house long before the First Age of Space. I led us to one particular case. It was made of real wood, and real glass. "Release!" I called out. There was no sound, no indication, but I was able to open the door of the case. I reached in and selected a coin.

I turned to my guest. "We agreed on one credit, as price of passage. Here is One Pound Sterling, which I wish you to take and deliver to your Captain, to pay for my passage. Will you do this for me?"

I placed the ancient coin in her hands. She took it, and said softly but clearly, "My Lady, I will be honored."

Seeing her curiosity, I gave her a brief tour of the room and its contents. It was hard to believe that so much, so little, had survived all this time.

Time.... I realized she had much to do. I had much to do.

"My dear, thank you for taking so much of your valuable time with me," I told her.

"My Lady!" she started out.

I shook my head, and took her arm in mine. "Where did you enter? I will show you out."

I took her through the building, sending a message that if she'd been forced to park her shuttle in an outlying area, that it better damned well be at the formal entrance when we got there. I received a reply that it would be there in three minutes. Good.

She was surprised to see her shuttle floating on the pad at the entrance. She smiled to me in amusement.

"My dear, I will see you in six days." I gave her a brief hug.

She smiled and shook her head. "My Lady, it has been an honor." She bowed and got into her shuttle. I stayed on the landing until they left.

"You gave it away!" an aide called out as I walked back to my office.

"Yes, I did. Shows it was still worth something."

I met with my senior staff, the Heads of the Houses, the day before I left. Two Heads were absent, sent to far-flung outposts to study and report. That was the price they paid for their machinations. That last night, David comforted me, and I comforted him, as best we could. He accompanied me the next morning to the Great Ship.

I told our pilot to land at the common landing area, circus though it was. I used a tone of voice insuring no further discussion. We'd gone through it before. They wanted me to accept treatment as an Honored Guest. I was going to walk in with my niece and her husband, as Lottery winners.

And that is what we did. I entered the queue with the other Lottery winners. I was wearing a simple, heavy, brown robe over a lighter orange one-piece robe underneath. Around my waist was a simple cord, with three knots on one end of the cord. I carried a small wooden bowl, and my boarding card, as my only possessions. My feet were bare. This was the way I wished to start my Adventure.

We reached the point where visitors were no longer permitted in the queue. David had been by my side. Now was the time for us to part.

It's interesting, how the great decisions come with such clarity and calm. I turned to David and pulled off my Signet ring, the symbol of my authority as Leader of the House. I put it in David's palm, closing his fingers around it. I knew I should select a successor, and I had, making my final decision at that point.

"Give this to the Lady Janet, for her to use until such time as I shall ask for its return. This is my wish. It is also my wish that she keep you as valued aide. I advise her to seek in you advice, counsel, and comfort. Thank you for your service, and your devotion, David, to our House, and to me." I leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. He turned and left without a sound. It was better for both of us that way.

"My Lady!" my niece exclaimed.

I shook my head, holding out my naked hand. How long had I worn that ring? A century and a half? It was time for someone else. "No, my dear, just your old Aunt Catherine now."

All passengers, even Honored Guests, were allowed themselves, their clothing, and twenty kilograms of personal belongings. My niece and her husband had a small bag each. Others around us were loaded down. As we moved, slowly, in the queue, others seeing how light our loads were asked, begged, and pleaded for us to carry things for them. I politely refused, as did my family.

An officer approached us, identifiable by his uniform and the crown on his head. "Please, this way," he offered. My niece held up her head and told him, "No, this is the queue, right here."

He looked at us in brief confusion. "As you wish." He bowed and departed.

I gave my niece a hug. "I am proud of you," I whispered.

As we approached the Gate to the Ship, I could see it better. The Ship seemed to be hovering, centimeters off the surrounding ground. I could feel it, feel something, something ready to leap.... The rim of the Ship was demarked by a ring of polycrystal, shimmering, alive.

The three of us entered the Gate together. We handed over our boarding passes. Our effects were weighed. We were allowed through.

