

Folly

© Copyright 2000-2005 by silli_artie@hotmail.com

This work may not be reposted or redistributed without the prior express written permission of the author.

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 will *not* suffer these fools on *my* bridge!” Captain Harris bellowed.

The two Guild business representatives exchanged nervous glances. They knew this was going to be difficult.

“Please, Captain, we’ve been over this before. He is willing to pay,” said the older of the two. The younger one looked quite shaken, as if on the verge of a breakdown.

Captain Harris looked at them incredulously, then turned to the medical representative accompanying them. She looked at the doctor questioningly, shaking her head.

“He will pay with his life! Does he know that?” Harris asked.

The doctor nodded, grimly. The Guild representatives didn’t respond.

Harris linked a control and brought up a three-dimensional display in front of them.

“Look at the fool’s evoked potentials -- see this?” She pointed to a ragged edge on the surface of the display, an edge tinged purple and green.

“Do you know what that means?” she accosted the business representatives of her Guild.

As they sat silent, she continued her browbeating. “Surely you had to study *some* of our Mysteries to become members of the Guild.” Her voice was softer, but the sting much harsher.

“This man is unstable!” she shouted, startling them. “For him to make a Jump, even a short one, in an unmedicated state is suicide! It will destroy his mind, what little there is of it, and if he’s lucky, kill him outright. If he’s unlucky, he’ll end up like the passengers of the Gimlet.”

Captain Harris turned to the doctor seated at the end of the table. “Do you agree, Sir and Doctor?” she asked formally.

The doctor stood, looked at the display, then to the two Guild members dressed in the brown-green of planet-based members of the Spacing Guild.

“Sir and Captain, I most certainly agree,” the doctor formally intoned.

Doctor and Captain looked to the two others.

The older Guild businessman spoke. “You know the contracts. He is aware of the risk. He is willing to pay. He insists. He has waived our liability.”

Captain Harris looked to the doctor and sighed. Both sat down.

Harris shook her head, thinking. Oh, the folly of it! Ever since Lady Catherine, Leader of the Great House of the Southern Cross had been discovered as a Void Captain, and the one who had made the first Great Jump, leaders of Houses Great and small, bureaucrats and functionaries, all wanted to try, all wanted to be the next Great Captain.

She ran her hands through her fiery red hair, settling her flight crown back in place. *And the Guild pandered to them*, she thought. The Guild pandered to these fools, taking their money and letting them wear a flight crown and experience a short Jump from the bridge of a ship. Oh how they paid -- staggering sums of money -- all to stand next to the Captain and experience a Jump, to see if they had what it took to become a Captain and whisper a ship beneath the stars. She knew they made more profit in one of these short jumps than they did in months of hauling cargo. Oh, the price of ego!

Harris looked at her so-called Guild brothers. They didn't know what Captaining a ship involved. They had to know about the Guild's monitoring program, using passenger crowns to monitor the evoked encephalographic potentials of every person who traveled on a ship. The systems monitored everyone -- and medicated them immediately if instability appeared during a jump beneath the stars. It was through the monitoring program that candidates were identified. Oh, how lucky they had been to identify Lady Catherine... Captain Harris allowed herself a rueful smile. She suspected *luck* had nothing to do with it.

“You ask me to take the life of a sentient being,” Harris said softly but forcefully to her Guild brothers.

They but nodded.

Harris turned, incredulous still, to the doctor. “Sir and Doctor, could you do this thing? Could you take the life of another?”

The doctor's face clouded. “You know I cannot, Sir and Captain!” he said angrily.

Harris bowed her head. “I meant no offense, Sir and Doctor. I know you cannot. But that is what is being asked of me.”

The younger of the Guild agents spoke, his voice quavering.

“Captain, Sir, yes, this is folly -- folly to the extreme. We know he will die. He has been told he will die. His advisors have been told he will die. Still he persists. But...”

“But what?” Harris demanded.

The junior representative looked around, glancing at the doctor, and making the subtle hand sign for being observed by those not-of-the-Guild.

“Spit it out, man!” bellowed Harris.

