

## Review

Stefan Vucak writes this intriguing novel using all of his imagination. Nothing is spared or left out of this Science Fiction thriller! I was on the edge of my seat with suspense wanting to know what was going to happen next, and not wanting to put this book down. This is a must read for any Science Fiction buff who craves action, adventure, mystery, suspense, politics, and a love for the unknown. Stefan is very descriptive in this novel and leaves no stone unturned, which is very satisfying for the reader to comprehend and imagine that they are there in the story, waiting to see what comes next!

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# **A WHISPER FROM SHADOW**

by

**Stefan Vucak**



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Note:

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and events are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is coincidental.

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## Dedication

*To Jan ... a fellow traveler through life*

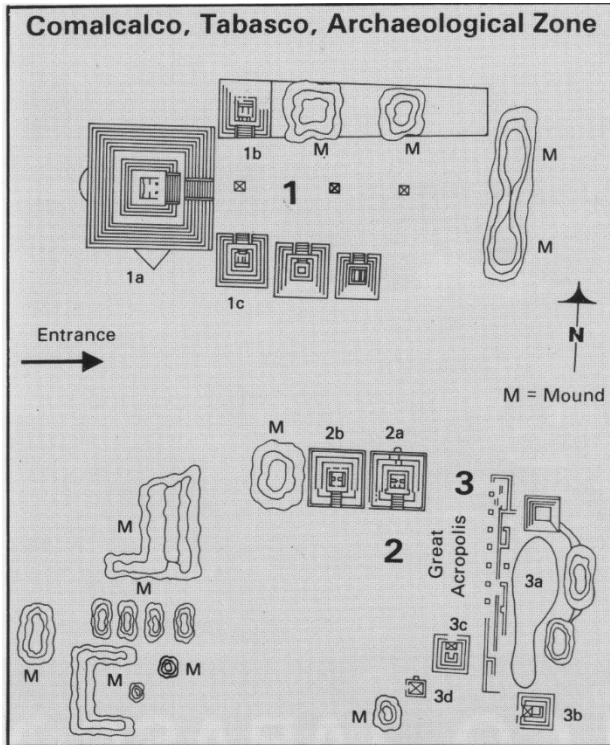
## **Acknowledgments**

Carina Nebula – Credit: NASA, ESA, and the Hubble SM4 ERO Team.

Comalcalco site map, courtesy of Claudia Espinoza, National Anthropology Museum, Mexico City.

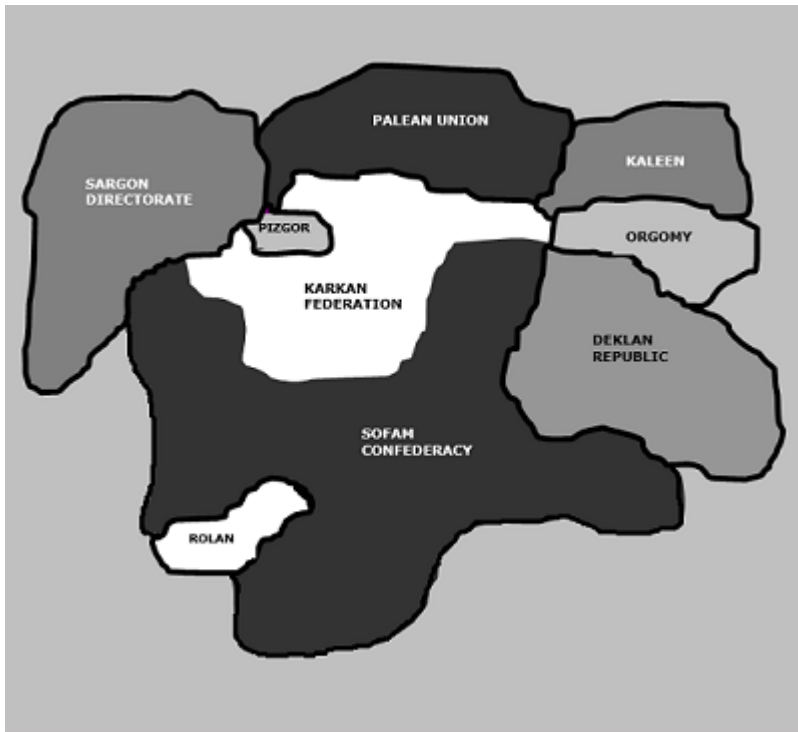
My thanks to Professor Alan Walker, Penn State University, for information on fungal diseases.

Cover art by Laura Shinn.  
<http://laurashinn.yolasite.com>



- 1** North Plaza Cluster
  - 1a** Temple I
  - 1b** Temple II
  - 1c** Temple III
- 2** Great Acropolis
  - 2a** Temple of the Mask
  - 2b** Temple of Thirsty Personages
- 3** The Palace
  - 3a** Sunken Courtyard
  - 3b** Temple IV
  - 3c** Temple V
  - 3d** Tomb of the Nine Personages

## Map of the Serrll Combine





## Composition of the Serrll Combine

The 247 star systems that make up the Serrll Combine is an association of six interstellar power blocks, split between two rival camps—the Servatory Party and the Revisionists. Each star system has a single representative in Capital’s General Assembly from which members are elected to the ruling ten-seat Executive Council. Seats are based on a percentage of systems occupied by each power block in relation to the total number of systems in the Serrll Combine.

| Name                    | No of Star<br>Systems | Percentage of<br>Total | Executive<br>Council Seats |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Sofam Confederacy       | 83                    | 34                     | 4                          |
| Deklan Republic         | 19                    | 8                      | 1                          |
| Palean Union            | 28                    | 11                     | 1                          |
| Karkan Federation       | 46                    | 19                     | 2                          |
| Sargon Directorate      | 32                    | 12                     | 1                          |
| Independents:           |                       | 16                     | 1                          |
| - Kaleen                | 8                     |                        |                            |
| - Rolan                 | 5                     |                        |                            |
| - Orgomy                | 6                     |                        |                            |
| - Pizgor                | 3                     |                        |                            |
| - Other systems         | 17                    |                        |                            |
| <b>General Assembly</b> | <b>247</b>            | <b>100</b>             | <b>10</b>                  |
| Outposts                | 40                    |                        |                            |
| Protectorates           | 34                    |                        |                            |

