

# Sweet Was The Song

by David Vickery

There were hundreds of passengers aboard the *Endor* but we all had two things in common. We all had the hope that Darius IV held what we wanted. And we had all turned our backs on Earth, almost certainly forever.

The first two weeks were dedicated to settling in and overcoming the nausea that the constant acceleration caused. We spent time doing what space tourists do: marvelling at the increasingly red-shifted universe from the aft viewers and the increasingly blue-shifted one from the forward viewers. We also watched spellbound as the forcefield vaporised the occasional dust fragment in a momentary blinding glare. At our speed, without the forcefield even the smallest particle would strike the ship and everyone in it like intense gamma radiation. We knew that, but it was something else to see it for ourselves: the awesome energy, the potential for destruction, the smallest thing threatening to overcome the largest in the wink of an eye.

"I will show you fear in a handful of dust," said someone behind me. I turned to see Doug Foster, the mineralogist and miner.

"A handful?" I said. "A speck would do."

"That's right. Ever stopped to think what would happen if the forcefield failed at this speed?"

"I prefer not to," I said.

He nodded, smiled sardonically. I walked into the cafeteria and sat down over an orange juice and apple danish. A girl I'd noticed in the briefings walked over to me with a tray. Light hair, darker eyebrows and a kind of intense mouth - one that I imagined rarely smiled. But what struck me most were her crystal clear blue eyes. The look of unshakeable certainty. I saw her name tag over her breast pocket.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Please do, Ms James."

"Rhiannon. And you're David."

"Have we met?"

"No. But I know the name of everyone on board. After all, we'll be spending the rest of our lives together." She stirred her coffee vigorously.

"Probably," I said. She sensed my reluctance.

"Probably? Travelling at 99.99% of light speed, we'll be only six weeks older when we arrive. But for those on Earth, fourteen years will have passed. Can you really see yourself going back to a world where everyone you knew is either dead or nearly thirty years older?"

"It would have to be a serious problem, I'll admit. Or seriously bad luck."

"Problems can be overcome. And you make your own luck." I smiled, but she was already continuing: "No, what worries you is having to face up to the fact that our decisions are irrevocable. I've seen a lot of it among the passengers." She turned as a tray clattered loudly behind her and I saw the crucifix around her neck.

"Are you going to convert the settlers on Darius, Rhiannon?"

Her eyes flashed back at me. "Seems to me I could start before then."

"I'm not interested in Christianity. Sorry."

"And why not?"

"I just don't believe Christianity has the answer."

She snorted. "You don't even know what the question is, so you're not likely to recognise the answer."

"Besides, Christianity's on the decline. I read in *Newsweek* that only one in - "

"It's been on the decline for centuries, but it's as true now as it ever was."

"My sentiments exactly."

I thought she would flare up at this; but surprisingly, she smiled. Her face was transformed, its angularities smoothed away.

"Goodbye, David," she said, finishing her coffee and standing up. "We'll meet again."

"It's a small planet," I said.

Over the next couple of weeks the detailed briefings began. I soon realised that Darius IV wasn't such a small planet: not much smaller than Earth, in fact. One moon, equable climate, heavily forested. But what made it unutterably different from Earth was its one indigenous sentient species. The Darrians didn't look like people – someone in the briefings called them a cross between a seal and a bear – but they were intelligent all right. Within days of the first earth ship landing they'd made contact, established relations, and shown themselves amenable to sharing languages.

In our last two weeks we learned the language hypnopaedically, while we slept. And it was then that I started to see changes among my fellow travellers. More than that, I started to change. The Darian language wasn't just different words, it was different concepts. It was impossible to speak it, even in a jokey way to each other over coffee, without feeling more open, more amicable. Yet at the same time part of it remained alien. Words and whole phrases were lodged in our brains: we could translate them (indeed, thanks to the hypnopaedic learning, we did so instantly) without really understanding them. We knew the words but not what they stood for.

"I understand one thing now," said one of the potential colonists, Colin Hendry, to me one day. He'd come across as a light-hearted, easy-going character but now he was more serious than I'd seen him. "How it is that the Darrians have let us set up our colony on their planet. There just doesn't seem to be any way to say 'our planet' in Darian. I try to think of how to put it, and words won't come. All that happens is that I keep asking myself, how can you *own* a planet?"

His wife Sue joined him, gazing through the viewscreen, red light bathing her face.

I thought of the concepts. "That's right. It's obvious."

"Obvious to them. But not to us. Imagine if a spaceship full of Darrians landed on Earth and proposed setting up a colony. We wouldn't like it. In fact, I don't think we'd stand for it."

"But Earth is crowded. There are only a few thousand of them on their whole world. There's room enough for both them and us."

"I know," he said slowly, "but I don't think that's the point."

The last week saw the *Endor* in steady deceleration. The stars began to look normal again. This inevitably made us thoughtful: about Earth, about our future. Even about the crew. I could see now how much the crews of the colony transports and other arms of the space fleet had given up: their parents, their Earthbound friends and relations. But also how much they had gained. Every time their ships returned to

Earth, progress had surged on in leaps and bounds. There was new technology waiting for them in every part of their lives, making life better, easier, safer, more interesting, more exciting. Often there were brand new ships too, more efficient, more luxurious. They were seeing the future; they were *living* the future. Who knows, this generation might still be alive when that cherished science-fiction dream of faster-than-light travel became reality.