“Sir and Captain,” the young man said, “our Predictors say this is necessary.”

Harris frowned -- Predictors! Wheels within wheels here! “They do? What do they say?”

When the young man offered no further explanation, Harris once again bellowed, “What do they say? Tell me or find another! I am the Captain of a Ship, not an assassin!”

The young man spoke softly. “Sir and Captain, they ... foretold this.” The young man shuddered. “They called me before them -- me, before them! They instructed me to tell you ... that the price is indeed high, but the rewards are far greater for us all. You will emerge stronger from this. You will bring an end to this folly, and you will bring us much more.” The young man took a breath, on the verge of collapse. “They said you *must* do this, for our sake, and for the sake of those to come. They showed me...”

The young man collapsed weeping, his head descending to his hands on the tabletop.

The doctor moved to his side, removing diagnostic instruments from his belt and scanning the young man.

Captain Harris stood. “I will do it. I don’t like it, but I’ll do it.” She waited for the other Guild representative to acknowledge her.

Captain Harris picked up her formal cape and departed.

On the bridge of her ship, Harris scowled. She turned to her First Officer. “I would speak with that fool who would be our passenger.”

“Yes, Sir,” he replied.

Then, much softer, she said, “Michael, thank you for your support in this. I want to get it over with as quickly as possible.”

He stepped forward and touched her arm gently. “I understand. I’ve been asking myself what I would do in the same situation.”

Folly

“And?” she asked, smiling a little.

He shook his head. “Thankfully, all I’ve had to do is ask, and wonder.” He paused for a moment, looking into her eyes. Then with a sigh, he said, “I’ll get the fool.” He stepped away.

A few minutes later, a holo image appeared before Harris. She shook her head as she looked at the man -- overweight, overdecorated, overinflated with his own importance. Harris sighed. He had one more chance.

“Do you know who I am?” Harris said.

“Ah, er, yes -- you are Captain Harris, and you are going to...”

“If you do this you will die! Do you understand that?” Harris said flatly.

The fool blinked. “Ah, I am aware there are some risks associated with this venture, as there are in any...”

“You have been told that you will die! This folly will kill you! You have been told that, have you not?”

The fool blinked again, and seemed to get some spine. “I have been so informed, and I disagree! Captain, I will be on the bridge of your ship tomorrow for a Jump, or you and your Guild will pay penalties!”

Harris frowned. “So, you insist on going through with this?”

The fool straightened up in his chair. “Yes, I do! Is there anything remaining for me to do to prepare for the Jump?”

Harris scowled. “Arrange your affairs and appoint a successor.” She hit the disconnect.

Some time later, her cargo officer, Delaney, approached.

“Captain, here is the list for tomorrow,” he said, handing a tablet to his captain.

“Eleven!” Harris called out. “Eleven people!” She ran a hand through her hair, then stopped, paused, and took a breath. The amount charged for one person was huge, but eleven -- the crew’s cut would leave them all wealthy. This fool’s ego was going to bankrupt his House!

She nodded to Delaney. “Thank you. I see you’ve searched them through the Guild. All unknowns, save for the fool. None of the others has made a jump before. Delaney, this is a circus. I’d rather be transporting adult sneeches in full mating lust than dealing with this.”

He smiled. “I understand, Sir and Captain. Your crew agrees.”

“Have all the waivers been collected?”

“Yes, Sir, and crowns prepared. All but the one set for automatic medication on the first sign of trouble.”

“Very good. I’ll message my disgust one more time to the Guild. Find us a place for dinner and round up the crew. We can afford a good one, thanks to this fool. Even if he pulls out now, cancellation penalties still leave us rich.”

Delaney bowed, smiling. “Yes, Sir.”

The Laplace was a simple Ship, a cargo ship. It suited Harris well. She hauled cargo, making what were now considered “short” jumps on the order of thirty light years. She had no wish for grandeur. With any luck, she thought, they’d lift tomorrow morning, make the jump to Ganymede, jump back, and dispose of the body in time for dinner. Local authorities had been briefed on the expected outcome, and the fool had threatened to go to court to insure his right -- to die.