### Principal political blocks:

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Revisionist Party: | Palean Union<br>Deklan Republic<br>Sofam Confederacy               |
| Servatory Party:   | Karkan Federation<br>Sargon Directorate<br>Nonaligned Independents |

### Composition of the Executive Council

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Security Council:        | Bureau of Colonial and Protectorate Affairs<br>Bureau of Defense<br>Bureau of Cultural Affairs |
| Administrative Council   | Bureau of Administrative Affairs<br>Bureau of Justice  |
| Economics Council        | Bureau of Economic Affairs<br>Bureau of Technology and Development                             |
| Central Planning Council | Bureau of Central Planning and Development   |

*“Here, then, is the beginning of when it was decided to make men, and when what must enter into the flesh of men was sought.”*

Part III

Chapter I

Popol Vuh

## Prologue

In a burst of scintillation the ship emerged from subspace.

It was high above the planetary plane, beyond the gravity well of the small yellow star. The ship's secondary shield grid flared in violet discharge, then stabilized. It paused, oriented itself and moved deliberately down into the inner system toward the bright points of a double world. It slowed as the twin horns began to resolve out of blackness: one gray and the other brilliant blue-white. The ship made one terminator orbit around the moon before moving toward the dark side to hang above a narrow valley of the north pole where it waited. Below, twisted masts reached up amid the radial pattern of the base. Shrouded in shadow the base was dark and silent, cold like the cliffs that surrounded it. After a time the ship rose and slowly moved away.

It climbed above the horizon and was greeted by a blue crescent of a sleeping world. The northern ice cap was enveloped under untidy cloud stretching its angry whorls into night. In a burst of speed the ship vanished into the black shadow of the waiting world. It moved into a polar orbit as the planet shifted ponderously beneath it. It made a single circuit, looking for the sentinel cruiser, noting the scanning sensor probes coming up from the ground. It found the cruiser hanging above the equator. The ship maneuvered until both flew silently side by side in a locked orbit.

\* \* \*

“Status?” Kukll-nn demanded with an impatient growl.

Oryana lifted her head gracefully and looked where he stood before the high window, hands clasped tightly behind his back.

“They’re sending down a landing boat,” she said, her voice soft and musical, now slightly breathless. Her black eyebrows were arched and traced a thin line above large brown eyes. She pulled at her small pointed chin with a slim delicate hand and turned back to the main display plate positioned above the sloping consoles. The tactical grid dissolved and the image reformed into a wide-angle pattern. She glanced absently at the small repeater plates and sighed dreamily.

“A ship from home! I wonder how much things have changed,” she mused, eyes misty, lost in memory. Absently, she fondled the long, white tresses that spilled across her shoulders. Down the middle of her head the hair was streaked with twin bands of dark gray of a mature Deklan female.

Kukll-nn stood silent beside the window, his eyes far in another reality. The observatory gave him an excellent view of the city below. The lake, its black waters lapping softly below the massive stone walls, stretched north and west as far as the eye could see. Shrouded in blue haze the mountains arched toward a violet sky. Ice and snow capped the peaks, shouldering the lower slopes. How fragile, he thought, almost brittle in their stark and serene beauty. So much like his native Kaplan. He shook his head, surprised at the nostalgia that overcame him.

“Recall acknowledged?”

“All continental stations reported in two minutes ago,” he heard Oryana say behind him. “The intruder has matched with our ship and is maintaining neutral status.”

The Center was quiet, waiting, the stillness interrupted by the whisper of computer reports and an occasional shuffling of feet from the watchstanders.

“Sachmm-nn?”

For a few seconds there was silence. Oryana stared at Kukll’s back, then climbed out of her seat and walked slowly to the window to stand beside him. Following his gaze, she watched the natives busy at their work. He was lord of this world, and now it was all ended. They had expected this, and some of them probably even welcomed it. As the years marched, the waiting hadn’t grown easier.

She looked at his reflection in the window and the face she saw was hard. It was a rough face full of slabs, chiseled with deep lines of power and determination. A face used to command. His hair was rusty, shot through with patches of white. It had lost some of the gloss that used to make her breath catch. The years had been kind to all of them, she thought as she gazed at him with deep affection. And there have been so many years. Too many perhaps to face what they left behind.

“Do you really think that’s necessary?” she asked gently and reached up with her hand, hesitating before touching his shoulder.

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He tensed at her touch and turned to look at her, faintly amused. “Don’t you? Yes...I can see it in your face. All the years we’ve spent here have not removed the longing. You still yearn for the worlds of Deklan. And me...” The fire in his black eyes waned and his jaw lifted with resolve. “Those worlds are no longer ours,” he grated, each word a blow and she flinched. Slowly, he raised his hand and pointed a stubby finger at the ceiling. “That ship up there hasn’t come to help us, remember that. You ask if Sachmm-nn is necessary. We shall see. Now, order it to power up and stand by.”

Hurt, she turned to the operator behind one of the consoles. When he nodded to her, she looked at Kukll-nn.

“They have acknowledged,” she said stiffly, torn with warring emotions.

They watched the city in silence. After a while, he turned to stare into the deep pools of her eyes and gently brushed her cheek.

“I am sorry, Oryana. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that. It’s only—”

“Don’t.” She clasped his hand and held it. “I understand. But...” She left it unsaid. What was there to say when the yesterdays suddenly came crowding.

“We better go and meet them,” he said at length and managed a faint smile that didn’t touch his eyes.

\* \* \*

The voice from the temple boomed and the people stopped their work and stood silent in the streets, markets, homes and farms. The gods were speaking. Leoichan, High Priest of Tiahunn-cc, heard the voice and listened. As he listened, his excitement grew. When the voice stopped, he ordered the priests to send a message to the king and gather the people to direct them to the star nest. The gods were coming!

