

# SIREN SONG AT MIDNIGHT

Dave Wolverton

When I was a girl of ten, my father, Stefán Elegante, worked as a paleogeneticist for the Pacific Fisheries Commission, trying to restore extinct tuna and marlin, dolphins and blue squid. He took me to his lab and showed me how he pulled bits of bone from fossils and dyed the DNA so his computers could read it and begin building living replicas of the cells: “See, Josephina!” he said, pointing to remnants of a cell under his microscope, rainbow-hued ropes of DNA. “You see, the fishes are still there! Waiting for us to bring them back to life, and the DNA is a manual to tell us how.” His eyes glowed as he spoke, and I didn’t understand half of what he said. “This is old DNA. I like the old stuff best. DNA that is a hundred years old is better than that cloned from a living cell, for when a creature is living, so many chemical processes happen from moment to moment that sections of DNA get torn loose and often return into place reversed. But a cell that is a million years old is sometimes in better shape. The cells heal themselves. In old dead cells, the chemical bonds between amino acids are so strong that reversed DNA corrects itself, you see!”

He gazed at me a moment with his solemn brown eyes, saw my confusion. “Don’t worry. Someday, you will understand all of this, and more,” he said, kissing my forehead. “You know, I sometimes wonder, if we destroy our world, do you think God could take this old DNA and rebuild us?” he asked, sincerely awed by this marvel. I saw his fossils and understood only that, like God, he brought creatures to life from the dust of the Earth. On that day, I decided to become a paleogeneticist.

But somehow his hope died. Just as a wasp will lay its eggs in pear blossoms, corrupting their fruit, so despair corrupted him. Once he dared to dream of a restored world with vast rain forests, alive with the cries of macaws.

*Wait. I am confused, exhausted to the bone. I’m not sure what to say. I must turn off the recorder for a moment .*

[Two seconds of silence.]

*I think I began too early. I know I’ll live for only another few minutes, and I must record this while I can. Let me begin with the arrest of my father:*

Last September, five plankton-harvesting ships exploded in a single evening. From childhood I’ve seen these Chinese ships off the Chilean coast-floating ceramic cities whose brilliant halogen lights sputter like fallen stars in the evening out on the horizon. During the attack, I was working at El Instituto Paleobiológico in Cartagena, extracting DNA from fossilized dimetrodons. I heard a distant explosion, almost a popping noise, and ran out into the evening. One plankton-harvesting ship had exploded on the horizon, and where it had floated, a great violet curtain of spray was rising into the night, higher and higher, looking almost like a thunderhead. Beside me, a small boy cried, “What is that!” and his mother, who perhaps wanted to protect him, said, “It is only angels, washing the curtains of heaven in the ocean.”

I thought India must have attacked China, that the Plankton Wars had started again, that they might blow all the ships. But if the Plankton Wars had begun again, they did so with a twist, for that night the Rio Negro dam blew in Brazil, and two million died as black torrents flooded down the Amazon.

A few hours later, the media revealed that the bombers were *chimeras*, genetically-engineered men that General Torres had modified to better adapt to life on other planets. They were an aquatic breed and had lived off the coast of Chile for years. By morning, the streets were ablaze with news of the attack by “Los Sirenos,” the Sirens. The detonation of seven bombs was heralded as if it were a major war, and the Alliance of Nations began to hunt the Sirens. The news fascinated me, not because I longed for vengeance against the chimeras, but because the work of the genetic engineers who created these beings was similar to my own, yet a far greater art.

After the attack, the news showed Brazilian mothers mourning for children who had washed out to sea as the Amazon flooded; showed twisted wreckage, tiny orphans desperate for food. One commentator told how it could only have been a few Sirens who were gallantly bidding for control of Earth’s waterways, trying to stop the plankton harvesters that continually stole food from their mouths. But his voice was drowned by others who decried the Sirens’ “crime against humanity.” Experts paraded through the media, telling how destruction along the Rio Negro was only the beginning. They said millions in China and India would starve without the plankton harvesters, and they hinted hunger would strike in South America because of the loss of our fisheries.

My father had risen to become Director for the Pacific Fisheries Commission, so I called him on commlink to ask if these reports were accurate. He weighed each word, saying, “The Chinese pay so little for fishing rights, we won’t miss it. In three months, they’ll be harvesting like always.” He sounded harried, tired, and I imagined he was under great pressure.