On the other side of the Gate, we were taken aside quickly. “My Lady, Sir and Lady,” we were addressed, and shown to a private area. It was a small sitting place, resembling a private park. From what I’d memorized of the Ship, it was near the cargo entrance.

“One moment, and someone will be with you,” our guide said, then bowed and left.

The ship’s Doctor soon appeared, with three assistants. One took my family’s bags. “These will be placed in storage,” we were told.

Doctor said to my niece and her husband, “I have reviewed your request, and am happy to comply. Please follow my assistants. They will take care of you.”

My niece turned and gave me a hug. “Thank you My Lady, Aunt Catherine. We will see you on the other side.” They left holding each other. I could see the love they had for each other, and the excitement they shared.

I eyed the Doctor as he bade me to sit next to him. He nodded.

“They will be traveling the easy path,” he said, meaning drugged, “But with an interesting request, which we will accommodate as best we can. As for you, My Lady...”

“I thought I had an agreement with your First Officer, that once aboard your Ship, I was to be addressed as Catherine.”

He nodded and smiled. “And I am certain that is how *she* will address you, My Lady.”

I laughed. I was outflanked. “Very well, Doctor. Please, I ask that you all call me Catherine. It is the one accommodation I request.”

He nodded. “Agreed, then. Your right wrist, please.” I extended my wrist. He placed a band about it, clicking it securely, showing me the large button in it.

“Should you wish to be medicated at any time during the voyage, you need only press this button. Medication can also be initiated remotely if need be. Have you taken the necessary steps?”

I nodded. “I am told the steps have been taken, Doctor.”

“I am sure your people are more competent in these matters than I,” he said. “But now, the most important thing.” He withdrew a crown from a small bag. Its six crystals were alive, much more alive than the crystals in the crown he wore. “You must wear this at all times during the voyage. Agreed? Should you attempt to remove it once we have lifted, it will initiate medication. Understood?”

I settled it on my head, with his help. The feeling was interesting, intimate, stimulating. “I agree, Doctor. What now?”

He stood up. I stood up with him. “You may wish to avoid the Lottery entrance, but you are free to go wherever you wish aboard our Ship. I will talk with you later. There will be a warning chime before we lift. I bid you safe passage, My Lady.”

I nodded and shook his hand. “I wish us all safe passage, Doctor.”

“Thank you, My Lady. If you will excuse me.”

“Of course, Doctor.”

He walked off.

I sat again, eyes closed for a moment, studying the sensation of the crown on my head. I’d meant to contact one of our House groups and spend time with them, learning more about polycrystals and their impact on the ability to curve space-time by an act of Will. With all I had to do, I was reduced to scanning reports, most of which were far too specialized for me to completely comprehend.

Ah well, and I was unlikely to comprehend it further. I opened my eyes. I wondered if I still had links? I checked. I did indeed have links. I requested an update on Ship status. I quickly learned we had four hours thirty-seven minutes until scheduled departure. We had seventy one hundred fifty six passengers, of which sixty four were Honored Guests. Twenty one passengers had chosen to make the voyage unmedicated. The crew numbered thirty four.

I brought up a map, and was surprised at its detail. I could examine the outlines of Ship systems! There was far more detail present than in the holos we had been sent. I was surprised by how little volume the physical portion of drive systems occupied.

But with over four hours until departure, and the amount of time I’d been up without anything to eat, my needs were more immediate and visceral.

My inquiry popped a marker onto the map. Tents were set out with refreshments for Honored Guests. I stood, gathered my bowl, and set out across the soft grass.

It took a few minutes to make the walk, as I was in no hurry. The tents were set out on the other side of the Ship, near the Gate for Honored Guests.

I walked into a refreshment tent, and looked over the display. It was sumptuous. I looked over the buffet and filled my bowl.

My bowl full, I moved outside the tent and sat on the grass to eat.