The crews had lost their families, but they were one large family of their own. Many of them were married. Part of me envied them: they were constantly seeing marvels. But it seemed to me that they were always travelling without ever arriving. That wasn't the answer, for me at least.

Finally the ship smoothed into orbit around Darius IV. We held that orbit for a day or so, communicating with the colony; then we nosed down into the atmosphere.

Every one of the passengers was glued to the viewscreens, me included. When the hull cooled from its entry we had a perfect view. The *Endor* sailed majestically through the clouds. Below us, glittering lakes caught the sun, forests speared upwards into the light. It was like Earth and yet it was a different world: an alien world, with a history I knew nothing about. The distance from where I'd been born was impossible for me to grasp: and yet I would probably die here.

The ship landed softly in the cool of the morning. The crew didn't disembark. But we came out, down the ramp and onto the soft soil of this brave new world. The air tasted different, fresher somehow. The alien breeze was soft and inviting and had a sweet, elusive perfume. We stood and looked around us, breathing deeply, exchanging glances with each other. Many of the couples held hands. I'd have welcomed a hand to hold myself.

"Welcome to Darius, ladies and gentlemen," said a voice. Coming towards us was a reception committee led by a short, fat, balding man who yet had an air of authority about him. He and his fellow citizens shook hands with a number of us.

"Calder's the name, Charles Calder. You're more than welcome. This is just as important a day for us as for you, you know – you're the first colony ship to arrive for many years. No, no, I'm no-one special – just the mayor of this little community. There are elections every two years, you know." He was bubbly, slightly over-excited, shining with hope and eager to please: and I realised we were all much the same. It was somewhere between meeting strangers and greeting long-lost relatives. He and his colleagues bustled about, shepherding us along to the guest quarters.

"Remember, although you'll have filed career paths, you're free to revise them. Take a look around, change your mind if you like – I did! There are several new options open since the last Earth ship. The great thing is that we all get along and pull together and make the colony work. But there's plenty for everyone here and everyone's welcome. Now, how's about some *real* food after all those ship meals? We grow all our own produce, you know...."

Calder and Co. were just what we needed: undoubted humanity, plus a positive keenness to take all our decisions for us. I felt disoriented, breathless and a little nauseous, and looking about me I wasn't the only one. But Calder put everyone at ease.

We ate breakfast en masse in a huge hall with windows open to the warming sun. More of the settlers appeared, carrying trays of cereal, things that smelt (and tasted) surprisingly like bacon and eggs, bread, vegetable oil spread, a range of jams, tea, coffee. I was astonished by the warmth of the welcome, until it struck me: these people could be my neighbours, my friends, even part of my family, for the rest of my

life. They knew that all right. And they too were excited at the new faces, the new possibilities, amongst them.

I took a slice of white bread, broke it and tasted it. Crisper, almost like toast in consistency, but definitely bread. It had a richer flavour too, along the lines of pumpernickel. I looked up, to see the weathered face of Doug Foster alongside me.

"You know, I think I'm going to like this place," he said.

"Let's hope we all do."

"You're right there – I don't fancy walking back."

That afternoon, with the sun high in the sky, we gathered in the clearing in front of the communal hall. All of us newcomers, and many of the earlier colonists.

"Something of a tradition, this – if a place this new is allowed traditions," said Calder. "Well, someone's got to start these things!"

We didn't know what he meant at first; and then it became clear. The gleaming hull of the *Endor* juddered as her massive engines powered up, shrill whine giving place to full-throated roar.

"Just think, a few weeks for those guys and they'll see what Earth science has come up with in the twenty-eight years since we left," said a friend of Colin Hendry's.

"Or what a mess the politicians have made," Colin replied.

The great ship wafted gently off the ground, her nose dipping slightly.

"*Endor*," I said. "Wonder why they called it that."

"Have to call them something," said Colin.

"It's Hebrew," said a quiet voice beside me, and I turned to see Rhiannon James. Hadn't realised she was so close. "It means *Spring of time*."

"Spring of time," I said. "I like that."

The colonists were waving and cheering, and the newly arrived passengers joined in. There was laughter and chatter and animation, but it faded as the *Endor* gained height on its belly jets. Then the main thrusters fired and the ship began to glide forward, gaining speed. It flew one or two almost ceremonial passes over the colony. Finally it shot into an inverted parabola, its bulk rapidly diminishing as it soared and roared away. We watched it contract to a point and then the silken clouds of Darius IV encompassed it round and it was lost to sight.

In the silence that followed we were all alone with our thoughts. It came to us then with surprising force what we had done. We would never see those crew members again, many of whom had become close to us on the voyage. But more than that, we would never see our friends or our family again. We would never see the planet Earth again. We were on our own.

The soft breezes blew cool as the sun went behind a cloud. Some of us burst into loud wailing sobs, several were seized with panic attacks, all of us felt sad. Calder and his folk were everywhere, comforting, assisting, reassuring.

"It's hard, I know," he said to us as he passed, "but it's better that you see it. You'll feel better tomorrow."

And we *did* feel better tomorrow. Such emotions were only to be expected; we were human, after all. But each of us had made the decision to come to Darius IV objectively and weighing up every aspect.

Calder was also right when he said it was better – infinitely better, I felt – to have seen the ship leave, and to mark that leaving with a ceremony. To have woken up the next morning and found the *Endor* gone would have been devastating.