For a couple of days my friend Rosalinda recorded news holes about the chimeras. We planned to watch the holos for entertainment, but as the holos displayed, I was horrified. Our Marines hooked electronic sniffers to stunners that looked like torpedoes; with these they hunted the Sirens by scent. When they scored a hit, they dragged the stunned Siren from the water, shrieking and flapping its tail. The sirens had pale blue scales covering their bodies, the color of the summer sky on the horizon, and icy green eyes and hair the silver of mountain water. Their women were delicate, with an unearthly beauty, and their cries as they were dragged from the waters sounded like the song of dolphins mingled with a human scream.

Most captured Sirens were women and children who could not swim fast enough to evade the stunners, and the powerful chemical jolt of the stunners was too much for them. Many women and children died. As we watched the children cling to dead mothers wrapped in seaweed, and as we listened to the wails of pain and grief, the horror struck in a way we would not have understood if we had seen the single broadcast of each capture as it happened. We lost our innocence, and Rosalinda ended up hugging me, offering me comfort late into the night. After that, I had no stomach for news. I avoided listening to it, did not think about it. I tried to put it out of mind.

Then, my world changed. On September 15 as I worked in my lab, a man crept in—a pale man with an effeminate face, dressed in putrid-smelling street clothes, carrying a metal bar. His hand bled as if he’d cut it while prying the back door open. He stalked toward me nervously, sweat glistening on his brow, swinging the bar into his palm, watching side hallways for signs of others. My coworkers had gone home an hour before. We were alone. The way he looked, I thought I would be lucky if he only raped me.

“Josephina,” he said quickly. “Josephina Elegante? Daughter to Stefán?” I nodded dumbly, backed away. He lurched toward me. “Here, get these to your father! It is *mem-set!*” He held out two small gelatin capsules the color of urine.

“What?” I asked, so frightened I did not know what to do.

He looked at me strangely, smeared the blood from his hand across his shirt. “Mem-set—a mind-wiping

drug. It keeps one's memories from being scanned. You must give it to your father, for he has secrets that he wants to keep concealed, even beyond the grave."

"What? Are you crazy?" I asked, backing away. And I worried, for it seemed obvious he was crazy.

His eyes suddenly widened. "You do not know?" he asked. "Your father has been arrested for giving explosives to the Sirens. It is on the news even as we speak! He has been charged with high treason and murder. He will surely be executed. As his only relative, you will be allowed to attend the execution. You must give these to him before he dies!" He held out the drugs, watching the halls as if he believed the secret police would burst into the room.

"Wait," I said. I thumbed the subdural pressure switch behind my right ear and jacked into a simulcast news holo, keeping it on multitask so I could watch the stranger at the same time. My father, Stefán Elegante, was shown huddling among what must have been twenty Allied Marine troops, all of them in their space-blue armor. They rushed through the streets of Cartagena in a block, and peasants tossed bricks and burning sacks, shouting "Murderer!" The peasants looked confused. They did not know my father's crime and functioned only as a mob. The narrator said, "Now we see Stefán Elegante, alleged traitor to his species, rushing for cover." I stood in shock, as my father boarded a military transport. I jacked out of the newscast, thumbed my commlink again and read in my father's code, but he did not answer the call. I jacked back into the newscast: it showed my father on a small boat offshore from our beach home in Concepción, unloading boxes into the waiting arms of the Sirens. The reporter said the boxes held explosives.

I jacked out in shock, for I knew that this was all some magnificent lie, knew my father was innocent despite the holos. What was their evidence? Pictures of boxes?

"Please," the stranger said. "I'm a friend. I'm only one of dozens who helped give your father weapons for the Sirens. Many others like me still hope for a restored world. Yet your father knows who we are. His memories will convict us. Alliance laws forbid the police from scanning the memories of criminals while they live, but once your father is executed, then his right to privacy dies with him, and Alliance surgeons will slice away his cerebral tissue so they can scan his memories at leisure. He knows this. He promised to take the mem-set. We all promised to take mem-set if we were caught. When you go to the execution, hold the capsules between your cheek and teeth until you get them to Stefan, then have him bite them. This is a powerful dose—enough for a dozen people, but you must get it to him at least two minutes before the execution. Once he breaks the capsules, the mem-set will form restriction enzymes. The membranes of his neural cells will harden, and the DNA in his brain will be chopped into pieces, destroying all his memories. Understand?"