Slowly, then with hurried fervor, chanting, the people moved down the broad avenues toward the star nest where the gods would come. The King, the High Priest, the Oracle and the multitude of peasantry waited at the gates of Tiahunn-cc. Black marble doors rumbled as they slid open. Clad in tight red coveralls, Kukll-nn emerged. Oryana was at his side dressed in blue. The people held their arms high and sang the

names of the two gods. With slow dignity the gods mounted an air chariot and began to move. The populace shouted and danced and walked with them toward the star nest.

The valley walls fell away and the baked plain opened before them. Leoichan began the sixth chant of observance as he stared in awe at the two metal birds perched on their stone pads, surrounded by spidery towers. The minions of the gods moved about on flat air chariots and Leoichan watched it all and chanted.

Assembled, they murmured and waited, eyes fixed on the heavens from where the gods would come. A deep rumble shook the air and the ground trembled. The heavenly bird glittered in white light high above them. Leoichan began the eleventh chant and the priests around him held their arms high.

Clad with fire and light, it was like a star descending. With thunder that shook the heavens, white smoke billowing, the heavenly bird fell quickly. It slowed and hovered for an instant, screaming in tortured anger, and then it touched the pad. The fires stopped and thunder echoed through the hills. Smoke drifted slowly down the valley. In the sudden silence, only the chanting could be heard.

The bird sat there breathing hot air, shimmering in the haze and everyone waited for the gods to emerge. Leoichan turned shyly and smiled at Kukll-nn and Oryana, proud to be near them. They smiled back and he felt warmed in his soul.

A hush fell over the crowd when one of the towers began to slowly move toward the bird. Kukll and Oryana mounted their air chariot and sped quickly down onto the baked plain.

Leoichan watched the chariot stop at the base of the tower. The gods climbed down and stood before the bird, waiting. A box descended within the tower. When it stopped, doors opened and he stood there, tall, his hair bright red and his clothing was silver. When Kukll-nn saluted, Leoichan gaped, his surprise complete. The other stared back a long time before returning the salute.

\* \* \*

Kukll allowed his hand to fall to his side as his eyes raked over the thin form of his visitor. The man's long hands swayed and his fingers

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twitched in characteristic agitation. His small yellow eyes darted restlessly as they moved over everything. Hidden behind bushy orange eyebrows, they glinted with cold fire. The face was pale white and pinched, fixed with a thin nose. There was arrogance and hidden cruelty in that face. The twin bands of thick red hair were rich and prominent. Kukll decided they weren't going to get along.

"Master Scout Kukll-nn, and my executive officer, First Scout Oryana," Kukll said evenly, trying to keep the distaste out of his voice. The man was a political busybody and the quicker he dealt with him the better. "I see Prima Scout, that the Serrll Combine has not forgotten us after all."

"No, they have not forgotten, Master Scout," the other grated heavily and looked about him pointedly. "I am Virrchaa, on a special Executive Council Mission to look you over."

"Look me over or take me over? I suppose I should be flattered, but after nineteen years, taking into account four time dilation jumps, you'll have to forgive me if the excitement has kind of worn off."

"I should imagine." Virrchaa snorted and swept his hand before him. "Holy Master of Sin, man! What have you done to this world?"

Kukll glanced at the assembled multitude. "I have brought it life."

"I'm not in any mood for your worm shit!" Virr growled and led the way to the sled-pad. "Let's talk."

\* \* \*

"Is that all?" Virr said with icy politeness as his fingers drummed impatiently against the desk.

Kukll nodded and took a sip from a frosted tumbler. "I guess that's about the size of it, Prima Scout."

Virr glared at Oryana, but she was suddenly busy studying her nails. He pushed back his chair and started pacing. Kukll sat back and a faint smile creased his chiseled face. Whatever Virr expected, he certainly didn't like what he found.

With a growl of exasperation, Virr stopped before the wide window. The city below was spread before him in neat patterns. It looked simple, belaying the sophistication of its design.

“You were sent here on a follow-up survey mission,” he hissed impatiently and turned to glare at Kukll. “And that was all!”

“That sounded okay nineteen years ago,” Kukll pointed out.

Virr pursed his lips. “Look at it from my point of view. I break out of subspace and I think that maybe I am in the wrong system. There is no SC&C, no patrols, nothing. And the moon base? Abandoned. You were sent here to watch them, not mold them!”

Kukll shrugged and reached for the decanter. He filled the tumbler, stared at it for a moment, then looked up, his mouth hard.

“The bases on this world were set up for one reason and one reason only: genetic engineering experiments. And don’t tell me you didn’t know. So let’s drop this indignant posturing nonsense, shall we? We don’t need to pretend here.”

Virr exhaled and bared his teeth. “I expect a measure of respect from you, Master Scout!”

Kukll laughed. “What are you going to do? Send me home?”

Virr glared, pursed his lips and turned to stare out the window. “They look happy down there. How much do they know?”

Kukll glanced at Oryana. “They know that I teach and heal. When necessary, I punish. I leave it at that.”

“How many other bases?”

“Two; one farther north and one on the western landmass across the ocean. We had a base on the southern island continent, but there was a reactor accident and we were forced to abandon it.”

“The natives?”

“They’re developing. Not as fast as predicted, though. It’s being looked into. The western continent is dry and getting worse. Here, we have a chance and the polar ice is receding.”

Virr turned and looked directly at Kukll. “You will shut down all bases and terminate the experiments.”

“Does that mean the natives as well?” Kukll asked calmly.

“This doesn’t come from me.”

“Tell me one thing. If the Executive Council intended to close us down, why the regular resupply ships? In all my years here there has never been even a hint of abandoning the project.”

“I don’t know—”

“Don’t give me that! Not after coming all this way. What happened



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to make everyone suddenly want to salve their conscience? Look at them!” Kukll swept a hand at the window and stood up. “That’s an indigenous population and this planet is a protectorate. You’re sworn to defend what is here.”

Virr smiled grimly. “You’re right. The natives will be left alone. They can struggle on as best they can. But this,” he said and looked about him, “this has to go and you will return to Capital for a well deserved rest.”

Kukll glanced at Oryana and chuckled. It was a mirthless laugh full of irony.