As it was, we awoke still feeling that sense of vulnerability; but now it was overlaid with other emotions. We felt young again: we knew the optimism, the clean

slate, of youth. Nothing was fixed, there were no givens, no certainties. Everything was possible.

Even the breakfast tasted fresher, more alive. We ate our home produce with a revitalised sense that this food, however much it resembled Earth staples, was grown and nurtured on a different planet. From whose mountains Earth was invisible and Sol itself an undistinguished glimmer.

Over the next few days Calder and his cohorts led us around, showed us the options. There was the neolithic camp, where men and women painted their faces blue, wore animal skins and dwelt within makeshift huts. They lived close to the earth, in a way that even their ancestors had long forgotten. It was emotional catharsis. Some chose to live this way permanently, building families into associations, associations into tribes, tribal groupings into kingdoms. It was satisfying, as satisfying as bloodlust and the bellow of victory.

Most of those who joined this enclave moved on, renewed, revived. There were many other choices: Greeks, Romans, Vikings, pirates, Pilgrim Fathers, Victorians, Thatcherite greed, twenty-first century asceticism - and most popularly, a more or less current Earth society, without the ills and bills and corruption, but with all the labour-saving and entertainment aids technology had to offer.

Colin and Sue Hendry ended up here, after a stimulating break in a Roman villa *circa* 170 AD which sought to recreate the enlightened reign of Marcus Aurelius. They found out that old truth for themselves, that with wealth and power life has changed little in its fundamentals over the centuries. There have always been luxuries, distractions and divertissements. But as with most of the new colonists, comfort and push-button wonders won out. They moved into the main enclave, and it was easy to see that they were here to stay.

I visited their villa several times. I enjoyed the freedom of wearing a toga, sipping a distinctly quaffable wine called, inevitably, *Falernian*, reading Tibullus and Catullus aloud, even indulging in what they gigglingly called orgies: sloppy kissing, décolletage, roguish remarks from the folk who were playing slaves. But that's all it was, playing. A Hollywood production. Those who chose to stay might live and, yes, die by the sword; but for most of them it was transitory and unmoving. I was unmoved too, thinking of my past and of failed relationships so ancient that they might more easily have belonged to Imperial Rome.

I visited them also in their all-mod-cons apartment. Here was the serious business of the rest of their life, the sanitised Earth, the freedom from cynicism and graft. It was a new chance: for them, for their relationship, for their idealism. I wished them well, but it wasn't for me. What was, I wondered?

For the next few weeks I was technically what they called a drifter: unwilling to settle down, falsely comforted by the knowledge that I had all the time in the world. Yet there was no going back, either metaphorically or actually. My old life was a dead letter. And it was then that I finally began to admit to myself the big difference between running from and running to. I'd escaped but I hadn't yet arrived.

I and a few acquaintances saw Doug Foster off in my second month. I'd assumed he'd be one of the first to head out into the great unknown; but as he said to me, why not enjoy the comforts of civilisation for a while? There was a small party, after and even during which I felt more depressed than ever. Doug was off out beyond the confines of the colony, exploring a brand new planet, ostensibly seeking mineral wealth, more probably perhaps enjoying that solitude which had driven him from

Earth across the galaxy to Darius IV. I wished him well, drank to his health; and realised that, although I'd only met him aboard the *Endor*, he seemed like an old friend. Another goodbye, another parting.

By the time my third month dawned I was even more desperate for some kind of certainty, some direction to my life. The rapidly dwindling drifters clung together, yet at the same time despised each other for the weakness they half-acknowledged in themselves.

I ran into Rhiannon James unexpectedly. I was sitting in the Greek enclave, watching the sun set. The enclave was built on an island not far offshore, yet far enough to be separate. There were the noises of insects, birds and animals, yet it was quiet compared to Earth, the *Endor* or even my own thoughts. Blue turned to gold, gold to red, red to purple. It was deeply satisfying and yet part of me was still unsatisfied. There was a soft footfall behind me. I turned, my eyes temporarily blinded. As my vision cleared, I saw Rhiannon, carrying an amphora in one hand, dressed in the style of a Theban lady. The track on which she walked wound through a lawn (carefully cut by volunteer slaves), occasional statuettes in arbours.

"Thebes, eh? Briefly pre-eminent amongst the Greek city states following the defeat of Sparta at Leuctra at 371 BC – "

" - And collapsed after the death of Epaminondas at Mantinea in 362. Yes David, I read the briefing notes too."

For a moment I was unreasonably irritated. Then I found a smile. "Didn't expect to see you here, Ms James. Hardly your scene, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know. *Hellas* gave much to Christianity, not least an optimism that I definitely share. And it was a simpler time. An easier time." She sat down beside me. A breeze rolled in from the sea, ruffling our hair. Her face was flushed with purple and gold from the sunset.

I gestured to the wine jar. "One of your better ideas."

"Yes," she said. "I like to think of the Greeks finding time to go down through the groves to watch the sunset. And what better way than with a sip of wine? Even the Spartan women, with their fierce farewell to their menfolk about coming back with their shield or on it...thinking of their epic voyages, wishing they could share them...."

"Sounds like a cue for poetry," I said. "Unfortunately, so little seems to have survived."

She unstopped the amphora and passed it to me. "Improvise," she said.

I looked out at the sunset over the sea. As it died it seemed to strengthen, golden light flaring over the ocean's edge. I drank deep and the wine, its taste rich and wild, moved me. I spoke, surprising myself with a half-forgotten memory.