The stranger wrapped my fingers around the capsules. "If any of us could hope to get past security to your father, we would gladly take this task upon ourselves. Please, save us! We are desperate!" he said, then he turned and ran.

I stood for a long time, holding the capsules, wondering what to do. I could not believe this stranger, and I wondered if it were some plot to discredit my father. That evening, I began trying to obtain permission to see my father—

[Two seconds of silence.]

*I'm sorry. I had to turn the recorder off. I can't think. This day has exhausted me. I am so angry that they call my father a "traitor to his species." He loved every species. Perhaps he loved them too much. As I record these words I am sitting in my terrarium at El Instituto Paleobiológico de Colombia—the institute my father funded—feeding my pet Euparkeria from a bag of eggs. The*

*Euparkeria* are a small dinosaur from the Early Mesozoic, the earliest age of dinosaurs, and they are a branch of thecodonts, the first true dinosaurs. They are the size of geese, with long graceful necks as delicate as a pianist's fingers, tiny front legs, and forest-green skin. On their backs are yellow-white speckles, the color that the primeval sun must have cast as it burned through fern jungles. One *Euparkeria* licks at an egg with a long olive-green tongue, cleaning the egg yolk from inside a shell, looking for all the world like a small, wingless dragon.

My father used to say that *Euparkeria* are an important link in the chain of life. From them sprang many species—birds and pterosaurs, meat-eating carnosaurs, saurischian dinosaurs like the *Brontosaurus* and *Supersaurus*, and ornithischians, such as the *Triceratops* and *Ankylosaurus*. If each higher animal species were a branch on a tree, the *Euparkeria* would be close to the tree's root. They are one great main trunk from which higher animals evolved, while at the top of the tree would be an insignificant twig, a bud without fruit: mankind.

My father was not a traitor to our species. He only realized that we look on ourselves and think that instead of a twig, we are the whole tree, that we are the crown of creation instead of only another stem.

Anyway, my father was a military prisoner, and despite my pleas I was forbidden to speak to him before the trial.

My friends disappeared, pretended not to know me. Even Rosalinda, a girl I've known since childhood, closed the door when I tried to speak to her. She shouted at me through the door, told me to go away, and she was crying, saying that the secret police had come to question her. At first I was angry and hurt, but her family had no political connections, and I knew it was better to keep my distance from her.

I accomplished nothing at work, did not eat. I could not ignore the instinct that drove me to believe in my father's innocence. I'd spoken to him at least three times a week for years—knew him better than anyone, and I knew he was incapable of murder. I searched his office, looking for proof of his innocence. His appointment books were gone, and only his computer logs were on-line. I sat late into the night, reading notes about the various genomes of extinct fishes, trying to extract some clue to prove his innocence.

I imagined that my father had been lured into this. Could it have been that he thought he was giving food to the Sirens? I wondered. That would be like him. He could have handed out boxes, unaware that weapons were stored in them, and now that he'd been caught, he would nobly protect the others with his life, even though they betrayed him.

I so wanted this scenario to be true that I looked for evidence to support it. I read until my eyes burned from viewing every computer log, until perspiration trickled down my back. Late that night, an orderly came to the office, Mavro Hidalgo, an old man who had worked for my father since before I was born.

"Josephina, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Looking for something," I said. "I don't know what—anything to prove my father's innocence."

Senor Hidalgo shook his head sadly. "I've already been through all those records," he said. "I've already thought about it. You want proof that Don Stefan is innocent, but you won't find the proof in scraps of paper."

I looked at old Senor Hidalgo, and my eyes became wet, and I blurted, "Are you saying he is guilty? You believe these lies?"

But Senor Hidalgo shook his head. “You don’t need papers. The truth of his innocence is in your heart.” He sat next to me, smelling of sweat and beans. He placed his leathery hand on my shoulder. “You know, your father has been sick for many years, suffering from depression.” I nodded, for I’d known this. “When he was young, he was worse. For days at a time he would laugh and his eyes would glow, and he would come to work practically walking on the ceiling! Oh, he was so happy, he did not need wings to fly.

“But then, the smile would fade and he’d come to work and you would see him drag, as if wrapped in chains, and he’d sit for days and do nothing. We were all afraid for him, thinking he might kill himself, so one day I asked, ‘Don Stefán, why put yourself through this? You could cure this malady with a pill! Then, why do you suffer?’ and do you know what he said?”