The next morning Harris expected a circus, and that’s what arrived at the Ship’s main entrance. She shook her head at the sight -- the amount of money the fool was squandering on this was staggering! There was the fool, overly resplendent in his robes and self-made decorations. His entourage accompanied him, some cooing and primping in a sickening display. Others looked bored. The medical representative the Guild insisted on including looked grim. A House legal representative, in his formal robes and miter, looked bored. Harris noted two or three in the group who seemed excited. One older man, perhaps a successor? The woman -- wife or lover about to be freed? The young lad? This had to be an adventure for him.

“Good morning, Captain,” pronounced the fool in an overly loud voice. “I am ready.”

“To die?” asked Harris softly.

The fool frowned. “Let’s get on with it.”

Harris forced a smile. “Indeed.” She stepped back, and then in her commanding voice said to the group, “You will each be fitted with a *flight* crown. These must be worn at all times. They may only be removed by a Guild representative. Any attempt to remove the crown will result in your immediate medication. As a precaution, the crowns are set to initiate medication if they sense you are in difficulty.”

For some, the lucky few, the Void was Sunyata -- fertile vastness, possibility without limit. For others, the Void mirrored their own insecurities -- and worse -- an infinite blackness, falling, empty, cold. For those, medication was the only route of passage between the stars.

She looked at the fool, anticipating him, and before the fool could get up his wind, Harris added, “Your crown, Sir, has no such safety net. Is that as you desire?”

The fool sneered back, "It is."

"Very well," Harris said. "First Officer, see to it and bring them to the bridge."

Harris turned, and shooting a grim glance at her own Guild representatives, including their legal representative, strode to her bridge.

She turned from her checklists as she sensed someone coming on to her bridge. She acknowledged the Guild Legal representative.

"Sir and Captain," the Legal representative said formally, bowing.

"Yes?"

"This is a troubling time for us all. We understand your reluctance to proceed, and while we agree personally with it, the forms must be obeyed. My brother and I have completed another difficult review of this matter with the passenger, in the presence of the local authorities. All have been briefed quite thoroughly as to the expected outcome of this journey. Still, he persists, he demands. My honorable brother has failed to dissuade him from his course. We have assurances sufficient that you, the ship, the Guild, and all involved on our side are immunized from any possible outcomes. The passenger has accepted personal and complete responsibility, and indemnifies us. We request that you only ask if he wishes to continue in view of the risks associated with the journey, nothing more."

Harris nodded. This was as close to a show of emotion and feeling as she'd ever encountered from a Legal Guild member -- and even the fool's own legal counsel advised him against continuing. "Thank you for your counsel, Sir. The forthrightness shown by you and your honorable brother shall not go forgotten."

The legal representative bowed once more, and withdrew from the bridge.

First Officer entered the bridge a few minutes later. He exchanged glances with his Captain.

The entourage followed shortly, the fool leading the way. He swaggered to Harris, only to be intercepted by the First Officer.

"Stand here," First Officer said, pointing to a place on the bridge in front of a small cylindrical control pedestal about a meter high.

The fool waddled over, looking around. He looked ill at ease as to what to do with his hands, finally placing them atop the pedestal.

Captain Harris stood two meters away, next to a similar pedestal. Harris allowed herself another smile. The fool hadn't prepared very well. If he had, he would have known that a Ship is a True Machine -- in the words of the Ancients, without moving parts. The bridge of a ship is

a singularly unimpressive place, seemingly devoid of instrumentalities. All surfaces were gray or dark gray.

She looked to the fool. The fool evidently thought the smile was for him, as he gave the grimace he must have thought passed for a smile.

Harris asked, "Sir -- do you wish to continue in view of the risks associated with the journey?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw both Legal Guild members standing together and nodding.

The fool pulled himself a little taller and said, "How many times do I have to say yes! Get on with it! The Predictors see greatness coming from this journey. I..."

Harris commanded the holo fields around them to show a view outside the ship. The room changed from indirectly lit grays to the bright sky and surrounds of the landing field. To gasps from the entourage, and silence from the fool, Harris said simply, "We lift."