*"The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep*

*Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,*

*'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.*

*Push off, and sitting well in order smite*

*The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds*

*To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths*

*Of all the western stars, until I die.*

*It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:*

*It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,*

*And see the great Achilles, whom we knew...."*

There was a long pause. "From a poem called *Ulysses*, by a poet called Tennyson," I said. I passed the amphora back to her, stealing a quick glance at her

hair-tossed brow as she raised the earthenware vase and drank.

"Ulysses was an Ithacan, not a Spartan," she said gently.

"Does that matter?"

"Not at all. It was perfect. Thank you."

"Sailing beyond the sunset. Seeking a newer world. That's what we've done, isn't it?"

"Yes, and what I'm about to do again. I've decided to leave the colony. Go into the interior."

I was disquieted. "You have? Why?"

"I feel I've been called to take the word of God to the Darrians."

I laughed worriedly. "You're joking."

"No. I mean it."

"But - " I struggled to formulate a protest. "How can Christ have anything to do with these beings light years away from Earth?"

"We're told that His coming influenced all of those who lived on Earth before He came. If that's so, what barrier can mere distance be?"

There was a bitterness within me that the last rays of sunset, the spreading warmth of the wine, the shadowed beauty of the hillside and Rhiannon's closeness fought with, before overcoming.

"Okay, Rhiannon. I hope you find what you're looking for."

"Thanks, David. I hope you do too."

Days came and went, turning into weeks. Eventually I found myself in Calder's office.

"Sit down, David," he said. "I've been waiting for you to call. Most of the other drifters have settled now, at least on their preliminary choice."

"I know," I said.

"There's a lot to choose from out there, you know. What about the Viking enclave? The camaraderie of the feasting hall and the long-boat, travelling across misty seas to islands never visited by man. Or life in the golden age of Greece: life without complications, without the burdens of so-called progress. You can see some of the greatest plays ever written in the amphitheatres: the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, the *Electra* of Euripides, *The Wasps* by Aristophanes. Take our hypnopædic course before you go and you can hear them in the original language. You can even write your own ancient Greek tragedies and comedies and see them performed."

"I know," I said again. He painted a tempting picture. Warmed up now, he went on to journey through the vast canvas available to me, ending with the most popular main colony.

"It's life on Earth; the sky's just as beautiful, the food's just as nourishing. But without the crowds, without the grind of ambition, without centuries of institutions and convention. Whatever you came here to get away from, you're free from it in the main colony. We have our share of problems, but unlike on Earth everyone's pulling in the same direction to solve them. We need new blood. You could build a bright new future for yourself if you've a mind to."

"Yes, it's attractive. It's part of what attracted me to the Darius programme in the first place. I probably will decide on one of the enclaves. But first I need to travel into the interior."

Calder was silent for a moment. I'd thought of him before as something of a joker, if not a joke; but now he looked wise and grave and experienced.

"You're sure?" he said at last.

"I'm sure. This is another planet, a whole new world. I need to see something

of it before I settle down. I need to find the soul of the place, if that doesn't sound too pretentious."

"And perhaps you need to find yourself, eh? I understand. Seven of my year's intake decided to do the same – including me."

"I looked at him with renewed interest. "You've been outside the colony?"

"Yes. Like you, it was something I felt I had to do. And I have no regrets. But let me warn you, as I did your four other colleagues who have gone into the interior: it's not entirely safe."

I smiled wanly. "I think that's what I want. The enclaves seem too safe to me."

"They needn't be. If you settle down in one of the, well, earthier ones you can easily find yourself faced with genuine life and death choices. Once your probation period is up you're there to stay; it encourages people to live life to the full, without being constantly plagued by wondering whether they chose the right place and time. But I didn't mean that. Get into a sword fight in Imperial Rome or a medieval battle, and you know what you're letting yourself in for. You've weighed the risks against the rewards of prestige, honour and wealth. But out there...."

"Don't try to scare me off, Charles."

"I don't want to do that," he said, looking at me steadily. "I want to give you the clearest picture I can, so you know what's involved. There's a creature out there called a deathbiter, you know - small but unbelievably savage. There aren't many of them, fortunately, but if you run into one – "

"They mentioned it in the briefings."

"Then there are bogs, and precipices...if you fall and break your leg, or your neck, you'll never make it back here. And no-one's likely to find you. Not for another fourteen or fifteen years. No-one but the scavenger rodents and the other animals."

"I'll be careful."

"But most of all there are the Darrians. What do we really know about them? The negotiations after our scoutships landed were all done at long range. They're elusive, they keep out of sight. Have you ever seen a photograph of them? Our knowledge of them is half vague impression and half legend. And remember, it's their planet."

I laughed. "How can you own a planet?"

"I know," said Calder, standing up. "But they're still the natives, and we're the outsiders." He went over to a cupboard and took out a small pack on a strap. "Here," he said, giving it to me. "A survival pack. There's a knife, a firelighter, emergency rations, a short-range stunner to kill fish and small game, a first-aid kit and a geodirectional finder. It'll guide you back here – when you're ready to return."

"Thanks, Charles," I said. Our eyes met again.

"One last word. Three of my intake never came back. They might have gone native and be living with the Darrians by now; but I doubt it."

I looked away. "Perhaps they found what they were looking for."

Calder sat down again. "When will you go?"

"Tomorrow early."