“No,” I answered.

“Your father told me that the time he spent flying through the air more than rewarded him for the time he spent in the abyss. He said, ‘Mavro, I know you worry for me, and I know I could take the cure. But I love my illness. You people—how can you appreciate life as I do? How can you live even one moment with passion? It is all so grand, so beautiful. Even when I am lost in the blackest well of midnight, *life* tastes so sweet to me! Life is so sweet!’ ”

Senor Hidalgo patted my shoulder, told me to go home, then began to straighten the office. I knew he was right. I didn’t need more proof of my father’s innocence than the life he’d led. My father could not have given explosives to the Sirens. I’d seen his innocence in the tender way he fed his fish by hand at the aquariums, in the way he kissed the pain away from my childhood injuries, in the way he relished to draw a breath. Life, all life, was too precious to be wasted.

That night, I drove to Concepción, to the sea house, and arrived at dawn. The police had scavenged the house until it was in ruins. I cleaned the mess, walked the beaches in the mornings. I kept the mem-set hidden in my room, and twice the police came to question me, always asking names of my father’s friends, of those I’d seen him with. I answered by declaring his innocence.

The details of my father’s trial were never publicized. I learned through the news that my father was convicted of treason and accused of stealing a vast fortune through graft. He was found guilty of complicity in the murder of two million Brazilians and was sentenced to die. I find it ironic that they convicted him in a secret trial, yet respected his right to privacy so much that they refused to pry his memories from him. Perhaps for them it was just a waiting game, and they believed they would get his accomplices in time.

After that, I learned that a news special would be broadcast by a famous reporter, a gringo cyborg named Todd Bennett who promised to have an “Interview with a Madman.” The interview was advertised for days, and I could not sleep because I wanted so badly to see my father, to hear his voice. I watched the holo at home, enlarging the image so it filled the entire living room.

When the interview started, they showed Señor Bennett wearing a smooth white tungsten half-face with six glittering eyes that recorded all he saw in different spectra. The bottom half of his face was still human. He wore a glorious multicolored cape of light, which contrasted with my father’s drab attire of prison blue, and it struck me that Señor Bennett knew the effect that his dress would have, for he looked as if he were a beautiful angel of light sent down to torture some damned soul in a tired hell.

“Can I begin by asking a few questions?” Señor Bennett said in flawless Spanish, using over-precise inflections common to those who speak with the aid of a translation chip.

My father wiped sweat from his face, pulled his long hair back over his shoulder, and looked out the

window of a small cell. “You can ask,” he said.

“Fine,” Señor Bennett said. “Then let’s establish your guilt. Records show that for months you fed the Sirens. In itself, that was admirable. But what caused you to commit the sin, this crime against humanity, of shipping them explosives?”

My father looked at the cyborg and said, “I am a fantasist, a dreamer. That is my only sin: to dream and hope.”

The cyborg smiled placatingly. “Hope is no sin. It’s one of the three great abiding virtues. When we die, we take it with us to heaven.” I laughed, for I was correct in my assessment of the cyborg. He did want to disguise himself as an angel, and he was too stupid to be subtle about it.

“Hope has done me no good,” my father said. “You want to establish my guilt. It has been established in court. I masterminded the War of the Sirens—if you can call it a war. I gave them explosives. It was not a sin.”

“Surely,” Bennett countered, “you do not expect us to believe that you acted alone in this act of terrorism? You have no expertise in explosives. You could not have trained the Sirens.”

“Believe what you will. If I had accomplices, I will die before I reveal their names. I will die!”

“You can’t protect them forever,” the cyborg affirmed. My father shrugged. Bennett asked, “Tell us why you aided the murder of over two million people?”

“When I was appointed as Director of Pacific Fisheries, I hoped to save the world,” my father said. “Ever since we first raped the Sea of Cortés and destroyed the world’s richest oyster beds, we Latin Americans have sold the spoils of our oceans to the highest bidder. First the oysters, then the sailfish and tuna, dolphin and manta—till we were left with nothing but algae and plankton.”

“One moment,” Señor Bennett asked. “These animals you mention, are they food animals that became extinct?”

“Yes,” my father said, “*temporarily* extinct food animals.”

Señor Bennett smiled, “I don’t eat flesh, myself.”