I got up to get more fruit, some of the spiced meat, and a beverage. One of the staff poured me a tempting looking beverage. I smiled and said, "Thank you, my dear." I returned to my seat outside.

I was joined after a bit by a young man. "May I join you?" he asked.

"Please," I indicated with a wave of my hand.

"I am Peter, at your service," he said with a slight bow, placing his plates on the grass.

I extended a hand and shook his. "My pleasure, Peter. I am Catherine."

We talked about our journey. This was to be his second trip to New Haven. I queried his profile. He told me he was responsible for geothermal engineering. He asked if I had made many journeys before.

"No, this is my first long trip. I've been about the home system, but never outside it," I told him.

We spoke at some length. He offered to refresh my beverage; I accepted. When he returned, he sat again.

I asked, "Which path are you taking?"

He said, a bit sheepishly, "The easy path -- I've made arrangements -- shortly after we lift. And you?"

"I'd planned on staying awake."

Sitting next to him, I missed David already. As Leader of a Great House, I'm sure I could have David at my side, and on the voyage in a few minutes. No, that was not the path I'd chosen.

"You won't reconsider?" I asked. I was actually flirting with him!

He shook his head. "No, Catherine, It's too unsettling for me. Even short jumps. For me, it's the easy path."

I looked up into the sky, still blue with broken high clouds. "If I sleep at all, it will be out here under the stars," I told him.

He sighed and moved his hand closer to mine. I took his. I knew he was single, unattached, in superb health. I knew he was the Director of his project.

But for now, he was a man, and I was a woman.

“More to eat?” he asked.

“No, thank you.”

He rose and picked up his plates, and my bowl. I took the bowl back. “I’ll hold on to this, thank you.”

He returned the plates to the tent, stopping to pick up another plate left on the grass.

He returned to me. “Walk with me for a while?”

I nodded and let him help me stand.

We walked. He was looking forward to his project. I could tell he was running it, checking it, even as we walked. I sent a link to our House, suggesting we extend him, and his House, any courtesy. We stopped at a small pond, and I rinsed my bowl, drying it with my robe.

As we stood, he asked, “May I look at your bowl?”

I handed it to him. He examined it, then seemed to realize. “Is this made of ... wood?” he asked in astonishment. He handed it back gingerly.

“Yes. It has been in my family for many generations.”

“Your feet are bare!”

“Yes, they are. You are wearing shoes.”

He laughed. “Catherine, I don’t know about you...”

I laughed along with him. “Some of my friends have been saying the same.”

We had retraced my path, stopping a distance from the Lottery gate.

“Such brave people,” I said softly.

He nodded. “Yes. I envy them sometimes. Would I have the courage? I understand a Lady of one of the Great Houses actually applied through the Lottery, and was accepted. It makes a good story, anyway.”

I nodded. “Yes, I’ve heard that as well.” We turned and headed to the main house.

At one of the doors, we were greeted by a staff member, who bowed to us.

Peter turned to me. “Catherine, I must beg your leave. I must contact my House for final instructions. I’m being used as a courier as well. I may not see you before we depart. Would you share planetfall with me?”

I held his hands. “Yes, Peter. I wish you an easy journey.”

“And to you as well, Catherine. Possibly you’ll be in my dreams,” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

I was still thirsty, so I headed back to the refreshment tents. The staff were busy preparing for departure, so we “Honored Guests” were on our own. I knew how to open containers and serve myself.

I moved to a bench near a fountain. Viewing Ship plans, I observed that the fountain was used as a backup cooling system. Efficient, clever, and artistic. About a dozen people were around it, conversing, or sitting quietly.

Examining more, I found another spot, marked “Contemplation.” I walked to it, at the Rim of the Ship. It was a garden of rock and sand in the ancient Nippon style. I sat on the stone bench, looking out onto the Rim, glowing, flickering polycrystal. I focused on my breath, on the moment.

A chime sounded, and a strong male voice called out, “Lift in five minutes.”