"I'll meet you at the Darian Gate."

I spent the night with the Hendrys. It was a double celebration; Sue had just heard she was expecting their first child. It was a nice apartment, reminiscent of one I'd had on the East Kent coast. It had holo-TV; the programmes were different and yet the same. It also had loaded into it thousands upon thousands of films and shows from two centuries of Earth entertainment, from 3D interactive to black and white. There was a

fine hi-fi, all the latest kitchen gadgets, and plenty of Darian ales. Colin and I made a hole in his collection while Sue stuck to spritzers.

"Best of luck, David," said Colin after the third jug. "I almost wish I was going too."

I looked around me at his home. "No you don't."

"No I don't. And yet part of me does. We're happy here, happier than we ever were on Earth. There's room to breathe and be ourselves. It would be fun to see the rest of the planet, though...."

"There are plenty of unspoilt areas here; more than we'll ever get to see," offered Sue. "The main colony alone is vast, let alone the rest of the enclaves."

"True," I said. But we all knew it wasn't the same. Inside the perimeter we'd tamed the planet and recreated our past. But outside the gates it was untamed and even unknown.

I met Calder a couple of hours after dawn the next day. I had a hangover and probably not unrelatedly some doubts about the wisdom of my decision. But I gave him a smile that felt more like a grimace and he slapped me on the back.

"So long," he said. He powered down the forcefield and opened the wooden gate. It swung wide to reveal trees and scrubby grassland. I somehow had expected a road or even a path leading into the distance but of course there was nothing of the kind. Just undeveloped country.

"When you want to come back in, use the phone outside. It's connected to my office and there's always someone there. Don't be tempted to use the knife or the stunner on a Darian, by the way. It'll skin you alive."

"Another legend?"

"I think there's some truth in that one."

We stood for a while looking back at the bustling main colony, the nearly but not quite Earth. Far behind were the historical recreations, invisible from here, where men and women lived out lives of brighter colour and darker shade than had been seen on my home world for centuries. Each of them, and the main colony too, had appeal; each of them drew me with a powerful pull, just as when I'd first decided to come to Darius IV. And yet it wasn't enough. Or perhaps it wouldn't be enough until I'd been outside and come back of my own free will.

We shook hands and I stepped outside the gate. I heard it close behind me and the faint hum begin again as the forcefield activated. I walked away and didn't look back for a long time. When I did, my journey had already taken me beyond the brow of a hill and the colony was out of sight. I felt a momentary panic. All that great panoply of Earth's only offworld colony beyond the solar system, so quickly swallowed up!

I continued to walk, the panic soon subsiding. But it was replaced by other emotions no less powerful. All my life there had been buildings, structures, manmade things. Even in the earliest enclaves I was never far from a house, a temple, a statue. The trappings of man. But here there was nothing but openness and emptiness. This wasn't a walk in the countryside on Earth. In any case, there would have been other people not far away, walking dogs, listening to music. This was a walk on a different planet. I was alone; light years alone. I had a surprisingly strong pang of desire for human company. An hour behind me were people, laughing and talking, who would welcome me back. But I thought of the ridicule my abortive escape would bring and quickened my pace, my survival pack and a purifier canteen swinging at my side.

Later the sun burnt through the thick white fluffy clouds and a sky of warm

blue was revealed. My mood lightened. I was a pioneer, free to choose my future without distractions. Perhaps no human had ever walked this route before. No-one had ever seen this particular view before. I heard the fresh sound of water running nearby, made a brief detour and found a river, crystal clear down to the slicked pebbles at the bottom. I stunned a fish, built a fire and cooked lunch.

But later still my easy optimism also changed. The sun lit a bank of clouds and I was admiring the view when it hit me: that wasn't the sun at all but an alien star called Darius. Even the fish I'd eaten was an alien creature. I wasn't meant to be here; none of us were.

Shrugging off this nonsense with irritation I put out the fire, got to my feet, filled my canteen and strode onwards. The rest of the day passed slowly. Despite many stops and soon settling down to a gentle pace I felt footsore and weary.

"The long day wanes," I said aloud. My voice sounded strange in the quiet of early evening, but I noted that I was no longer panicking about nothing. I set about making a camp: mounds of heather-like grass to lie on, a fire to build, a bird in the branches of a tree nearby to stun and prepare for dinner.

After my meal I sat, sipping from my canteen, reflecting on the strangest day of my life. Stranger than the day I came aboard the *Endor* and realised I really was leaving Earth forever. Stranger than looking back through the viewscreens at our mother planet. And stranger than our first sight of Darius IV, all dark green woods and silver rivers. But even if what I'd done was crazy I had at least done it alone. I felt childishly proud of myself for a moment. My friends back on Earth would have been amazed. So would Sarah. But I didn't want to pursue that one.

In the middle of the night a sound woke me. It was a scream, hardly out before it was cut short. Or was it a nightmare? The fire had burned low and it was cool, but even so I found myself sweating as I raised up to listen. Nothing. Just a gentle breeze soughing in the trees, the sound of insects, and some indefinable rustling not far away. I didn't have a torch and it would be madness to stumble about at night. Even with a torch, I might have found it difficult to move. I looked up through the overhanging branches of a tree to unfamiliar constellations in a clear sky. Uneasily I drifted off to sleep again.