My father roared, “You eat your own children!” Señor Bennett lurched back as if my father would strike him. My father stood and began pacing the cell. “When I was appointed director, I thought, ‘Here I am at last: a man who can’t be corrupted by graft! I can restore the ancient fisheries, rebuild seabeds laid waste by centuries of pollution.’ Today, because of continual algae harvests, our atmosphere has seventeen percent less oxygen than when I was born. You worry about the poor who have no food—what will you say to those poor in a generation, when the seas are dead and they have no air to breathe?”

“When I took office, even the trash fish that used to eat our turds had become extinct.” My father paced the floor, moving so fast, speaking so fast, he almost gibbered, “So I committed the sin of hope. As Director of Pacific Fisheries, I sought funds to resurrect extinct fishes and phytozoa, give the oceans time to rebuild. But I received only promises of money. I tried to reduce the amount of plankton the Chinese could harvest, but Director Nestor de la Luz told me to keep silent. He said the Chinese paid too well and that we would have to let the harvests continue for another year. We were rebuilding after the war with the Socialistas, and he said we needed money for the reconstruction, so money never came to me. It took months and years before I realized I was only paid to be a figurehead—no one really wanted me to

restore the fisheries.”

“Is that why you betrayed your species?” Señor Bennett asked in a cutting voice. “Because you were frustrated in your efforts to reduce the harvest? Because you wanted to be more than a figurehead?” He was baiting my father, and I hated him for it.

“No!” my father said. “Emotions had nothing to do with it. For years I enforced the quotas as best I could, but when Nestor died and I took his place, I found that fisheries money hadn’t been siphoned off for reconstruction: it had been going into Nestor’s pockets all along! He’d stolen from us! And at the same time, I learned that for years Torres’ chimeras had begged us to halt the plankton harvests. The Sirens were starving. Nestor had kept their pleas hidden, fearing that if people knew the truth, they might protect the fisheries here, and it would cut into the income he earned from graft.

“But I knew that no one would care. We wouldn’t stop the harvests, so I took the bribes from the Chinese, just as all my predecessors had done, but instead of pocketing the money, I bought explosives!”

My father’s eyes became wild. I wondered if he’d been drugged for benefit of the viewers. He sat down and then stood up again immediately and paced the room, back and forth, quicker than you would believe possible.

“Truly, I hoped to wake you all, but the explosions only dull your ears! You kill your own children. I pity the poor who will not be able to eat or breathe or escape this planet. Someday they will remember me as a hero for trying to stop this madness while we yet had something to save! We are a diseased branch on the tree of life, and because of us, the whole tree will fall into ruin. I commit the sin of hope no more!” My father began raving, and a curious light shone from his eyes. I don’t think he saw the reporter any longer, saw nothing but his own death, for he cursed the world.

Despite his confession, I did not believe he was guilty. I was angry with his accomplices and wondered why the truly guilty party, the person who had trained the Sirens to use explosives, did not step forward.

All that night, I remembered my father’s words, “I will die before I reveal their names. I will die!” Was that a plea? I wondered: Did he really want the mem-set so badly that he would almost announce it to the world? I sat in my room, replayed the interview. The man in the holo, the convict, did not look like my father. He did not look like some gentleman, nobly protecting men more wicked than himself. He looked like a killer, eaten by guilt and rage, unrepentant for his murders, and as I watched him again and again, pacing his cell like a leopard, I began to consider: My father’s illness had made him passionate, a man quickly moved by both joy and despair. He spent so much time walking in that dark abyss that I wondered: Could some Siren’s song at midnight, sung while my father was deep in despair and at his most vulnerable, have drawn him to his destruction? If, at just the right moment, the Sirens pleaded for weapons instead of food, would my father have succumbed?

*As I record this, I’ve been remembering how when my father put me in charge of El Instituto Paleobiológico, he said, “Once you show people that we paleogeneticists can recreate life from the Mesozoic, they will see that there are no limits to what we can do. The concept of extinction will fall away, and we will be free to rebuild this world, turn it into a Garden of Eden.”*

*Such was my father’s hope. But six years ago I recreated the Euparkeria and the world has regarded my work with meager curiosity and some fear. It was then that I first realized that my father’s assessment of the world was wrong. He wanted to recreate rain forests, restore oceans to their pristine conditions; but once people saw my dinosaurs, they did not unite with our cause. In government hearings, bureaucrats decried the cost of such an effort. They said it would take generations to rebuild this world, that such an effort was impractical and would bankrupt nations.*

