

Two

Colonised planets have few ships. Having voluntarily relinquished life in Space the colonists own a frame of mind which does not wish to seem less than wholeheartedly committed to the planet of their choice. Owning a space ship makes doubtful their allegiance.

However, for safety's sake, every colonised planet has to have at least two ships at their disposal for use in an emergency, as ambulances if nothing more. Planets are prone to 'natural' disasters. Apart from those two mandatory ships, a few of the more prosperous farmers and traders may own a ship in order that they may occasionally venture abroad for their own profit or amusement. As for the less prosperous citizenry, should they wish to escape the exigencies of life on a planet, they can always seek passage on a passing freighter.

At the time of the Extraordinary Senate Meeting there were nine privately owned ships on the planet, all of them small luxury craft. One of those ships belonged to the Senate Member for North Three. The ship had been a present for his son, Halk Fint, on his sixteenth birthday.

The purpose of its purchase had been, paradoxically, an attempt to induce Halk Fint to remain on the planet. Give him the toys of Space, his father had reasoned, and he might stay and help run the farm. And Halk Fint had, out of affection for his mother and his father, stayed this last year.

Written into the constitution of every colonised planet is the law that says that all children, when they reach the age of twelve (Space years), must be sent into Space to complete their education. To separate parent and child at such an early age may seem unnecessarily hard to us in the city, where a school is never more than 500 meters distant and our children come home to us every night. But our children are already in Space, they know of life here, are told of life on planets; and, if they so desire, and a few always do, they can emigrate to the planet of their choice. Freedom is choice.

Our citizens are a free people. Those of our citizens who happen to have been born on a planet must also be able to make that choice. But no film nor book, no teaching machine, no individual teacher no matter how inspired, can adequately portray life in Space like firsthand experience. So, to be able to enjoy the same freedom of choice as their fellow citizens, planetary children are therefore compulsorily sent into Space.

Cynics among you might say that to kidnap children in their most formative years is to weight the balance in favour of Space. Let it be said, though, that the planets do advertise throughout Space for settlers, and their advertisements cannot be said to be without bias. And Space is the civilisation on which those planets ultimately depend. While many of those ex-planetary children, who have chosen to come into Space, have contributed greatly to the progress of civilisation and therefore, indirectly, to the well-being of all colonists.

Even so, to the chagrin of their parents, the majority (88.67%) of planetary children, on completion of their education, do elect to stay in Space. And it must be said that what attracts those children is not the noble ideals of our civilisation, but its gadgets and gewgaws and its frivolous pastimes. This gives weight to the argument of those advocates of planetary life who say that Space corrupts their children. This argument is countered by the defenders of the present system, who say that innocence founded on ignorance is not innocence. Added to that must also be the same 'natural' motives, desires, dreams that drove all our ancestors into space. Indeed a large proportion of those children who do come into Space, after the limitations of a single planet, become compulsive travellers. No intergalactic freighter crew is without at least one planet-born member among its number.

Seventeen year old Halk Fint was just such a product of this state of affairs. Though, in his case, his simple longing to live in Space and partake of its pleasures was offset by his unusually strong devotion to his mother and father. This is another peculiarity of planetary life — the number of long lasting monogamous relationships it sustains and the close family ties that relationships of such duration create. There are two schools of thought as to why this should be. One school says that this monogamy is born of the vicissitudes of planetary life, the common adversities strengthening the bonds between the partners. The second school of thought maintains that it is due simply to their isolation, to the paucity of alternative partners, of lack of choice, of freedom. Whatever the case this excessive devotion extends to the offspring of such partnerships, which probably explains why many of those children who come into Space bring with them troublesome feelings of guilt, which make them so emotionally unpredictable to those of us who have been raised in Space, who have never tasted the acrid dust of planets or known our fathers.

Halk Fint, the third child of the Senate Member for North Three, had these conflicting desires battling within him. His elder brother and sister had already left the planet. Their father had done everything in his power to legitimately stop them. Not, let it be said, out of malice, but because he sincerely believed that life on the planet was better than life in Space. After all, he had chosen it; and he naturally wanted what he believed was best for his children. However, despite his blandishments, despite his blustering threats and his emotional entreaties, no matter what petty difficulties he had placed in their way, as soon as his two eldest children had reached the age of majority, they had taken passage on a passing freighter.