“What do you think of that, my dear?” He looked at Virr and shook his head. “No, Prima Scout. It won’t be that easy. Our work here isn’t finished yet. Too many things still need to be done to ensure the native’s survival.”

“You like being a god, Kukll?” Virr studied the other man, past the mask of a Serrll officer at the mantle of power radiating from him.

“A god?” Kukll lifted his head in genuine surprise. “You’re a fool to think that, Virr. This, for what we have left back home? I am prepared to return. We all are. Holy Master of Sin, who wouldn’t be? But only if the Mission Plan is maintained and we are replaced. Only if the Mission Plan is maintained,” he repeated, his voice flat and uncompromising.

Virr shook his head. “I cannot do that, and you know it. My orders are clear.”

“And you don’t have the guts to do the right thing.”

“Even if I sent a message to the Executive Council pleading your case, my orders will not be rescinded. They don’t have any reason to.”

“Who the hell cares? By the time you get back, how many months will have gone?”

“Seventy-three days. We can do two hundred times the speed of light now.”

“At max boost perhaps, but you cannot push max for that long. Not all the way to Salina. Anyway, it’s long enough for the Council to change its mind. Think, man! This goes beyond mere political expediency or this experiment would never have been allowed to continue.”

“There is nothing I can do,” Virr said flatly. “Begin preparation for immediate evacuation, Master Scout.”

“I have a ship up there and this place is defended,” Kukll said softly. Virr stared. “You mean that?”  
Kukll’s eyes were cold with resolve.

\* \* \*

Leoichan watched the air chariot leave the gates of Tiahunn-cc and speed toward the star nest just as the summons arrived from Kukll-nn. He was torn, wanting to watch the air chariot, but the summons could not be ignored. Chewing his lip in frustration, he motioned to his retainers and the little group moved quickly toward the black marble gates.

When he reached the gates they opened with a low groan. With a feeling of religious awe and dread, he walked in. One of the minions greeted him and he indicated to his retainers to wait on him before following. He had stood before Kukll-nn and the goddess Oryana many times, but each time he stood in their presence, he felt vulnerable and his soul naked before their gaze. His sins were many and it was never certain how the gods would judge him. He gave an involuntary shudder and hurried after the minion.

The door slid aside and his footsteps were loud in the quiet of the Great Hall. Light streamed in yellow shafts through tall windows and made warm pools through which he walked daintily. The god was standing before one of the windows. Oryana, all in blue, was sitting on the reception dais and smiled at him. He sank to his knees and bowed.

“Your humble servant awaits your word, Lords,” he whispered, not daring to breathe.

“Stand, our faithful Leoichan.” Oryana’s voice was soft and clear and sent a tingle of excitement down his spine.

Slowly, he straightened and stood and waited.

Without turning, Kukll said, “Tell the King that all his people must leave Tiahunn-cc immediately. Tell him they must not stop until they’ve reached Tiukk-ll. Start now,” he growled and waved his hand in dismissal.

Leoichan was stunned, hearing the words, not believing. Leave the city? Uproot their lives?

“Lord, have we offended thee that you should send us away?” he

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whispered, greatly daring.

Kukll didn't say anything. He merely stood there, his hands clasped tightly behind his back. Oryana got up and walked slowly toward Leoichan to stop before him.

"The gods are angry, my servant. Fire may fall from the sky, consuming all."

"The gods are angry with the people?"

"No, Leoichan," she said softly and placed a slim hand on his shoulder. "I am well pleased and so is Kukll-nn. My friend, a messenger from the stars brought us news of troubles. We must stay here and defend Tiahunn-cc, but you have to leave so that your people may be safe."

Leoichan did not understand. However, the gods have spoken and therefore it must be so.

"I shall stay here with you. All of us will stay and help you in your need," he said with sudden resolve and straightened. "Have you not cared for us?"

Oryana looked at him and he was awed to see a tear glisten in her eye and slide down her cheek. "Thank you, faithful servant," she whispered. "The fire of the gods cannot be stopped. You must flee."

"To pack...there is so much..." He faltered and looked helplessly at her.

"Don't pack, just go!" Kukll snapped and Leoichan blanched, feeling himself tremble.

"Lord," he whispered and bowed low.

Relenting, Kukll walked up to him. "Don't be afraid, Leoichan. I didn't mean to be harsh, but time is limited. I shall not abandon you. Wait for me at Tiukk-ll. Don't forget the writings and the laws, my servant," he added, then abruptly turned and strode out of the Hall.

"Go quickly," Oryana whispered and followed.

Leoichan knew that something terrible was about to happen if the gods were so troubled. But leave Tiahunn-cc?

\* \* \*

The display plate cleared and Virrchaa glared at her.

"I want to speak to Kukll, First Scout," he said impatiently, his head held high and haughty.

“I speak for Kukll, Prima Scout,” she said unflinchingly.

“Very well, then.” He glanced at the chronometer readout. “Tell him he must evacuate all stations in fourteen hours. If he does not, I shall close them by force.”

“I shall tell him, sir.” Oryana nodded and his image faded. She turned to look at Kukll standing nearby and bit her lip.

“You heard?”

He barely nodded.

The black waters of the lake lapped below the walls of the fortress. Whitecaps curled and sent spray flying before the wind. About him the city was silent and empty. The last patrol reported all the natives evacuated. That was something at least, he mused wryly. After all the time and effort, it’ll now vanish in fire. What a waste. If the natives survived it would still have been worth it.

Beneath him the floor shook slightly and he turned toward the command consoles.

“The last of the boats has just taken off, sir,” the technician said, his eyes wondering, asking the same questions Kukll was asking. “Low orbit in four point seven minutes.”

Kukll placed an arm over Oryana’s shoulder. “Virr could be right,” she said after a moment.

“Yes, I know.” A cold smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “If we leave, then *they* would have lost it all.” He waved at the window. “He will wipe it all clean just to remove a political embarrassment. He might not like it, but he’ll follow orders. Who knows, in three or four thousand years the remnants might climb back to where they’re now. The species will survive.”

“And us?”

“We do what we must.” He shrugged, turned and looked questioningly at the technician.