*My father told them that an effort that took five generations would repay itself for a hundred thousand generations to come. Yet his talk was all for nothing. People eyed my father with the same curiosity and fear that they showed my dinosaurs .*

*Curiosity and fear. Here in Cartagena, we have a great zoo where they have begun to exhibit some dinosaurs, especially the fierce flesh-eaters of the Jurassic. Many peasants fear I will create such monsters, and that they will stalk the ghettos and eat their children. Ah well, it is shortly past noon. My father has been dead for more than two hours. I feel tired, and my tongue and mouth are going numb, so I must hurry and record these words:*

After the newscast, I pressed the small yellow capsules of mem-set between my fingers, wondering how much pressure it would take to release the liquid inside. I worried that the poisons might escape if the capsules came in contact with my saliva, so I spat on them, then watched to make sure that the capsules not disintegrate. I remembered a story of an old Socialista general who was captured in Argentina, and he'd poisoned himself with mem-set. I jacked into the computer network and called up the story, learned how he had taken the mem-set and lain paralyzed in his cell. Despite all his captors could do, he died within hours. The article noted that mem-set, because it is catalyzed by uric acid which is a natural byproduct of dying cells, is perhaps the only drug that is more effective in a deceased person than in a living being. Yet it is also deadly—for uric acid is present in small amounts in every human.

In the early morning, I walked the beach and looked out to sea, and among the ghost crabs that scuttled across the beach like something from a dream I saw a dozen gulls flapping above a heap that looked like a corpse. I ran to it and found a child, a Siren of palest blue, wrapped in red kelp, drowning in the open air. She was gasping, and her eyes were rolled back. I dragged her back to the water and held her under the waves. I watched up and down the beach, afraid someone would see what I was doing, and a moment later a female Siren swam at my ankles in the foam and thrust her head out.

“Thank you,” the Siren sang, and I looked into her deep green eyes and saw gratitude burning there. For days I'd been depressed and frightened, but I looked in her eyes and felt only warmth and peace. The gentleness in that creature's eyes was so convincing, so alien, that I could not imagine the Sirens killing humans. I wondered, when the Sirens blew the dam on the Rio Negro, could they have been aware that so many humans would die? Could creatures of the sea conceive how vulnerable we humans would be in their element? Later that day I saw the Allied Marines in the bay with their black gunships, dropping torpedoes into the water, hunting for the mother and her child.

After less than two months, the authorities declared the War of the Sirens to be over. The Marines imprisoned six hundred of them in secure holding tanks in Jamaica. I suppose the rest of them died. The Alliance slated my father's execution date, making him a single sacrificial lamb. I found nothing to prove either his innocence or guilt.

[Two seconds of silence.]

The Alliance did not reveal my father's location before his execution. All last night I paced my room, waiting for them to call to tell me where the execution would be held. At dawn, commlink tones sounded in my head. A woman told me to come to Camp Bolívar, outside Cartagena. I rode to the Marine camp in a taxi, too nervous to drive, and I found a military shuttle armed with neutron cannons warming its engines just inside the gates. Two police scanned me for weapons and ushered me into the shuttle with a dozen guards. I knew even before we left the coast that we were heading for the desert—the soldiers in the shuttle were adjusting the color settings on their body armor so that it turned an ivory shade, the color of alkali soil. The sun shining through the shuttle windows reflected from their visors as if each helmet were a single white star opal.

We thundered south for fifteen minutes, plummeted into a desert ghost town high in the Andes. The portals to the shuttle slid open and my guards scurried like sow bugs from beneath the shadow of an overturned rock. They dropped to the ground and covered the old limestone buildings with their pulse rifles. The cold mountain air hit me, and a cloud of smoky-gray dust and chaff swirled up from the shuttle's landing skids. I stepped out and surveyed the town: the morning sun cast long blue shadows across each fold of the mountains, across each jutting stone. The light was so intense that my eyes could not focus on objects in the shadows. Everything was either black or white in this hard land; there was no room for grays.

From the door of one stone building a dark little mestizo squinted at the bright sunlight. He wore the space-blue uniform of the Alliance Marines and smoked a thin cigar. He straightened his back, tossed his cigar to the dirt, and ground it under his heel as if it were a locust. "Señorita Elegante," he said, "I am Major Gutierrez. The press will be here shortly, and you will not have much time to spend alone with your father before the . . . ceremony."

