

MERMAID SONG
a story of evolution

by Gary R. Moor

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Thalassa's Physical Attributes

orbital period = 424 Earth days

diameter = 13,988 km (Earth = 12756 km)

mass = 7.04×10^{24} kg (Earth = 5.974×10^{24} kg)

density = 4912 kg/m^3 (Earth = 5515.3 kg/m^3)

volume = $1.4331 \times 10^{21} \text{ m}^3$ (Earth = $1.083 \times 10^{21} \text{ m}^3$)

gravitational acceleration or g = 9.6 m/s^2 or $.98 g_E$ (a 180 lb. man from Earth would weigh 176.4 lbs. on Thalassa. Thalassa is a larger planet, but less dense.

mean surface temperature = 11.5° C or 53° F (Earth = 14° C or 57.2° F)

orbital distance from star = 239 million km (Earth = 149 million km)

Thalassa's star 23 OTA: main sequence yellow dwarf, class G1V (sun is G2V) in the constellation Southern Cross; 1163 ly from Earth; 1.25 times brighter than our sun. You could not see it from Earth unless you had a powerful telescope.

CHAPTER ONE

SALTWATER DREAMS

Americans point with self-righteous anger at the appalling acts of Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, Communist China. We fail to recognize that we built this country upon the single greatest act of genocide in human history. Once Columbus set foot on Hispaniola he proceeded to murder eight million Arawak, thus began five centuries of the methodical extermination of Native Americans by Christian Europeans. This so-called New World is the same old bloody one our ancestors brought with them.

Spencer G. Aubrey, 2018 AD. Starship Prometheus: Should We Go?
International Journal of Scientists 105:22-10

Miscegenation between the Vallar people and the people of the Republic should be strictly forbidden. Not only should we not allow an entire culture of humans to live divided from the Republic, as the Vallar do, but phylogeny of the Vallar race clearly reveals a weak genetic strain we must avoid. They have fallen back without a whimper against the advance of the Republic's colonization. They are without a real civilization; neither history, religion, government, nor any societal organization that we would regard as the earmarks of an advanced civilization. To substitute our culture for their primitive anarchy would do them a great service, drawing them, at last, into the 31st century.

Senator Phillip L. Marcus addressing the General Assembly in support of the Vallar Expeditionary Force, SY 1003 (3074 AD)

What really distinguishes humans from other animals is we do not learn from our mistakes.

Angianne Wolf, regarded as mother of the Vallar, attributed to her during the so-called *Final Holocaust* of Earth (WW III) 2041 AD.

1

New Seattle, planet Circinus Four, colonial seat of government for region 25.
SY 1008 (3079 AD)

Isaac Chavira looked across acres of human corpses as he stood alone atop the newly constructed regional courthouse steps. The desiccated and flattened bodies lay within a twenty-foot-deep rectangular excavation. About Isaac stretched a square mile of construction site. Not a single living plant survived. Even without the grave it looked like a war zone.

Low clouds, dark with threatening rain, pressed down upon the scene. He sniffed the air, seeking the rain's odor, longing for the free expanse of Circinus Four's oceans. The ground remained dry. The sky held static. Nothing but the smell of dust reached him. The corpses no longer had an odor of their own, no different than the dirt that had entombed them for years.

Civilization had come to Circinus Four.

Isaac's company, Chavira Construction, had begun turning a real profit.

Two days ago, when Isaac's excavators had exposed the first corpse, marine officers, troops and black-suited federal agents had arrived. They had arrived with paperwork and legalities complete, with orders to re-arrange the site's layout so the grave would remain undisturbed. Isaac knew they had not done so out of respect for the dead. The agents swore Isaac's company to secrecy, coercing each employee to sign a paper giving up all rights as citizens of the Republic should they break their vow.

The Republic's regional government had paid his company a huge bonus, many times more than that needed to cover the added expense. Isaac's accountant had found the payment in the operations account this morning.

Isaac turned away, taking out his gold digital pocket watch. He looked at it without seeing it. This would be over soon.

Behind the steps where he stood, a black-suited federal agent strolled along the unfinished foundation walls. He gave Isaac a nod. Isaac only stared back, telling himself it's just another job and it's important these men know we don't care about all those dead people. A few more contracts as lucrative as this and Isaac could retire a rich man still in his thirties.