The next morning found me stiff and cold. By the sun it wasn't long after dawn but it didn't seem useful to lie there. Fruit was on the trees. From what Calder had said, most things were safe to eat. The thing to do was to try small samples and wait awhile. And anyway no doubt the first-aid kit would help. I found my hunger was greater than my worry about food poisoning; who would care, anyway? I bit into the fruit which tasted delicious, like pears in sweet toffee.

As the sun rose higher in the sky I set out to search the nearby countryside. The trees were more numerous than they had been the day before and it took longer than I expected. I had half convinced myself that what I'd heard had been a nightmare after all when I stumbled into a little clearing. There a few yards ahead of me was Doug Foster. He was lying on his back in an attitude of repose but something about him told me he was unconscious or even dead. I unstrapped my first-aid kit and ran over to him: and as I ran, I noticed he had a wool scarf around his neck. Something about that seemed wrong; and just as that thought crossed my mind the scarf unwound and hurled itself at me. Leaving a red well in Doug's throat.

Reflexes whirled out of control. I threw my hand up and something warm and alive collided with my survival pack. The contents scattered in the grass. I heard a ferocious low growling and saw the grass quiver. Then a blur of fur and teeth flew

through the air. This time it caught me. Left leg, just above the knee. Instantaneous searing pain. I cried out, as Doug had cried out. Only it was a nightmare as well. A nightmare that would never end. What seemed like a thousand teeth were burrowing through skin and muscle and I imagined them crunching through the bone. The pain was blinding, staggering; I'd never felt pain like it, never known it could fill the body like this. Blood torrenting out of my leg and onto the deathbiter, I fell to the ground as though my legs had been flailed from under me. All my weight was now on the utterly savage thing, but it didn't seem to slow down. I thought then that it never would, until I'd stopped moving forever.

I thrashed around in the grass for my knife. The edge of panic. Throbbing pain convulsed me. Then the knife was under my hand. I turned over and plunged it into the bucking giver of pain. It made a sound curiously like a sigh and grew limp. I thought it would flop to the ground but it clung on, clung even when it was hacked to bits. I had to cut into my leg to detach the mandible.

I lay back, exhausted. But after a minute I was fumbling around for my first-aid kit, cleaning the wound, stitching torn flesh with a needle and suture held in a shaking hand, wrapping bandages, swallowing painkillers and anti-infectants. And then I passed out.

When I came to it was late in the afternoon. From the weakness engulfing me it might have been the next day, or the next week. The pain was still there but it was under control. I saw a long stick in the grass near to me and dragged it over, using it to lever me into a standing position. My first thought was for Doug: he deserved a decent burial. I turned to him. But Doug was gone, as though he had never been there. The pain in my leg told me he had, but he was gone all right. No blood, no clothing. As though he'd been lifted up and taken away.

I sat for a long time, thinking. The obvious move now was to return to the colony. But my whole being rebelled against the idea. I hadn't found what I was looking for. I gathered up my kit, shouldered my canteen, and limped further into the forest. I needed nourishment and rest before deciding conclusively, but I was already fairly sure I wasn't about to return. If I could survive the deathbiter I could survive anything.

The next few days passed without incident. The pain in my leg had changed down a gear into a dull ache. I hobbled along, resting frequently. I stunned small game and fish, ate fruit from the trees. Sometimes the food made me sick, most often not. I filled my purifier canteen when I found a stream. I slept frequently.

The trees were growing together more thickly here so there was less light, but more contrast. Sometimes I walked for long periods in deep shade. At other times the sunlight would shaft down into a glade, catching insects with coloured wings and lighting up the undergrowth to emerald green. I stood transported at the sight.

At the start of the next week a new kind of ache in my leg muscles told me the ground was rising, gradually but steadily. The trees were too thick to see far, to establish any kind of landmarks. I trudged on. A gentle rain began to fall. Food had been growing scarce for a while, and the rain seemed to make it even scarcer. I looked down at my pack, thinking about how long the emergency rations would last. Or perhaps the terrain would change. Or perhaps I would return to the colony. But I knew that I would return unfulfilled.

In the afternoon I pushed through the trees into a small clearing. The cloudy sky seemed bright after the recent shadowy walk. The sky was shimmering, a lofty grey-white canopy above the green canopy of the trees.

"Hallo, David."

I turned towards the voice. Rhiannon, more beautiful than even I remembered, sat on the ground. I realised then, or perhaps admitted, what I'd been looking for all along.

"Hallo," I said simply.

"Do you have any emergency rations left? Mine are all gone."

"Of course." I sat down beside her and pulled out a silver-wrapped tray. I passed it to her and she tugged the self-heating string. Half a minute later she zipped back the cover and a savoury aroma filled the air. She ate slowly while invisible birds sang in the trees around us. I told her about Doug.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry that I didn't know him well."

"Neither did I."

I passed her my canteen. She drank.

"You drink my wine and all you offer me is water!"

I laughed. "I'll buy you a glass of the best Darian Sauvignon Blanc when we return."

She looked over to me. "I'm not going back, David. I came out to talk to the Darrians, remember? Only I can't find them. At least, I think they're out there, but they keep away...if only this thing worked the other way round." She shook her geodirectional sensor in frustration.

"Well, if they don't want to be found, there doesn't seem much use in chasing them. And anyway, I thought you came out to convert the colonists."