The life and light in the polycrystals of the Rim changed. They were far more active. I closed my eyes and focused internally again. I could feel, sense, the energy, eagerness, in the polycrystals touching my head.

Another chime, and the voice said simply, “We lift.”

I opened my eyes to see us drifting away from the Earth, drifting higher and faster, with no physical sense of motion. We tilted, turning over, so that the Earth was above us, shrinking rapidly.

The sky changed from light blue to dark blue, to black as we departed. Our path took us through the rings of orbiting structures, and out past the Lagrange point where the pieces of the last of the pod ships, the Valkyrie, floated in silence, never to be completed, never to be launched.

The moon filled our view, then receded, as we moved up and out, out of the ecliptic plane. I remember as a little girl, looking up at the moon, reaching for it, and telling my father, “I want that.” I remember being told by someone that our Family was so rich we could buy and

sell entire worlds. And I remember him telling me, “Catherine, we are not owners -- we are only caretakers.” Thank you, father, for all your gifts. I know you are proud of me.

From my bench seat I looked forward again, past the rock formations, out through what I knew to be shells of energy, holding in the atmosphere that sustained our lives. Was the wavering in my vision caused by those shells, or by the moisture in my eyes? I looked out into the depths of space, filled with stars. I looked with wonder, knowing we were destined for a star whose light had not shone on our world during the recorded history of Man.

After a while, I stood. The stars above were exhilarating in their bright contrast with the depths of space. There were lights in the trees, and along the paths of the Ship. The House itself was illuminated, calling to my memory the image printed on an ancient piece of money, dating back to the times when pieces of paper were used as currency.

I set out for the house. What had the ancient one said? “A journey of a thousand Li starts with one step.”

I had taken a number of steps, walking along in the star-filled sky. I was filled with the wonder of it all. A teacher had told me, many years ago, to stand on my feet, and feel the connection I had with the Earth. For when I really stand on my feet, I am not lost.

What was I connected with now? I was in transition -- I knew that. But to what? I stopped, and felt the connection, through my legs and feet. I was connected -- to the Ship.

And as I took another step, we jumped. It was a small jump, a brief flash. Yet it swallowed me, sending me tumbling on the grass and leaving me on my back.

It had been so quick. And yet in that thin slice of time, I’d felt I’d been

I felt the energy in the crown on my head. I was swimming in it. I’d sensed it, sensed the structure underneath the stars. I was buzzing with it.

As I looked up, Saturn and its rings swung into view, filling my vision. I thought I heard cheers and applause in the distance. I could see the braided detail of the rings, and the twinkle of scoop ships harvesting tiny sips of atmosphere. Then we sped away, back out of the ecliptic again.

A week earlier, I’d managed a conversation with the solo Captain of a small Ship, the one who had taken us to Ganymede. I’d read of the science of travel, whispering beneath space on the power of Will. She told me some of the art. I knew that we’d make a number of small jumps first, both to test out systems and their readiness, and to find the proper point for a longer jump. When I’d asked her how that point was found, she smiled and asked me how I found the “right” place to sit in a room.

My body was relaxed; I sensed it approaching. We were going to jump again. It would be another short jump. Should I close my eyes, or leave them open? I closed my eyes and focused on the space inside.

I sensed his Will, and the Will of First Officer, some quality of her mind, her spirit, guiding and directing. I felt the beginning of the jump, and the middle, and the end. It was interesting -- as if jumping in a general direction, traveling a distance, and then having some flexibility on where to drop out again. Had I felt a connection between them? Yes, I had.

I sat up; I knew somehow it would be a while before we jumped again, and that would be another small jump. We would make at least one more small jump before the large ones.

As I sat up, I was startled by the brightness flickering around me. Where were those lights? I realized I was seeing the light from the crown on my head, such life and intensity! My mind went back to the vision I'd had of First Officer, with light streaming from the crown around her head.

I stood. I closed my eyes, standing as I'd been taught, turning inward to feel the connection. As I did, even through closed eyes I could see the polycrystals in my crown flare brighter, feel them connecting me to the Void.