A loud humming drew his attention back to the grave. He watched the fleet of forty-ton-capacity airtrucks he had leased for his pilots arrive at the far end. There stood a sixty-foot statue of the Republic's cross and eagle his men had erected before the grave's discovery. The eagle's stone eyes, fierce, overlooked the thousands of dead. Beginning in front of that symbol of the Republic's power, the airtrucks began dropping load after load of rock and gravel into the vast rectangle, preparing the site for layers of thermal regolute. The resulting explosion of dust obscured the statue from Isaac's view. The roaring sound of rock on rock resembled a stormy ocean surf.

Isaac's thoughts moved inexorably as the fluid-like front of roaring rocks and gravel approached. The rush of dealing with the problems after the grave's discovery and his exhaustion no longer delayed the inevitable conclusion. The Republic's military, the Interstellar Corps, had not peacefully relocated the Vallar to reservations off-planet, as Republic history had recorded. As a marine, his father had fought against the Vallar and like his father, Isaac had become part of this genocide.

He grew up believing the Republic had a right to the planets the Vallar had settled earlier. The Republic had to grow, humanity had to explore, spreading its influence across the galaxy. The Vallar were always out here in the way, on all the most desirable planets in the region. Since first contact with the Vallar two and a half centuries ago, the Republic's expansion through the Vallar region, toward the galactic center, had slowed considerably. Unhindered, the rest of the Republic's frontier expanded much faster, making the Republic's sphere of influence lopsided.

We are all human, he used to tell himself, we should unite humanity and live together as one race. The people who became the Vallar left Earth over a thousand years ago before the so-called Final Holocaust. The Republic arose from the ruins on Earth, and for seven and a half centuries grew separate from the Vallar. His school history courses had taught Isaac to see them as vicious primitives fighting against the Republic's rightful colonization. On the original Vallar home world of Sunrock, they had warred against the Republic—ten years of combat—two in which Isaac's father had fought as a young man. His father had told him nothing of that war; only now, upon discovering this grave, Isaac had begun to understand why.

Several yards from the base of the courthouse steps, something caught Isaac's attention. His infallible vision picked out three skeletons from the mass, still swathed in shriveled brown skin, indistinguishable in color from the matrix of dirt in which they lay partially buried. Devoid of clothing, they huddled together, parents with their child between them. Isaac noticed another corpse, not human, near the father's skull. For a moment Isaac stared, then realized with a shock of recognition that it was a dog.

He suddenly became sick to death of his prosthetic Laughlin eye with its mechanically flawless vision. He tried to remember what it was like to have two real eyes, a real face, and not this deformed visage. Three years ago a construction accident had left his face irrevocably maimed, or so he was inclined to think, for he knew the surgeons would restore his face in time. The reconstructive surgery had helped his new side-career as a civilian fighter in the interstellar corps single combat circuit. The surgeons had reinforced his skull and spine and the deformity of his features intimidated his opponents. As a result, in the ring, none of his opponents could knock him out. He'd loved martial arts since a kid. This side career had become more and more important. Each win still surprised him because he was defeating the toughest men in the Republic out here in frontier region 25. He'd begun to consider he could actu-

ally become the region's heavy-weight champion. It would not only make him rich, in addition to his business, but he'd also be famous.

However, as he watched his pilots work, a strange notion arose: regardless of what he did, or what happened, he experienced each day the same as the one before. His life had become no more than a narrow set of experiences he cycled through, a maze he ran each day, forgetting yesterday was the same as today. He rushed ahead, each goal achieved leading only to the next, nothing was ever enough, nothing actually fulfilled him. Each day he went about his business, pretending life, to cover his fear, anger, sadness and despair. For the first time he admitted to himself that his dearest wish was to be left alone in quiet solitude. He had trapped himself in his commitments with his fighting career and his construction business. Too many people relied on him. He pursued these careers anesthetized by the hope they would someday make him feel better.

His gaze returned to the dead family lying before him. Here he was, now part of this injustice, this genocide, knowing he would not make a stand. In his cowardice, he felt he had too much at stake.