“Sachmm-nn is fully powered up and all stations have acknowledged. The local population has dispersed. All boats are in position. Target is in low three-hour equatorial orbit. Our ship will shift to a geosynchronous position in twelve minutes from now.”

Kukll nodded. “Open a channel to Virr’s ship.”

When the plate cleared, the two men stared at each other, both resolved, determined to carry it to the end. Virr pursed his lips.

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“Damn it, Kukll! This is madness.”

“I agree, Prima Scout, but I cannot permit these people to be wiped out. Orders or not, that’s murder.”

“And I cannot permit Sachmm-nn and Tiahunn-cc to remain operational, Master Scout. You’ve made the population dependent on your technological and social infrastructure. You cannot be with them always.”

“No, but without it, they’ll revert to savagery, or worse.”

Virr looked hard at Kukll and seemed to reach a decision. “I give you my word as an officer of the Serrll that I shall take no action against the natives. Provided all the bases are neutralized, with the exception of the moon base, of course.”

“I might go as far as to believe you, Virr, but that doesn’t bind the Executive Council.”

“I meant the Council, damn it! I will file a report with the General Assembly and the Council won’t force the issue. As you said yourself, it’s not worth it. You’ll be free to return. I don’t want to shed our blood for a cause I don’t believe in and reasons that are expedient. Don’t force my hand.”

“On one condition.”

“And that is?”

“The Serrll must send follow-up missions, to check up.”

“That might not be so easy.”

“Make it easy. And Virr, you cannot afford to have your ship damaged. It’s a hell of a long way to Captal.”

“So it is.”

When the screen faded, Kukll looked at Oryana. “What do you think?”

She tilted her head and frowned. “He appears sincere, but I don’t trust him. He gave in too easily.”

“Just so.” He nodded and turned to the watch operator. “Maintain alert status and give me position of the primary target.”

“They’re maintaining neutral status, and their shields are up.”

“Then we wait.”

\* \* \*

The comms alert beeped and Kukll turned as the image cleared.

“Sir, it’s three hours plus,” the operator said.

“Status?”

“All landing boats maintaining low orbit. The target has assumed a geosynchronous position above Sachmm-nn. All other bases—”

“I know,” Kukll snapped and slammed his fist against the desk. “Is Virr’s ship in line-of-sight?”

“Affirmative.”

Kukll looked disgusted. “Get him for me, now!”

When the image cleared, Kukll stood straight, hands clasped tightly behind his back.

“You shifted orbit when I wasn’t in a position to see. Why?”

“I don’t make explanations, Kukll,” Virr snarled, his eyes almost hidden by flared eyebrows. “I just want your compliance.”

“You’re not in any position to make demands, Prima Scout.”

“A missile might change your mind, Master Scout!” Virr bellowed as he finally lost his temper. “I want your answer and I want it now. I’m tired of this whole mess. And I’m especially tired of you! Copy that, Mister?”

“Sachmm-nn has weapons capability, in case you have not been informed.”

Virr turned abruptly, nodded and the image faded.

“Sir! Sachmm-nn reports they are under missile attack. Our defense screen has responded.”

Oryana drew in her breath. Her eyes glistened as she looked at Kukll. “After all we have done...”

“He won’t risk total confrontation,” Kukll said flatly, thinking furiously. “He hasn’t launched any scouts...yet. He wants to pull our teeth first. I cannot risk my ship and neither can he.” He walked to the tactical plot and studied the plate. “Order Sachmm-nn to fire a burst at his ship. Rattle his shields a bit.”

“Kukll!” Oryana cried. “This can only end in destruction for all of us. Then everything we’ve done will be a waste.”

“It’s already a waste. He will either destroy us now or someone else will do it tomorrow. Unless the Executive Council intervenes, the politicians will erase everything we’ve done here.”

She walked to him and looked gravely into his eyes. Her hands

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reached for him.

“You know, I have even forgotten what a Deklan sky looks like. Isn’t that terrible?” she said tragically and her voice trembled. “I remember black sands washed by a warm ocean and the smell of flying spray, but it’s only a memory now. Our reality is here. Understand me?”

He stared at her for a long time before squeezing her hands. “Are you sure this is what you want?” he whispered and she nodded. “Once committed, there is no going back.”

“I am sure, my love.”

“Sir? Sachmm-nn has received a near miss and our defense grid has held. Prima Scout Virrchaah has shifted orbit.”

“Open a channel,” Kukll commanded.

“The next attack will be on you, Master Scout,” Virr spoke softly, but his eyes were hard and uncompromising.

“That will not be necessary, Prima Scout. I wouldn’t want any stray missiles heading toward the natives.”

“You don’t trust me, do you?”

“What do you think?”

Virr’s mouth twitched. “No, I guess you don’t. You’re wasted here, and when we get back—”

“We’re not going back.”

“What do you mean? If you are—”

“Don’t worry. I’m not planning to throw away my life in some grand gesture. I have reconsidered our position. Particularly the follow-up missions.”

“And?”

“We’ve been here a long time, Prima Scout. All of us have. Long enough to develop a certain affection for the natives and this planet. For me, Kaplan is a faded dream, albeit a fond one. I intend taking volunteers and make a time dilation jump of fifteen years. It will buy the Council more than enough time to sort things out. Many of the people here will still be alive when I return. Enough of them to pick up the pieces, anyway.”

Virr was silent, and then shook his head. “Damnedest idea I ever heard of.”

“But it will work. Besides, who do you have willing enough to exile

themselves here?” Kukll asked, his voice full of irony. “About the Mission Plan. The General Assembly may pretend that this place doesn’t exist, but they would still love to have it followed through. At least through Stage Two.”

“I agree,” Virr said.

“On one condition, Prima Scout.”

“And that is?”

“Tiukk-ll must remain intact. This is not negotiable.”

Virr was silent for a moment, then nodded. “Very well.”

“And, Virr? My ship will remain in orbit and ready until you clear subspace.”

Virr didn’t say anything as he cut contact.

\* \* \*

It was hot.

Overhead, the sun was a white furnace, too painful to look at. Few people were about and the temple grounds shimmered in the heat. Somewhere, a child wailed and there was a startled cackle from the poultry. A fly buzzed, then it was gone.