I opened my eyes. Who was I? We are defined in part by the roles we play. What roles did I have now? I have family aboard; how are they? I queried Ship as to their location. I smiled. They were in one of the pleasure gardens? Drugged? This should be interesting. I started walking once again, bending to pick up my bowl.

I laughed to myself. If someone were to ask me how I traveled to New Haven, I could tell them I walked.

I approached the pleasure gardens from one side, off from the main entrances. I found them in an area of soft mossy grass covered mounds, with shrubs, small trees, and wonderfully aromatic flowers. A slight breeze filled the area. I had trained as an engineer once. That part of me marveled at the attention to detail, and the artistry in the execution.

I found my family, sitting, Yab-Yum style, naked and intertwined, my niece sitting impaled on her husband, their arms around each other. They were holding and kissing each other. I knew trinaril distorted many things, producing a dreamlike state. They should be enjoying themselves greatly.

As I walked along the path to one of the main entrances to the pleasure garden, I stopped in surprise. Was it? I stepped closer. It was -- Peter was sitting on a bench, eyes closed, dressed courtesan-style. Beside him was a printed note, which read, "Honored Guest -- Use me for your pleasure as you will."

That stirred me deeply. What a risk he took! I laughed softly -- and what a reward he would have -- what a reward we would both have.

Trinaril brought on a dreamlike state, in which inhibitions disappeared. So did initiative, unless put into motion by the Will of another.

I stepped to him, and raised his chin. He was handsome, and so young -- not even eighty.

“Peter, look at me,” I commanded, but softly. His eyes opened. A smile formed on his face, slowly.

“Peter, would you make love with me?” I asked.

I could see the fires building in him, evident in him before he answered, huskily, “Yes.”

I took his hand and led us to a secluded spot. It was a bowl shaped depression a few meters across, covered in the dense, soft, buoyant ground cover. Surrounding flowers scented the air.

I loosened my sash, placing it and my robes on a raised spot. I loosened his courtesan's robes -- had he brought those, or had the Ship provided them? When they were removed, I saw he was indeed ready to please me, and please me well.

I guided us down to our knees and kissed him softly. His actions were slow, but determined and gentle. He kissed well, and ran his hands across my body.

I reclined on my back. He sat beside me, gazing at me with a half-smile. “Please me,” I requested.

He moved down my body slowly, taking his time, pleasing my whole body. Oh, he was skilled. By the time his hands and mouth moved to my core, I was deliriously hungry for him. His hands and his mouth soon had me shaking and crying out, then falling back against the soft ground cover, where he started in again.

Some time during the process we jumped again, another small jump, but one which shattered something inside me, broke through a barrier. We jumped as I passed through ecstasy, and this time I felt the purpose in our jump, our direction.

We fell out the other side, and I opened my eyes to the brightness from my crown filling the space around us. His tongue touched my center, and my eyes closed once more.

I struggled up after some time, and pushed him to his back. I felt full, yet hungry. I felt tired, yet rested. I felt at ease, yet ready to

I had also learned and practiced the arts over the years, and plied them with care and feeling on my consort. I soon had him writhing at my touch, moaning and calling out.

Somehow, before I mounted him, I knew I needed to turn him so we would be facing a particular direction. How does one determine direction on a Ship floating in space?

I inflamed him, and slid onto him, taking him into me. We both cried out at the touch, the union.

I started rocking on top of him, taking us both up to that precipice. His hands gripped my waist. I spoke to him, guiding him, holding him off, building and building.

And as our pleasure built, so did another feeling. I didn't know if my eyes were open or closed. My vision was filled with light and color, alive, springing from the crown on my head. The light, the shapes were palpable, alive, growing, surrounding us. I saw his face, his head arched back, the pale shade of his skin contrasting with my deep ebony.

I felt it building, building to a peak. And something else was building as well. I threw my head back, threw my eyes open, looking deep into the stars. I cried out for him to come, to fill me. He did, and that first hot pulse deep within me sent me over the edge.