A rush of memories overtook him; of making love to his lost Julia, of heat and moisture with part of him moving inside another's body, connected, yet lost to himself. He would never again feel that with her. Feeling the maimed side of his face, he wondered if he would ever feel that again with any woman.

2

New Seattle, Planet Circinus Four, Colonial Seat of Government for
Region 25. Two years later. SY 1010 (3068 AD)

Isaac Chavira watched his opponent struggle to get up from the mat. Sergeant Levant, the *Sergeant from Hell*, went limp. He lay at the center of the ring across the ten foot wide embossed Council seal of the Republic. A small pool of blood formed under his head where the seal's white eagle's claw gripped the golden cross. The roar of the crowd rose in pitch at the sight of more blood. Isaac looked at the upper rows of the coliseum, avoiding the eyes of the spectators closer in.

Standing straight and still, Isaac turned to the referee as if seeing him for the first time. He noticed the scantily clad young woman outside the ring who had presented the round's number on a large card. She stood frozen in shock with blood dotting her face and arms. She had risen to her feet with the rest of the crowd.

After much activity Isaac had grown accustomed to after a knockout, the referee held Isaac's massive arm up.

The announcer shouted, adding to the din, “Winner by knockout, the new Region Twenty Five Interstellar Corps Personal Combat Champion, and first civilian in history to hold that title—Isaaaaaaaaaac Chavira!”

As Isaac’s trainer, his cut-man and his ring assistant escorted him down the aisle back to the dressing room the crowd chanted, “Hammer, Hammer, Hammer” in time with each step of Isaac’s taped, bare feet.

Beads and rivulets of sweat covered Isaac’s body, diluting the blood running from a cut over his left eye—the real one. His right eye was a blank white orb. He had a cliff-like brow, over-sized jaw, and a mass of scars covering the right side of his face.

In the relative quiet of the dressing room, Isaac eased himself onto a cushioned massage table and held out his hands. His breathing had already returned to normal. The ring assistant unlaced the lightly padded gloves. Once the right glove slipped off Isaac’s trainer examined the hand, manipulated the palm, thumb and fingers. Compared to Isaac’s the trainer’s hands seemed childlike.

“Hurt?”

Isaac shook his head.

The cut man attended to the cut.

“How’s the eye?” said Isaac’s manager as he entered the room.

Opening the door let in an explosion of sound from the arena as the crowd had settled little.

He wore a finely tailored black suit. A small knot of crimson silk at his throat filled the gap of the tabbed collar of his gray dress shirt.

Isaac shrugged.

The manager rested both hands on the table.

Isaac touched the undamaged white orb of the Laughlin prosthetic eye. The eyelids were stiff and dead, unblinking.

“Whole structure’s out of composite there boss. Worried more about the left hand,” said the trainer.

“Okay?” said the manager.

“Said so,” said the trainer.

Isaac nodded.

“Think you broke his head with it Mr. Chavira,” said the cut man as he worked with his face inches from Isaac’s.

Isaac nodded again.

“He did. Heard it, I swear. Damn, Sergeant Levant, can you believe it?” said the manager. “Press’ll be here any second, sure you aren’t going to say anything Isaac? Last time and all?”

Isaac did not move.

The noise outside the door increased and several loud knocks came. The manager sighed, and then straightened.

“Give me a hand with the interview will you Bill?”

“Sure thing boss,” said the trainer.

The manager opened the door, letting in another explosion of sound, and the trainer pushed several reporters back who tried to enter. They forced their way out and shut the door behind them.

“Been great working for you Mr. Chavira,” said the cut man as he withdrew a pen-shaped instrument he had used to close the cut. He dabbed at the skin around the cut one more time.

Isaac’s lip-less mouth almost tightened into a smile.

They shook hands.

The cut man held on, saying, “Well I’m done. Guess that’s it. Been quite a party.”

He nodded at the door.

“I’ll slip out the back—never talk to those curtains either.”

He closed his black instrument bag, stuffed it in a larger cloth bag with a shoulder strap.

He paused at another door, holding it open and looked back at Isaac, who stared at the floor.