Leoichan hobbled slowly along the avenue, his stick tapping on polished stones. He was bent, his legs skinny, showing blue veins and tight, stringy muscles. Yet he enjoyed good health, even if he had trouble chewing with the few teeth that were left. Life had been harsh, but he did not complain. He had his sons and his family was powerful. He frowned as he recalled some of the practices at the temple and the loose interpretation of the laws. The king was strong and the people have prospered. Surely not as in the days of his youth, but obedient to the laws nonetheless.

He sat in the shade of the temple wall, lost in memory when shouting and the pounding of feet caused him to open his eyes. Squinting, he watched with amusement the running figures. In dismay, he realized they were coming toward him.

It was a messenger from the High Priest. Leoichan frowned. That man would have to go if things did not change, he reflected darkly. One of the boys, still panting, sank to his knees and bowed before him.



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“Venerable One,” the boy gasped and looked up with fear and wonder.

“Speak!”

“The Observatory!”

Leoichan’s ears roared and his heart began to pound. No, it cannot be!

“What about it?” he whispered, hardly daring to believe.

“The dome has opened and a shiny dish-like shape rose from within and started turning. Then it stopped and I was ordered to tell it to you.”

Leoichan nodded and closed his eyes in quiet happiness. The gods were coming at last. He should have believed, he should have. Did not Kukll-nn promise he would come?

“Tell the High Priest and the King to assemble the people at the star nest,” he ordered and smiled at the gaping faces. “The gods are coming.”

He sat back and relaxed, content. He feared to die before setting eyes on Kukll and the goddess Oryana again, but he was an old fool.

He remembered how it was on that fateful and terrible day fifteen years ago. Seven of his priests and he were hidden in the mountains, far above Tiahunn-cc and the black lake. They could hardly see the massive walls of the fortress in the hazy distance. The star nest on the plain far below was clearly visible. They waited, wanting to see the anger of the gods, realizing that death may be their only reward for such presumption.

He watched as the last heavenly bird roared in anger, fire billowing from its base. He trembled in fear as it climbed into the sky. Fire and thunder followed it to the heavens and the ground shook beneath him. When the thunder stopped, only a column of writhing smoke remained. He remembered talking to one of his priests, arguing whether they should stay longer, when a flash of blinding radiance seared the hills around them. One of the priests screamed and tore at his eyes.

Leoichan turned to see a strangely shaped cloud hang over where Tiahunn-cc once stood. Then the wind roared and clutched at them, threatening to sweep them from the mountain. Terrified, they fled. That night, huddled together against the cold, he remembered Oryana’s tears and he wept unashamedly for what was lost.

The memory of that cloud had stayed with him always.

Four of his priests died of a mysterious, wasting illness. Although he had taken sick, he recovered, the illness leaving him old before his time.

\* \* \*

Arms raised, the priests toned through the seventh chant of observance. The multitude buzzed with excitement. The King sat adorned in feathers and gold, hands folded as he stared at the emptiness of the star nest. Slowly, he turned his head, looked at Leoichan and nodded. Someone shouted and pointed and heads turned toward the heavens.

It was brighter than a star and Leoichan squinted to look at it. It had been a long time, a long time since he witnessed the coming of a heavenly bird. He did not mind dying now. He watched the light sink swiftly and heard the first rumble of thunder.

Flame and smoke filled the small plain. The very air trembled as the pillar of fire hung briefly and touched the earth. In the sudden silence the echoes boomed in the distance and faded. The priests finished chanting and they waited. The smoke cleared quickly and a hole appeared in the side of the bird. Leoichan clenched his fists with gleeful excitement as an air chariot glided out, sank slowly and started toward them. He turned and nodded. The retainers moved his palanquin forward, away from the waiting priests and royalty.

The chariot drifted to a stop and sank toward the ground, but did not touch it. Its glittering bubble opened and Kukll-nn, all in red, stepped out and looked curiously about him. Oryana moved close beside him, her blue coverall shimmering in the heat. Leoichan stared at them with hunger, drinking in every detail. They were just as he remembered them, unchanged. They were gods, no?

Kukll turned and smiled as Leoichan stood and bowed low. "Lord, I have waited as you commanded."

"My faithful servant." Kukll placed his hand on Leoichan's shoulder. "I have come, as I promised."

Behind them, the chanting rose in waves.

## Chapter One

Dark and heavy the sullen cloudbank reluctantly dragged itself eastward over a drenched landscape, trailing behind it ragged, torn streamers of fluff. In the north, slanting black sheets stabbed down in a downpour. Jagged lightning flickered, accompanied by a muted rumble. Overhead the sky was a brilliant washed blue and the air had a clean, invigorating smell that always seemed to linger after rain. Tendrils of white mist drifted over the thick lush jungle, softening the sun's glare. Branches hung limp, laden with shimmering dew.

This early in the morning the archaeological site was deserted, not that the place was overrun even at the height of the tourist season. Comalcalco wasn't Palenque or Chichen Itza. It was an out of the way hovel and its origins were considered too humble to be part of the mainstream tourist path. Hands on hips, facing the ruins of Temple II towering beside her, Lauren pouted as she surveyed the dig, then gave a sigh of frustrated exasperation. It wasn't *supposed* to rain in January!

"Just look at it," she demanded in disgust. Her undergrad assistant winced beside her and nodded in sympathy.

It wasn't pretty.

The whole west side of the mound where they have been excavating was an oozing brown wound, scored deep by runoff channels. Both L shaped test trenches dug between the mound and the eastern side of Temple II were completely filled with glistening yellow mud. At least the sorting tables were clean, scrubbed by the two-day downpour, which the makeshift canvas roof obviously wasn't able to protect. It would be impossible to do any further digging until the trenches were pumped out and dried. The rain also carved a deep channel down the west side of The Palace mound restoration site, the runoff spilling slush on either side of the completed Great Acropolis temples. Lauren didn't care, that was Imatlan's problem.