She lifted the ship, turning it to give those on the bridge a view of Man Home receding rapidly. A secondary status display showed her that one member of the entourage had been medicated -- that must have been the whimpering she'd heard.

She took them out past one of the Lagrange points which served as the parking place for the last of the pod ships, never to be completed, never to sail. She gave silent thanks to de Severac, Cargill, Shinozuka -- those who discovered the art of whispering beneath the stars.

She moved rapidly out of the ecliptic plane and to a spot from which to take the Jump. Ganymede was on the same side of Sol. They could reach it in a few minutes using the conventional metric drive.

But this was to be a Jump. So be it.

"First Officer, are we ready to Jump?" she called out.

Before the words had left her mouth, she had the green all-clear signals in her mind.

The First Officer, following the forms, called out, "All clear and secure, Sir and Captain."

Harris looked to the fool once more. He was sweating and breathing rapidly, hands trembling on top of the pedestal. Harris contemplated running a bioscan on him, but didn't -- she knew what the scan would show shortly.

She closed her eyes, putting the fool out of her mind. Opening her awareness to the Void, she felt their position, and their destination. Strange -- she sensed a multiplicity of routes. Not strange -- Predictors were involved in this -- she needed to be wary of the unexpected.

Usually she sensed one, possibly two routes out of what she knew were a transfinite cardinality of possibilities. One route was the shortest, but she knew that was not the one to take. The one to take was one of the longer, and as she contemplated it, she felt its correctness. Subjectively, it would be a jump of many seconds duration.

Without hesitation or doubt, she thought -- we Jump.

And slightly into the Jump -- chaos! She felt and heard an animal noise, and saw, partially with her mind and partially with her eyes, the fool screaming, bellowing, engulfed in blue flame.

Harris saw -- and she knew -- the fool was using a neurobooster! The outlines of its implanted wiring enveloped his head with blue flame. The fool turned to her, and moved.

Harris concentrated on the ship, on the Jump.

The fool touched her, screaming in terror and pain. The searing pain and energy shocked her, and she felt the ship tumble and whip violently off course. Harris focused her Will on the ship, but found herself overwhelmed by the fool's final throes of terror and pain.

Captain Harris staggered to her feet. The fool was dead, his crown lifeless and dull.

But standing in the middle of the bridge, arms outstretched, was the lad -- a child, barely thirty -- his crown ablaze, his head thrown back, his eyes filled with Void-gaze as he held the ship in place. He held the ship in place!

Captain Harris breathed out slowly, extending her arms and reaching into the Void...

And she met the lad, who hovered the ship in place, something never done before.

"Help me, please," the lad cried to Captain Harris, sensing her presence.

Harris felt tears streaming down her face. Oh the talent of this lad! Oh, the Predictors had been right!

"Easy," she spoke into the lad's mind. Gently, she sensed what the lad was doing, how he was hovering the ship. She understood -- she learned. Such talent! She felt her First Officer's presence join them.

"Now, can you see Man Home?" Harris asked the lad.

"I... I can feel it," the lad said into her mind.

She felt the shock from her First Officer, and sent him a calming thought. So he couldn't see where they were either?

“And Ganymede, our destination?” she asked, hoping the lad could see what she could not.

“Yes...” The lad giggled in Harris’ mind. “It’s funny how they wiggle.”

Harris smiled -- the lad had felt the moons in their orbits.

“Then move us there -- breathe us there -- Will us there,” Harris intoned. Then she watched and learned as the lad moved the ship effortlessly through the Void and dropped them back into normal space in orbit around Ganymede.

They were back in normal space. Functionaries swarmed like flies to the fool’s still-smoldering corpse. Her First Officer took control of that situation.

She did a quick count -- one dead, with a flight crown destroyed, five medicated, and one....

She looked to the lad. He was tall, still with the gangly appearance of childhood.

Yet that child was suffused in the living light of his crown, light which pulsed and danced around him as he looked on his hands, hands which were shaking still.