The cut man said, “Good luck on your construction business, looks like she’s really taking off this time. Tucana was it?”

“Thalassa,” said Isaac, his voice a deep baritone.

“Damn. Thalassa. That’s as far out as you can go. Biggest ocean in the Republic—well not in—’cause it’s right on the edge of the frontier.”

Isaac said, “That’s it.”

“Only a few explorers been any further out. I’d like to see a planet before the Republic gets its mitts on it.”

Isaac nodded.

The cut man said, “Ever get back this way in the fight business, I’ll be your cut man again.”

Isaac nodded.

3

Colonial town of Pelagos on Pelagos Island, planet 23 Omega Triangulum Australe Four, better known as Thalassa. Standard Year (SY) 1010 (3068 AD)

Federal Marshal “Ollie” Osbourne entered through the tavern’s back door. She shuffled across the sawdust-covered floor furtively checking out the quiet tavern crowd. Unarmed, she wore a disheveled green uniform; her missing service belt had worn her pants shiny about the hips. Heavy drinking had left her skin flushed, eyes red and watery. Several people stood at the bar, mostly pirates—conversations, a little laughter. She wiped her mouth. Her hand trembled. She touched her matted, graying auburn hair as if to straighten it.

From his place at the bar, Joe Graffman observed her approach. He wore a brown leather vest and sported a braided ponytail. He poured himself whiskey

from a bottle. When she noticed him watching her, Ollie stopped near the tavern's stone fireplace. He grinned. Behind him, the bartender stared at Ollie, then shook his head and attended to another customer.

Ollie made a show of searching through her empty pockets, and then smiled half-heartedly at Joe. She wiped her mouth again. Joe held out his whiskey glass. She nodded slightly. Joe's grin broadened as he took a gold coin from his vest pocket and tossed it into a spittoon near Ollie's feet. The thick fluid within muffled the clang of metal on metal.

Ollie automatically dropped to her knees, and then realized what she'd done and hung her head. She reached for the spittoon anyway. Joe laughed.

As Ollie's fingers touched the spittoon, someone with highly polished boots kicked it away. It clattered across the floor, rolling out its contents in a brown spreading goo. Ollie glared up at the kicker. It was her deputy, Pearl Winchester, tall and powerfully built, whose impeccable uniform contrasted with Ollie's dishevelment. Pearl shook her head in disdain.

Pearl held a light charger, whose long barrel she swung around to Joe without taking her eyes off Ollie. Joe inched away, carefully.

"Don't move Graffman," said Pearl quietly.

He froze, still holding his glass of whiskey in front of him.

"So this is what you look like on your annual-three-day binge," said Pearl.

Ollie said, "Pearl, leave me the fuck alone."

Pearl said, "Why in the hell don't you go to a tavern where we have some credit? At least bring more color with you. It's only the second day, this is embarrassing"

Ollie said, "Pearl, leave me the fuck alone."

Pearl said, "I get it, I'd find you right away if it was like the Churchbell or the Longreach. Well by golly Ollie, didn't work this time. First time in three years we ever found you in the middle of it. Rose'd kill me if I left you here alone."

With her voice an octave deeper Pearl said, "I'm takin' you in Marshal."

Ollie stared at her.

Pearl said, "'Member that disk—the *Western*, what was it called?

"A *movie*, god dammit," said Ollie.

"Yeah, the western movie, but it had a title. Rose got it from Edouard when he came in last month? It was eleven centuries old; remember, we had to show it flat?" said Pearl.

"What the fuck about it?" shouted Ollie.

"Felch you Oll. You're drunk. *Rio Bravo*, that was the name of it—yeah with the actors John Wayne and Deano Martini, er, Martin."

"What the fuck are you talking about Pearl? Besides, that line wasn't in it," said Ollie.

"Don't worry about it. I'm taking you home, and Oll, jeez, at least get up off the floor," said Pearl.

"The fuck you are," said Ollie.

"Dammit Oll, what the felch is going on? You can talk to me and Rose."

"I don't know. Okay? *I don't know!*" Ollie nearly screamed the last.

They glared at each other.

Ollie said, "Well, goddammit, you're talking too much—what the felch's with that?"