"I told myself that story. Almost believed it at times. But the colonists have had plenty of chance to accept the Word. Why should I make any difference? You saw them: they're all running from something, all desperate to live in their little fantasy worlds. They can't stand even mundane reality, so the ultimate reality isn't likely to appeal to them. No, they've made their choice. But the Darrians haven't yet had the chance. I can bring them that choice...." she trailed away. I looked at her face. Her cheeks were slightly flushed. I was aware of the rain increasing to a steady drizzle.

"Well, as I say, if you can't find them...and you're out of rations. Why not come back with me to the colony? You can always try again later."

"I'm afraid I can't walk any more. And you don't look as though you'll be able to carry me. I'm surprised you've made it this far."

"What do you mean you can't walk?"

"Time's running out, David. A wasting disease. I knew before I left Earth. That's why I came out into the interior. It'll give my life meaning if I can find them and give them the Word."

Her words, and the calm way in which she said them, blew a cold chill through me. More loss, more parting.

"Is there no hope?" I said gently.

"There's always hope," she said with serenity. In her face was that look of unshakeable certainty again. The rain grew stronger, rattling the leaves.

I sorted through my pack and selected the knife. I hobbled over to the edge of the trees and began to cut into the branches. At once a strange mood, almost like a smell, washed over me: a sense of being watched, and a sense of disapproval. But I continued to cut. Gathering the severed branches and the fibrous leaves I limped back to Rhiannon and lashed the branches together into a lame attempt at a shelter.

"Not much good," I said.

"It's all right." She closed her eyes. Rain ran down her translucent cheeks like tears. I wiped them with a gentle hand and she smiled, her eyes still closed.

"Why did you come to Darius?"

"I don't know now," I said. "I thought I knew: getting nowhere in a string of offices, watching my contemporaries move on, a sense of life passing me by. I thought I'd make a fresh start. I had high hopes."

"Who was the girl?"

I smiled. "Her name was Sarah."

"Nice name."

"She was a nice girl. But it didn't work out."

"So you came out all these light years to forget. Pity you hadn't lived a few centuries back. You could have joined the Foreign Legion instead."

The rain was now lashing down, stirring the grasses and the soft soil.

"This is crazy. Let me get you under the trees at least." I knelt down, half inside the makeshift shelter, and put my arm under her. I raised her up, but it was impossible. I lowered her gently back to the wet ground. Her softness, her sweet scent, our sudden closeness. Our lips met.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being here."

I lay beside her, smoothing the wet hair from her face. She opened her eyes.

"It's beautiful," she said. She rummaged in her pack and brought out something that looked like a golf ball.

"Is that a music sphere? I've heard of them."

"Then just wait until you hear them." Her fingers made tiny pressures on the sphere and perfect-fidelity sound launched out at once over the driven rain and the dripping trees. "Mozart's third violin concerto, *adagio*," she said.

We listened to the music. It was like someone who had known grief and pain and been changed by them but had put it all behind him. And could help you to do so too. It was almost too much for me as I sat there.

"Lovely, isn't it," she said. "I've always loved this music." I continued to sit, sadness filling my thoughts. She smiled a transfiguring smile. "Don't be sad. I'll soon be in the Happy Isles myself. Then I shall see Him as He is."

Something in me seemed to snap at this. I stood up in the full frenzy of the storm, waving my knife. "Help her!" I bellowed, raging against the storm like Lear on the heath. Hot tears mingled with the cool rain on my face.

And out of the rain it came, fur slick wet, moving with grace and agility. It was huge. I could understand the bear and seal analogy, but in fact as it came closer it looked like nothing but itself. Its eyes held mine, filled with intelligence, yet I knew it was utterly different to mine. We stood for an unending moment, the veil of rain coming and going between us. I dropped the knife.

"Good," it said in Darian. Its voice was high and clear. It looked at me for a moment longer, turned and was suddenly no longer there. I turned to Rhiannon, but there was no doubt she had seen it too. She leaned forward on her elbows, her eyes shining. Then there was a sound and the huge yet silky creature was back. It held out a paw full of roots. I looked questioningly at it.

"Chew slowly," it said in that same impossible voice. We took the roots and put them in our mouths. Almost at once I felt warmth diffusing through me and pain slipping away. I quickly found I could walk without my stick. With amazement, I saw Rhiannon getting to her feet. I looked at the creature with hope and it answered me with an even stare which might have held sadness.

"A stimulant only. My name means Swimmer. Do you have names?"

"Rhiannon and David," said Rhiannon.

"So. Strange and true. Follow me."

Swimmer led us through the clearing and into the trees on the other side. The rain was gradually lessening. I walked alongside the Darian, its damp body giving off a pleasant scent like new-mown hay, mingling with the freshness of wet ferns and bark.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To meet others like me. Is that not what you want?"

"It's what my companion wants most of all."

"And you, David?" It said my name so strangely I hardly recognised it.

"I don't know. I had high hopes of this planet...."

"And we have high hopes of you."

"Of the colonists? Is that why you allowed us to settle here?"

Swimmer made a churring noise that might have been contempt, amusement, surprise at my ignorance. "Come," it said, leading us off to the side of our route. Without warning we found ourselves swaying at the top of a peak which looked down to a vast panorama. Sun was pouring through the grey clouds, still heavy with rain but moving away. Down below was the colony and its enclaves. For a moment it seemed impossibly large to me, areas the size of whole Earth countries; and then it seemed no more than a toy.

"The settlement is nothing. A little piece of your home. Nothing can come of it."

"Then why do you allow it?"