And at that moment, we jumped. I howled and cried out into the fabric beneath the stars. I felt it; I was a part of it. I felt our path, and with my own Will, took us farther toward our goal. I felt those around me. I could see First Officer, her crown ablaze, and feel her joy at my presence. I felt the partnership of our Captain, his joy, and his invitation to me.

And in my joy, things shifted, and I saw clearly. I saw a different path, for myself, and for our Ship. I showed them the new path. They accepted, and I Willed us along that path. I felt their guidance, their advice. I needed to save enough to be able to jump again, quickly, if needed. I understood, and saw the safe spots, and showed them the unsafe spots. I felt their assistance in guiding us out of the jump.

Space returned to my vision in a blaze of stars. Through my crown, I felt our position. I knew our position, and that of my birthplace, so far away. I felt New Haven, our goal, now a few short jumps away. I felt the fabric of space and time, and felt it as a part of me.

My crown was blazing, surrounding us in a sphere of light.

I bent down and kissed my consort. I covered him with his robes. I looked over at mine, and laughed. They were a cocoon, and I had shed them.

We would not jump for a while. It had been a good jump, a long jump.

I knew where to meet them, at a spot marked by a small hill directly above the Source powering our Ship. As I walked, I saw them, ablaze in spheres of living light, descending from the sky.

And in my laughter, I floated up into the sky, arcing across to meet them.

They landed first. I set down, and took the final steps. They stood, as I, naked save for surrounding clouds of living light, Captain, and First Officer.

“You knew,” I said to her as I approached, extending my hands. They each took one, and we stood in a triangle.

“No,” she said, “I hoped, I wished, I prayed.”

“Catherine,” he said, his voice deep and resonant, “We all hoped and prayed. And oh how our prayers have been answered!”

I looked at him. I understood more. I would study with him, learn with him. But that meant

I turned to her. “But”

She smiled and shook her head, looking to him, then back to me. “Catherine, I’m only a little sad. For this means I become a Captain in my own right, to take my own ship -- if you join us.”

I shook my head. “If?”

“Catherine,” he said, “Please join us. We need you. You have already shown us much, in one jump. You are destined to Captain a Great Ship.” His eyes filled with tears; he was almost pleading now. “Catherine, you are destined to lead us, to lead us all.”

I looked overhead again, looking at the stars. I could feel them. “I know,” I said.

As I looked with my eyes, I found myself looking with my crown. I breathed deep, breathing in the fabric of space-time.

I felt the energy building again. I was doing it. I felt their hands in mine. “Yes, Catherine,” he encouraged. I could feel his joy, his support. “Lead us, Catherine,” she added. I could feel her sadness, and her joy.

I breathed in the fabric of space. I saw our destination. I wasn’t hesitant starting our jump, I was unskilled. But they helped, guiding me. I Willed us to our destination. Not pushing, not pulling, but Willing us there. Ending the jump was easy.

Space reappeared through the still roiling clouds of light surrounding us. They showed me how to move us, and we moved Ship to see the twin moons of New Haven being illuminated by its sun.

Our hands dropped.

Risk and Reward

He said, “We must return to the bridge. Landing still requires the use of instrumentalities.”

I nodded. “Thank you, Captain and Sir. I promised someone I would share planetfall.”

They held hands. I could sense the rest of the crew moving into action. I could sense their surprise, their pleasure.

I turned to go, but he stopped me.

“Lady Catherine,” he said, “You are one of us now. Join us on the bridge when you are able.”

She smirked, looking at me. “We will provide you with suitable clothing.”

I bowed to them. “I thank you, my new Masters. Teach me well. I have much to learn.”

You know of our return. We made it in one jump. And you have probably seen the holo of me, standing in gray, beside my Captain, announcing to all, that I was now Catherine in the Southern Cross.

The risk was small. The reward was great.

FIN

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Risk and Reward

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