"Fine," I said, shaking. I held the capsules behind my teeth, hoping he would not search me. He ushered me to the tiny stone building, and my hope rose. The facility was a prison, hundreds of years old with antiquated steel cages for the criminals, though all the cells were empty. I thought that if my father were kept in such a facility, it would be easy to pass the mem-set to him.

We walked down a long corridor to a darkened cell, and I saw my father huddled in a corner, sobbing. He was sweating profusely, as if he had labored in the hot sun, so that his hair hung to the side of his head like a damp black rag, and his jaw was set with fear. A soft orange glow in the air around his cell showed that a repulsion field had been hastily installed. Two armored guards and a priest stood outside the cell. I would not be able to get the mem-set to him.

"Can I go into the cell?" I asked Major Gutierrez.

"I am sorry," the major answered, "but, no."

"Can I speak with him alone?"

"No," the major answered, but he ordered a guard to follow him as he left, affording a little more privacy. The priest would have left also, but my father beckoned, "No, stay! Please. I want you to hear my confession."

"Father," I said, "I'd have come sooner, but no one would tell me where you were."

"What does it matter?" he said, and he stood and looked out a small window. He placed his palms on the stone wall. His hands shook.

"It matters to me," I answered. "It matters very much. It matters to your friends." My father seemed so despondent, that I wanted to see the hopeful fire that had once burned in his eyes, so I said, "I saw a Siren three days ago, a child. She washed up near the beach house. I noticed her only because a flock of gulls had gathered, waiting for her to die. Her skin was purpled, and her gills and fins were chafed. I pulled her to the shallows and held her underwater to breathe. After a moment, her mother swam up and took the child out to sea. The mother thanked me. If she were here, perhaps she would thank you, too."

I do not know why I told my father this in public. Perhaps I was angry with the Alliance, and wanted the guards to arrest me—helping the Siren had been an act of treason. I felt that the government was corrupt, and I wanted the guards to prove to me how evil they had become.

"It was the pollution," my father said, as if he were lecturing one of his classes in paleogenetic

engineering. “The acidic water makes their gills itch, so the Sirens come to the beach to let the sand wash through their gills and scratch them. Sometimes their gills fill with silt, and as they strangle they pass out and wash to shore.” He fell silent a moment, his voice changed, filling with despair. “You should have let the gulls have that child! You should have let her die! She will starve if the pollution doesn’t get her first. Better to let the child die!”

“How can you say that?” I asked. His dark eyes held no hope or solemnity, only crazed despair. He got up and paced across his cell, back and forth, full of frantic energy, and I wondered what had happened to him during the Alliance interrogations, wondered if he were sane. I wanted to ask if he were guilty of treason to his species. I wanted to ask if he had really given the Sirens weapons, just as I had wanted to ask for weeks, but at that moment I was suddenly too afraid to ask.

“Father,” I said, “I love you.”

He nodded, bobbing his chin with a lunatic grin. “*Por supuesto*. Of course, of course,” he said, as if my love were a given. He was shaking, and he began to cry, then suddenly burst into a fit of laughter. “How is your work? How are the *Euparkeria* ?” he asked, not even looking at me, pacing.

“They are fine,” I lied. I couldn’t tell him that the government had seized our bank accounts. They claimed that, like his little private war, my father had funded my research with graft. I did not have enough money to feed my dinosaurs for another week, so I made arrangements for the zoo to take them.

He continued pacing across the room, licking his lips, caught in the web of his thoughts. I spoke his name twice, but he did not answer. He swore softly. I’d never seen him like this, never in such despair.

I so wanted him to be happy. I tried to touch him through the repulsion field, and said, “Father, even now, doesn’t your life taste sweet?”

My father gazed at me, as if trying to pierce my thoughts, then spat on the floor. I stepped away, and in that moment I realized that he rejected life. Despite my childish faith, my father was guilty of murder.

Gutierrez came to escort me from the room, back down the corridors of the old prison to a walled court. In the courtyard stood a dozen dignitaries, as many reporters, and six Alliance Marines with projectile rifles. My father walked into the bright sunlight in company with the priest. My father’s hands and feet were shackled, so he took tiny, clumsy steps, pulling at his chains.

A hawk was soaring on the thermal updrafts, and my father stopped to watch it sail over a ridge. “My God,” my father said, “what does it find to eat here?” He looked across the desert toward the plains, and said to the priest, “Beyond those valleys, there were once rain forests. Great, endless forests.”