Pearl said quietly, "Bit more dangerous here than you know, Oll. So—" Pearl turned to Joe, saying, "—now then, Mr. Graffman."

With her back to Ollie, she took a step forward as Joe took a step back.

Ollie muttered, "Nobody fights my fights."

She got up and grabbed a chunk of wood from a box on the stone hearth. Several people jumped to their feet, but Ollie spun Pearl around and hit her across the forehead before they could stop her.

Pearl lay unconscious on the floor. Joe casually put down his whiskey as Ollie came at him with the chunk of wood. Two members of Joe's gang, who had watched from one end of the bar, had moved around behind Ollie. They grabbed her, wrestled away the wood, and held her between them.

Joe stepped up, drew back and punched Ollie straight in the face, snapping her head back. She hung limp in the grip of Joe's two men. Joe punched her hard in the belly. She threw up. He waited.

Joe drew his fist back again, but someone grabbed his arm and spun him around. He faced a tall rugged man with bright green eyes. Twisting his arm loose, Joe drew a photon pistol from a shoulder holster under his vest, smiled, and pulled the trigger. A buzzing, searing beam of light appeared through the rugged man's belly and across to the far wall, by chance missing several people. He dropped nerveless to the floor. A wisp of smoke curled from a hole in the wall. The corpse made a small hissing sound as fluids boiled within.

In shock, Joe's two men dropped Ollie. She curled up in her vomit on the sawdust-covered floor. Pearl remained unconscious nearby.

Joe holstered his pistol and walked out of the tavern, weaving slightly. Outside he smiled, walking across the hard packed mud of the street. A sea breeze made the air cool, damp and smell of brine. The sun's heat worked its way through a thin layer of stratus clouds.

A young woman wearing a shawl passed Joe. He grabbed her arm and looked at her face, shrugged and released her. She hurried on. As he climbed onto the sidewalk of molded regulite, he leered at a woman walking with her husband. Both picked up their pace.

Joe swaggered into another tavern and at the bar motioned to the bartender. The bartender served him a glass of whiskey. At the end of the bar, another member of Joe's gang nodded a greeting, but Joe ignored him.

Joe brought the glass to his lips. All conversation ceased abruptly. The bartender froze, staring at the front entrance. Joe put his drink down and turned, trying to be nonchalant.

Pearl had entered. She walked toward Joe, weaving a little; blood ran from her temple staining the left side of her uniform blouse. Her thick blond hair

hung loose, straggling about her shoulders and down her back. Gripping with one hand, she aimed the light charger at Joe, her head tilted to one side, blue eyes fierce. She stopped within six feet of him, her back to the door. Joe's first two gang members had followed Pearl from the other tavern and entered quietly behind her. One had a photon pistol in a holster slung around to the back of his hip.

“Joe, you’re under arrest,” said Pearl.

Joe faced her, relaxed, ready.

Joe's man at the end of the bar stepped out, aimed a photon pistol at Pearl and said, “Maybe so, but don’t turn around, Winchester.”

“Now what you gonna do, deputy?” said Joe.

Ollie entered the tavern, creeping up to Joe’s first two gang members now standing behind Pearl. In a quick movement she slipped the pistol from the armed man’s holster, then stepped back as he whirled around. She fired at Joe's man at the end of the bar who held the pistol on Pearl. The blinding blue light destroyed the pistol and blew off two of the man's fingers. Glasses shattered. The mirror behind the bar cracked. The shot man yelped, staggered back and dropped to his knees cradling the wounded hand across his belly.

Ollie aimed the pistol at Joe’s other two men. They put their hands up and stepped away.

Ollie said, “You do just about what you want, Pearl.”

Joe, panicked, made a quick sidestep, hands held clear of his pistol. Pearl swung the charger in a lightning fast arc into Joe’s forehead, slamming him to the floor. He didn’t move.

Ollie said, “Anyone else you want besides Joe?”

Pearl looked around. Joe’s two men cringed. The wounded man moaned.

“No,” said Pearl glaring at Ollie, who averted her eyes.

“Just give me a hand, Ollie.”

Joe’s two men moved farther away as Pearl and Ollie dragged Joe out facedown by the shoulders of his vest.