The lad looked up to Captain Harris. Harris saw the questioning in him, and then a glimmer of understanding breaking through the Void-gaze in his eyes.

“Lad, what is your name?” Harris asked

“Fred, Sir and Captain.”

“Fred what?” Harris asked.

The lad shook his head. “Just Fred, Sir.”

Captain Harris extended her hand. Fred nervously extended his.

As Captain Harris clasped Fred’s hand, she said, “You are one of us. Today you saved our lives, and became the first male to make a Great Jump. I am honored to welcome you to our Guild, Sir and Captain.”

Fred turned to her, the Void-gaze deepening in his eyes momentarily. Harris grasped his other hand to steady him, to steady him in this space.

Fred took a breath, looked into her eyes, and asked with the innocence of youth, “Teach me?”

Folly

Harris felt the wash of complex feelings through her body. She looked over Fred's shoulder to see her First Officer, her Michael, approaching. It would be sad to part with him -- but they both knew the day would come, and it meant Michael would now Captain a Ship of his own. And the lad -- Fred -- teaching him...

"Aye," she said.

The two turned to the weeping and chaos, the First Officer standing by his Captain.

"What a price to pay," Fred whispered.

"I pray it will bring this folly to an end," she replied, as she exchanged a glance with Michael, and they held hands once again. She could see the painful happiness in his face, sense it in him, see it in the light of his crown.

"Michael," she said, dropping formalities, "Let me know when we are ready to make the Jump back."

He smiled, a teary smile, bowed, and said, "Aye, Captain." He stepped back to confer with the legal and medical Guild members.

"Boy! Over here!" one of the entourage called out.

Harris turned to the group and said, "No!" Then to her First Officer, she called, "Clear the bridge!"

He smiled and replied, "Yes Captain!"

A few minutes later, she received the all-clear. She took Fred's hand and stepped to the console once more.

"Close your eyes and follow me," she said softly, "You are where you belong."

Fred closed his eyes and let himself be immersed once more in the Void. Before, he'd been thrust into things, and had held on, to the ship, to the Void, out of self-preservation. Now, he took the luxury.... He felt the Captain, felt her presence, knowing she was standing next to him. He felt the First Officer, close by. He felt the others -- the crew, the passengers.

"Feel the Void," her voice said into his mind.

He breathed it in, letting all but her and the ship fade. He felt tears start on his face -- he knew this was home -- he was where he belonged.

Harris felt the surge of emotion, of rightness, of belonging in him. She gave thanks again -- rare are those who are at home in the Void, and rarer still those who answer its Call as he had done.

Folly

“Now, where is Man Home?” she asked.

Fred felt their destination. He felt a multiplicity of paths, with two feeling stronger, more correct than the others.

Harris observed his selection. Did one path lead directly to the planet’s surface? She examined it -- it did lead directly to the surface, but it didn’t feel *right* to her. She indicated the other path.

“Will us there,” she said, giving him confidence.

They flashed into orbit around Earth.

She took over, establishing communications with the landing site, and handing over the thankless cleanup tasks to Michael once more.

When she received the go-ahead to land, she led them in, showing Fred the way.

Captain Harris did not get dinner that night -- the inquiry extended for many hours, concluding that the passenger had used illegal technology, and suffered accordingly.

The authorities tried to suppress the holos of the incident taken by the bridge holocameras. That only drove up their popularity. But the sight and sounds of the fool writhing and dying in agony had their effect -- the folly stopped. Whether it was fear of the pain, or the embarrassment, none dared try after that.

Captain Harris, her crew, and the Guild were absolved of any responsibility, and compensated for the horror they endured.

At the Spacing Guild Hall, in a ceremony simple yet old, the Guild took in a new member. The Master of the Rolls called out, “You shall be known to all as Captain Fred,” as he placed the gray cape around Fred’s shoulders.

And in a small room off the Guild hall some time later, in a very private ceremony simple yet far older, Captain Harris took in a new member. “Call me Barbara,” she whispered as she removed his cape.

FIN

Rev 2009/05/01

Folly

By silli_artie@hotmail.com

<http://www.asstr.org/~artie>