"For the few who venture out, as you have. You fulfil our expectations."

I was about to ask a question when I saw a stirring in the wet grass that was instantly horribly familiar to me.

"Death – !" I shouted, but before I could even complete the word the snarling animal was leaping at Swimmer. Fast as it was, though, Swimmer was faster. Its paws flashed in the air, there was a snap, and the deathbiter was limp and unmoving. Swimmer flung it into the grass. I remembered Calder's legend.

"One of those creatures killed a friend of mine," I said.

"We know. We found his body and bore him away. We know that your kind buries its dead in the ground. We did it for him, before the scavengers came. And we watched over you until you woke."

"Why?"

"We value all sentient life. For us it is the highest thing."

"Yet you killed the deathbiter."

"Those kind have no memories, only ferocity and killing."

We walked on, away from the precipice and back into the forest. Life was stirring again after the downpour.

"What do you mean, no memories?" said Rhiannon, catching up with us.

"We share memories. I hold the memories of all my people since time had meaning. When my body dies, my memories will live on, enriching our race."

"All of your people, inside you?" I said.

"Yes. Everything we experience is passed on, stored in those who live. Nothing is wasted. Nothing ever dies."

"I believe that too," said Rhiannon.

Swimmer turned its huge head to her. "Will you share memories with us?" We looked at each other and nodded. Swimmer looked into our eyes and turned, going deeper into the forest.

As we continued to walk, Rhiannon grew weaker and began to stumble. I asked Swimmer for more of the stimulant, but the Darian explained that the herb did not grow here. Instead it caught her up in its powerful yet gentle paws, striding along untroubled by her weight.

Afternoon turned to evening and we came to a hill dominating a large clearing. A fire burned, sending sweet-scented smoke across the grass. Several other Darrians emerged from the trees, apparently unsurprised to see us. Swimmer introduced them to us as Bright, Berry-eater and Tree. It set Rhiannon down gently in the grass. I sat next to her.

The Darrians talked briefly, then Swimmer turned back to us.

"The sounds you made in the forest, which I will share later with my people: they were like nothing I have ever heard. Do you have more?"

Rhiannon took the music sphere out of her bag, then turned to me.

"What is the date? I've lost all track of time."

"I don't know. Mid to late December according to the colony's calendar."

"Perfect." She selected another track with a twist of the controls, and music once again poured out into the clearing. Only this time it was not Mozart but something much earlier. It instantly caused a hush among the Darrians, rapidly joined by others who moved in soundlessly on silent paws. I don't know what it meant to them, but to me it evoked all the lost spirit of Christmas; the childhood hopes and ingenuousness; mystery swirling in the darkness. It started low and even, rose, dipped and soared. It came from a simpler, more direct, more devout time.

"Sixteenth century carol," said Rhiannon. The music ended and she began to sing it again. "*Sweet was the song the Virgin sang...*" And at that, the Darrians joined in with their unearthly voices. Strangely different, and yet the same. The carol had seemed complex to me, not repetitious like the better known ones. Despite this, the Darrians followed every nuance.

"The deep moans round with many voices," chuckled Rhiannon. Then the chuckle turned into a cough.

Tree came over to us. "We want to know more of what the song was saying," it said.

"I'll try to tell you."

"Save your voice," it said. "Your memory will tell us everything."

Berry-eater approached with shells containing thick liquid.

"Drink," it said.

We drank: the fire was piled high: shadows danced in the dark. Then a new song came from the Darrians, who now numbered in their hundreds: as sweet as the carol, yet wild, restless, a song to take you voyaging across the deep until you died. And as they sang and we drank, our minds seemed to lose anchor and drift into the sky. New memories flooded my brain. I knew what it was to live and die a Darian, understood their fierce honouring of sentient beings, their rejection of machines and man-made things for interaction, intermingling, interbeing.

As well as this weight of Darian memories, which would have been overwhelming if they were not also energising and life-giving, I shared Rhiannon's mind. I was closer to her than I'd ever been to another human; indeed, she and the Darrians, dead and living, were far more to me now than all the humans I'd ever

known. I saw her well-buried sense of insecurity, her fear of failure, driven down by sheer efforts of will. I knew her unshakeable certainty, her faith, her love for and her sense of being loved by God. And in there somewhere was a space for me: human love, sweet sadness that we couldn't stay together longer. All of this would have felt like eavesdropping except that my mind was open to hers too. We were each other, just as we were Darrians who lived and died and loved and created. We had found what we had sought, just as the Darrians had. I turned to her and kissed her for the last time.

Two days later, Swimmer and I stood at the edge of the clearing. The two of us had buried Rhiannon and the whole Darrian people had honoured her life. But for them, and for me as well, she had not died. All that she had been, all that she had known, was part of them. Just as they had been part of her and would for the rest of my life be part of me.

I was ready now for Calder's colony. Not the modern part, I thought, but somewhere to reflect and create. Those amphitheatres seemed even more enticing.

"Were your expectations fulfilled?" I asked.

"More than fulfilled," said Swimmer. "And they will be again when your shining ship comes again to this world. The best is always yet to come."

I touched my hand to its warm fur and our eyes met again. I looked down to pull the geodirectional finder from my pack, and when I looked up Swimmer was gone. The best kind of farewell. But up on the hill standing out against the clouds and the soft blue sky was a huge cross made from two tree trunks lashed firmly together. I smiled and began the long trek back to the colony.