Her little roped-off kingdom had turned into a mire. This was the second time this month they'd been washed out, and the damage was far worse now. The old Mayan gods were indeed cruel, she thought dejectedly. Her visa and permits will expire in three weeks and she had a nasty suspicion that Columbia U would not be renewing her grant for

an extended stay. Especially as it would mean skipping some of the second semester classes. No, it wasn't the university. It was Boulcher!

The image of the archaeology dean's corpulent shape and sagging jowls, greasy hands fluttering in a grope and squeeze, made her squirm in disgust. He was her PhD thesis and research advisor and sat on her orals. She had gotten her degree despite his negative endorsement after she failed to be suitably cooperative with his, ah, advice. Ever since then the repulsive man had hounded her career, pouncing on every opportunity to ridicule her work. Unfortunately for him, she was very good at what she did and her papers were generally well received by the Mesoamerican archaeological and anthropological communities. The plain fact was, Boulcher was a fossil and the university should have buried him and his stuffy collection of dusty bones and rocks years ago. He had not published a paper in years and the closest he came to a dig these days was when he was nursing his potted prize petunias!

Perhaps it was time she seriously considered the offer from Texas U. Their archaeology department was respectable and it wouldn't hurt to add full professor to her name. She was vain enough to want it, and the tenured security it would bring, realizing that while Boulcher sat as chair, it was unlikely Columbia would give her tenure. A woman needed to be twice as good as anyone else just to get to the starting line. In a purely unconscious gesture, she pushed back her sleeves and set her full mouth into a tight line.

"Two weeks of work down the drain." Lauren clicked her tongue and ruefully shook her head, setting the long ponytail swinging.

"Literally," Martin said with a marked lack of enthusiasm, realizing that *he* would be the one having to clean up the mess. Well, not completely alone. There was a murmur of restrained sympathy from the other three Columbia U undergraduates who stood in a huddled group beside him dressed in shorts, T-shirts and floppy green army hats. After two days of being stuck in their steamy Villahermosa hotel, they were not all that sure whether mud and wet grass was a better bargain. It was either that or more of the doc's stern tutelage. The doc did not believe in idle hands or minds and this was not a holiday. What they did here would earn them valuable course credits for the second semester, determined by the course coordinator; meaning the doc, of course.

Watching her, Martin knew that expression well. When the doc

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firmed her mouth, everybody the hell better be ready to get out of her damn way, for the lady played hardball and took no prisoners. Her single-minded drive could sometimes be frightening. He was in love with her of course, everyone was. When she walked into a lecture theater the testosterone level of every male present spiked. The doc was apparently oblivious to the devastating effect she had on her students, or presumably didn't even care. Which was too bad. The reality was, he thought morosely, she probably never dated anyone who wasn't at least a post-doc. Which was also too bad, for it placed her forever beyond his reach. Ah, unrequited love, a major drag.

Golden light bathed her oval face and clean complexion, highlighting the yellow streaks in her auburn hair. While on a dig, she unfailingly wore it in a ponytail, otherwise it was piled up high in a bun or left long to cascade down her back, with half of it covering her left breast. Her large brown eyes could suddenly turn from their glittering incisive hardness to soft, sensuous pools of churning emotion when focused on a particularly fine artifact. Slim, graceful and long legged, at five foot eight the doc was a walking fantasy. All her undergrads would murder for a chance to be her slaves on a dig and competition was stiff to see who would make it to Comalcalco. She worked everyone hard, but was fair and generous, caring more for genuine scholarship than a given tonnage of paper output. The doc only taught final year classes, serious students who had already decided on a career in archaeology. Looking around, despite the rain and primitive conditions, Martin enjoyed working on another professional dig. He fervently hoped she would consent to be his advisor when he took his master's.

First, he had to graduate this summer.

When he started the fall semester last year, graduating had not been altogether a certainty. He still squirmed at the memory of that awful first day. He was busy copying summary notes displayed on the theater's eleven foot by five foot LED screen when the doc walked in. He could almost hear the eyeballs click as the guys took her in. Unconcerned, she took one look at the screen and switched it off.

"Hey!" he yelled. "I was taking that down!"

"And you are?" she asked pleasantly.

"Teller."

"You have your Markson and Boon's, Mr. Teller?"

“Sure, doc. I thought—”

“You’re not privileged to call me doc, and think you didn’t.” She stared at him like he was a discarded pot and frowned. “I’ve got bad news for you, Mr. Teller. For all of you. Come exam time the whole of Markson and Boon’s will apply, not just my summary notes. Corner!” she snapped and pointed with a slim hand.

The theater was deathly quiet. Hands on shapely hips, she leaned forward and waited.

Coloring, his blood seething with embarrassment, he stood up and with clenched teeth walked to the back corner. Who the hell did the bitch think she was! Hushed murmurs rippled through the hall. He had heard about the terrible professor from a master’s graduate, but this swift demonstration of her wrath was very unpleasant as it was unexpected.

What was she saying?

“People, I am Doctor Hopking, and I will be your lecturer for advanced Mesoamerican archaeology 304. Webster’s defines a lecture as an informative talk to a class. That is exactly what I intend doing; give you information. How you take it will be up to each one of you. If anyone here expects this semester to be a tedious session of movies on past digs, quit now and avoid disappointment. I have no use for you. If you want to graduate, you’ll need to pass 304, and you’ll have to earn it. And people, I don’t take prisoners. Sucking up to me is a dead end street. Mr. Teller, you can come down now.”

He had never forgotten that day.

As others soon found, getting the corner was no big deal. It was the doc’s way of punctuating a dumb move and a very effective punishment for sloppy thinking. The doc did not mind misguided thinking. She just didn’t have much time for idiots. From thirty-four hopefuls who were mostly there to drool over her sinuous figure, the second semester had only nineteen.

“Doctor Hopking!”

The piercing cry made everyone’s head snap around. Lauren instinctively started walking toward the mound, then paused and turned.

“Martin, break out the gear and start cleaning this up,” she ordered and swept a hand at the flooded trenches.

The pretty little black haired Chatika appeared on top of the three-

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meter mound, practically dancing with excitement. Martin grinned at her and waved. He liked working with her and being near her. She was friendly, professional and very competent. He would not have minded exploring the relationship further. Unfortunately, she also had a big muscular boyfriend. Martin saw him once and had no wish to be the subject of his displeasure. He had two favorite women and both were out of reach. It just wasn't his summer.