One Marine fidgeted with his rifle. Until that moment, I do not think I believed the execution would take place. I somehow hoped that others would recognize my father’s innocence, that the great wise leaders of Earth would stoop to save him. I looked at the rifles, and a thin scream issued from my lips, and I bit it back, tried to control myself. The major escorted my father to a wall and stood with him a moment. Everything was so quiet.

The major said, “Señor, do you want a blindfold?”

My father looked at the ground and shook his head and sighed. Inside his cell he had been sweating, depressed, but the cool morning air dried his sweat, and I imagined that he was almost glad to finally finish it.

“It is traditional to offer a cigar,” the major said. My father shook his head, still staring at the ground.

“Any last words, Señor Elegante? Last requests?” My father only shook his head. One reporter coughed.

“I have a last request!” I shouted, and the major looked up at me. “Can I speak to my father alone, only for a moment, to say good-bye?”

“I am sorry,” the major said, “but no.”

“A kiss? Can I kiss my father good-bye?”

The major looked up at me, sighed. “If you wish.”

I ran to my father. Everyone was watching, and there was no way to pass the mom-set to him. I was afraid he might swallow the capsules instead of break them, and I had no way to tell him how to use the drug, so I burst the capsules between my teeth, hard. The mem-set tasted bitter, slightly of anise, and I thought I might gag, but I held it on my tongue. And as we kissed, I spat the poison into his mouth, rubbed it onto his lips.

My father lurched backward a step and his eyes widened in horror. “Josephina!” he said, crying out as if begging to know what I had done.

“I don’t want to live without you!” I said. “All our work is destroyed. I will always love you! God knows how to read the manuals of our lives. He will put everything back together. For a while—only for a while—the restoration will continue without us!”

My father threw his arms around me and wept. “No, Josephina,” he cried. “I did not want this to touch you. I did not want to hurt you.”

Major Gutierrez pulled at my shoulders. “Do you think you could die, and I would not be hurt by it?” I asked my father. I grabbed him and held, and Gutierrez let me hug him for a full minute, weeping, then the major spoke to me softly and escorted me back in line with the reporters. My father watched, his eyes riveted on me. He wept as Major Gutierrez read the list of charges and called his troops to ready their arms.

My father shouted. “Someday, we will rebuild this world! The time will come when your children will play in rain forests, and canaries and hummingbirds will fill the skies! Every beast of the field will be reborn!”

The troops raised their rifles. “Fishes will swim in your rivers!”

“Aim!” Gutierrez ordered.

“Crickets will make music in your pastures, and whales will sing love songs in the seas!” my father cried. “You watch! It will happen!”

“Fire!” Gutierrez shouted, and the rifles spat their bullets, filling the bright courtyard with smoke.

My father staggered back, red holes gaping in his shirt. He stared up in the air, beyond the heads of those in the firing squad, and his eyes filled with light, as if he saw salvation hurtling through the sky. The look on his face was so filled with awe, so compelling, that everyone suddenly turned and gazed into the sky also, and then I heard him cry “God,” and he spun and staggered against the stone wall, smearing blood on the ash-gray stones.

*I sit here in my terrarium and look at my little Euparkeria and stroke his neck. I'm out of eggs to*

*feed him, yet my wingless dragon stands on his back legs, tenderly searching the folds of my dress, expecting an egg to magically appear. It has been nearly three hours since I broke the mem-set between my teeth. Opalescent clouds seem to be forming at the edge of my vision, and everything looks as if it is covered with gauze or silken threads. My feet and fingers are so numb I do not feel them, yet my mouth burns as if it is on fire. I believe the mem-set has begun attacking my DNA, chopping it in pieces so fine that in a million years, even God may not be able to put me back together. I cannot talk into this microphone much longer .*

*On my way home. I jacked into a news broadcast. The reporter says that the Alliance of Earth Nations is considering plans to exile the Sirens to Darius Four, a water planet without human occupants. So, the pollution will continue unabated. I could not help thinking that though the Sirens lost their brief battle, they have won themselves a world, while day by day we are losing ours.*

Also on the news, I heard a reporter say that as my father died, he shouted “¡Vivan los Sirenos! Long live the Sirens!”

But that is not true. I was there. He shouted only one word, crying with a thrill of hope in his voice: “¡Vivamos!” Let us live!

[Uninterrupted silence to end of tape.]