

Darik

by Peter Clarke

Mother starves while feeding baby, barked the headline. The citizens of Sarn liked to keep up with the news, not because they had the luxury of indulging in news saturation like some other planets, but because of the strength of their community spirit. Truth to tell, there was little room for any kind of luxury here: Sarn, though fabulously beautiful, was an inhospitable place. Its inhabitants struggled to scratch out a living; although food could be cultivated, it was often no sooner grown than it would be destroyed by the savage storms of sulfur hail and liquid nitrogen rain that would rush upon them from the mountains with scarcely a second's notice. Even if the Sarnians had had the time and strength to build greenhouses and storm walls, their planet was grudging in offering the resources – iron, copper, energy – that they would have needed.

But what they lacked in comfort, they more than compensated for in one personality trait: generosity. Their desire to give was so strong that poverty – at least, the disgusting gulf between rich and poor that afflicted most other races – was unknown. Even the destitute mother of the headline had lacked food only because she was waiting for rescue after a storm had torn her meagre house apart. All of society reflected the passion to give. Few could afford to buy the newspaper, for example, but the publisher would give it away for free in all the poorest districts. Nevertheless, he made a handsome income (mostly given away, of course) because the Sarnians were so grateful for his service that they paid anyway, often many times the cover price.

In one dark corner of the city, however, sat Winston, brooding. He was one of the few Sarnians who used the word 'miserable' more often than 'happy'. Deep in his soul, hunger lurked; not just the physical hunger that afflicted the whole community from time to time, but a craving for more; to be rich, to be great. Winston, too,

bought the paper (grudgingly paying exactly the cover price), but not to share the love of the community. Instead, he scoured the pages for hope; the hope of wealth, of aggrandisement. And today, he had found it – or, at least, the glimmerings of it. Rumour had it, said the report, that the beautiful and remote island of Linia, several days' walk from the city, might be concealing deposits of titanium – a material desperately needed to make food processing equipment. Winston had seen his opportunity. He had trawled the stores for a few supplies and was getting ready to start his trip to Linia, to be first in line to be a titanium tycoon. Greed and hope and hate growled together in his heart. He would leave the city tonight, slipping away while its exhausted but contented denizens (deluded fools, he thought) slept.

Although their planet had afforded the Sarnians a rough deal, they themselves were a beautiful race. A visitor from Earth would have feared them, for they resembled nothing more than giant spiders with men's faces. But in truth, their bodies, comprising six fused globes, glided elegantly on their shapely, agile legs. The face bore sensitive, kindly eyes and a large, expressive mouth. With what little energy they could afford, they poured themselves into art and culture: dancing was a magnificent feat of grace and geometry, and sport had been raised to its highest expression of any race. And it was sport that had brought Darik to fame today: twenty years old and nearing maturity, he had won the coveted Sportist of the Year award, for his excellence in the noble and extravagantly beautiful game of soccer. He had tried to urge the prize – a trip to the fabulous island of Linia, a luxury few Sarnians ever experienced – onto his mother; but she, tearfully, thrust the travel pass back into his hands, her voice quaking with joy and pride.

A dog-cart was provided for him; this treat was another token of the high esteem in which the prizewinner was held. Thus he travelled, backpack fat with supplies (since Linia, uninhabited as it was, could offer no hospitality of its own). On

the mainland shore opposite Linia awaited a tiny boat; Darik released the dog-cart, which scampered back to the city as fast as ever it could, fearful of the ever-present threat of nitrogen storms, and he prepared to cross the narrow strait to Linia.

Winston, too, crossed the strait. Finding no boat, he had lashed together a raft, which barely survived the crossing, brief though it was. Landing, he set out to explore in the hope of finding a good camp ground. Then he saw Darik. Rage and disappointment boiled inside him. So, he had not made it here first, ahead of the crowd; this athletic youth, doubtless as greedy as he was, had beaten him. Well, all was not lost; perhaps he could bargain a 50-50 split of the island. But as he watched, a new emotion rose: curiosity. Darik's back was turned; he had not seen Winston, and he was bent over the ground, looking at a tiny, shining object. Winston was piqued; was this the longed-for titanium, perhaps? He crept closer. Now the object was easier to discern: it was a silver globe, a perfect sphere the size of a tennis ball, and Darik had picked it up. In Winston's mind, the black of lust and the green of envy gave way to a red mist. In fury, and with little knowledge of what he did, two of his hands closed round Darik's windpipe. The globe dropped, bounced, rolled away. Winston held and squeezed until Darik's legs folded and he sagged to the ground. Then Winston, dry-mouthed and crazed with lust and panic, dropped him and dived for the sphere. After a frantic moment's search in the undergrowth, he held up his prize: the tiny, smooth sphere, satisfyingly heavy, for which he had killed.

Four days later, the dog-cart returned to the city, sorrowful: Darik had not reported back on schedule. A search-party was sent and found him on Linia, sprawled at the foot of a cliff, as if he had fallen over the edge. In mourning, they brought back his body for the meagre funeral. It was not necessary to bury Sarn's dead, but merely to lay them outside the city, as the acid rain and hungry jackals soon dealt with the body. Darik's mother wept as she heard the ritual words intoned by Darik's head of

clan: “Go in peace, brother. We are forever yours, and we will never forget. Know that you are loved.” The crowd of friends and kin sighed and clasped each other in their grief.

Winston did not attend the funeral. Instead, he was spending all his time with the globe, transfixed with amazement as it had unfolded to reveal a tiny screen. A few other lustful Sarnians – not good enough to be called friends, but united in their greed – huddled round to watch, as it began to display what seemed to be a map of the rocky terrain to the east of the city. As the image panned, bird-like, they saw a group of caves, ancient and deep, in a hostile ravine two days’ journey away. And in the deepest cave, the globe showed them the most tantalizing picture of all: a family of globes, a myriad, just like the one they held.

United in their craving, the unholy brotherhood gathered themselves for the expedition. The globe guided them, its little map unfolding the route as they went. Without a moment’s hesitation, they plunged into the mouth of the cave, far beyond the sun’s reach in the depths of the canyon. Still the globe guided and coaxed them, further and deeper, through twists and turns and chambers and tunnels, beyond all hope of return and beyond all reason. As the passage narrowed, they crowded close to see the screen as it dimmed and blurred. So hungry were they for the secrets it held that they never felt the tiny needles the sphere gently thrust into their necks, nor the poison as it coursed into their bodies, closing down their vital systems and robbing them of consciousness. Once again the globe fell and bounced from their lifeless hands. As it fell, a breath of fresh air rustled through the distant city, a sweet wind stirring the haggard trees, such as its inhabitants had not known for a generation.

The globe folded away its tiny screen. Relieved of its duty to purge the city of greed, it sent a final message to its maker, and crumbled to dust.