For his youngest son the Senate Member for North Three had changed tactics. Where the other two had been denied, where possible, everything to do with Space, he had indulged his youngest son's every passing fancy. Providing he remained at home. So Halk Fint owned many of the toys of Space, took many holidays in Space, only to reluctantly return home, only to grudgingly remain on his parents' farm.... until he was again allowed to leave for Space. His was a comfortable

and tortured trap.

As a child Halk had, with sympathy and incomprehension, beheld his parents' despondency over the departure of first his elder brother and then his sister. He too had felt the pain of their parting. Since then he had ruefully noted the delight on his parents' faces at his every homecoming. He had no wish to hurt them, to bring about such naked misery again, to not bring them pleasure again. So, for the past six months, to resolve the conflict within himself, to reconcile his filial devotion to them with his desire to leave them, he had been trying to talk his parents into selling the farm and returning to Space to live.

The Senate Member for North Three was not an unkind man. He knew that his son remained with him only out of gratitude, out of love. But all Halk's friends his own age were in Space, his interests were all in Space, his ambitions were in Space. So, after the Extraordinary Convention of the Senate, he asked his son if he would fly to XE2, tell the Director what was happening, and return immediately with his reply.

At mention of an unexpected jaunt into Space Halk's thin face had filled with a smile, only for it to vanish as soon as he had been told that he must return immediately. The Senate Member for North Three loved his youngest son, did not want to be the cause of his misery.

"Do this one thing for me," he told Halk, "and you are free forever from all obligations to me. After your return here you may take this ship and go wheresoever you wish in the universe. With my, and your mother's, blessing."

So it was with an irrepressible smirk that Halk Fint strapped himself into his seat and issued instructions for his take off and course. He gave himself only five seconds to wave farewell to his mother and father; and then the small ship lifted off, rose above the line upon feathery line of his father's date palms.

For the first time since he had known Space Halk did not look down on the farm with loathing, with the contempt a prisoner has for his keeper. Now he gazed down on those blue-green rows, as they massed into so many geometric patterns, with something akin to affection, with the indulgence of incipient nostalgia. The farm, after all, was but his father's eccentricity. And he, Halk Fint, was heading out, in a ship of his own, for the new, for the exciting, the different.

A longing for life itself urged Halk Fint on; a desire to escape the known for the unknown, to go in search of life in all its guessed-at magnificence, in all its supposed multitudinous variety. Propelled too by the fear that if he stayed much longer on the planet then he would miss something vital; drawn on also by the feeling that somehow the future held all the answers, and he knew life on the planet and the answers weren't down there. He knew what he would become down there, and he wanted something more, something better than that. Because Halk Fint owned the unlimited potential of the young; and the planet was old and limited in scope.

Such are the conceited aspirations of the young — so general that they are always indefinable. Like all the young Halk Fint saw himself as the first of his kind; and the life he already knew didn't have anything new to offer him. Suffice it to say that life itself, that ever-regenerated mystery for the young, lured him out into Space.

Away on the horizon he caught a blue glimpse of the sea.

“Amendment,” he said. “Direct course to XE2. Maximum speed. Least deviations.”

He had intended going over to manual once clear of the planet and making a couple of quick orbits to look for the moon. Now, out of gratitude, he wanted to obey his father's instructions to the letter, fulfil his mission and be free. And faced by the black infinity of space one small moon seemed very unimportant. What, he asked himself, did one small moon matter when Out There men travelled galaxies?

The ship acknowledged the new instructions, told him the amended course and his ETA at XE2. He had by now risen through the uppermost clouds, was accelerating as he left the planet's atmosphere.

“Better than talking to a stupid tractor,” he jubilantly said.

Those were the last words that Halk Fint was heard to utter. Seconds later he started in panic as his ship shuddered under an impact. A massive electrical discharge then caused the small ship to explode.