Chatika was a graduate on loan from Mexico City's National Anthropology Museum, sweating out her master's dissertation. Her mentor, one Dr. Kareza Imatlan, a tall taciturn individual who exuded gloom and depression just by his mere presence, was thankfully still to arrive. After all, a learned figure of his stature could not be expected to be up and getting all sweaty and dirty before mid-morning. His team of local and international undergrads was doing that for him, restoring The Palace temples; the Great Acropolis already having been rebuilt. Imatlan was forced on Lauren by the Mexican government as part of the price for allowing her to dig at Comalcalco. Martin knew that Imatlan resented the American undergraduates and had little patience with their questions, but he and Lauren got along surprisingly well.

It was a different story when they first met. What Imatlan could not have known was, when the doc assumed her professional persona, there could never be any doubt as to who was in charge. The way Martin heard it, after a brief but fiery clash of wills, Imatlan unexpectedly capitulated with a gracious display of Latin gallantry. Martin wished he could have been there to see it. Thereafter, Imatlan mostly kept to himself and didn't bother Lauren much, for which Martin was sincerely grateful.

Lauren ducked under the perimeter rope, strode past the test trenches, winced at the mud clinging to her boots, and clambered to the top. She heard the roar of revving car engines and turned. Two jeeps emerged from the museum gate trailing blue exhaust smoke, Imatlan's group coming in for the day. It was still too early for the tourists. Chatika grabbed Lauren's arm and practically dragged her to the north face. When they stopped, Chatika beamed triumphantly and pointed down.

"O my gosh!" Lauren husked in awe. Imatlan forgotten, she scrambled part way down the mound. Ignoring the mud, she knelt and ran

her palm reverently along the smooth side of a yellow, stained sandstone block. Her heart hammered and she wanted to shout with joy. Absently, she pulled a broad brush from her back pocket and lovingly swept away loose dirt and dried mud smears. She did not see Chatika smile at the unconscious gesture. It was obvious what happened. The storm had washed away part of the artificial earthen mound of Temple II, exposing the stone. Instinctively, she knew this was old and clearly predated all the structures erected here. But how old? She would have to dig to the base and get soil samples for accurate dating. Goodness knows where the thing was quarried, probably Chiapas. Tabasco had no sandstone quarries she knew of, old or new.

She looked up and flashed Chatika a warm smile, revealing even white teeth.

“We just made the history books here, my dear, you know that.”

“You were right all along, Doctor,” Chatika said in soft accented English, her dark features split in a wide grin. “The mound had a purpose after all. It wasn’t just a foundation for a temple ruin.”

“As to that...we need to peg this out, string and photograph it. Get the others, will you?”

Lauren longed to start digging around the block right away, but refrained. The stone wasn’t going anywhere and she needed to handle this properly and with care. This single piece was proof positive, a clear vindication of her theory that the Mundo Maya, and even the much older established Olmec forerunner civilization that once inhabited most of Tabasco, were only a relatively recent phenomena in this part of Mexico. It was never clearly explained why the Mundo Maya first prepared earthen mounds at Comalcalco before erecting their unique brick pyramids on top of them. The fact that they used brick, clearly indicated that stone was not readily available, or not available in sufficient quantity, and not as some of her detractors suggested that the eastern Mayans didn’t know how to work stone.

She had little time for Boulcher or Kirmond’s theories that the Mundo Maya were primitives, being the reason why they built their pyramids using only brick. Another accepted doctrine she scorned, claimed that since Comalcalco lay on a flood plain surrounded by jungle, the Mayans built mounds to ensure the temples would be seen from a distance. To her, this was a ludicrous proposition. With jungle all about



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them the local inhabitants would have no way of seeing the temples no matter how high they were.

Her theory was simple. When the Mayans moved into Comalcalco, they found the mounds already there. Although not conclusive, carbon dating of various soil strata samples provided some legitimacy for her position. Some of the samples dated to over three thousand years. To her, it was only logical that the Maya would then build on top of the mounds.

With this single stone, she now held an answer to some of the questions that plagued her ever since she first decided to carve her way through the male dominated archaeology field. She could now start asking who were the people that laid this stone. Gazing at the block, the mound was clearly not a tel. That was already established from earlier digs. Perhaps the mound hid something. She peered closely at the worked face. The side was perfectly smooth and bore no trace of tool markings. Running her finger along the almost sharp edge, she marveled at the precision of the workmanship. This was not a product of a culture barely out of the Stone Age that supposedly only had copper tools. This stone took sophisticated technology to produce.

Martin appeared, towing behind him the other undergrads. They crowded around Lauren, chattering heatedly, maintaining a respectful distance. For them, this was the reason why they went into archaeology, even though everyone realized that most of their careers would in all likelihood be spent in museums and libraries, sifting through musty collections and chasing down arcane references. In the main, all the interesting stuff was already dug up, or so they were told. Martin didn't believe it and the doc certainly did not, always prepared to challenge the envelope of accepted dogma. Besides, field trips were always fun. Gazing at the stone, it was proof undeniable that everything had not been dug up.

Conversation suddenly died and they stood in silence, contemplating the shrine that was the stone. Martin looked down and smiled into Lauren's eyes.

"Congratulations, Dr. Hopking."

Everyone broke into huge grins and clapped. The familiar growl of Imatlan's four-wheel Toyota sounded from the other side of the mound.

Lauren stood up and dusted off her jeans. “Thanks, Martin. We’ll hold off congratulating each other for now, but we’ll make up for it tonight with plenty of cold Margaritas.” There was an even more furious round of clapping. Self-congratulation was thirsty work. “Until then, we have work to do. Chatika, it looks like Dr. Imatlan has finally arrived, but this cannot wait. Take one of my hopefuls and start stringing the site—”

“What reference?”

“SSL1; sandstone level one. Use 500 millimeter grid squares. Mark levels every ten centimeters. Martin, you take the others and organize a one to twenty plan, context sheet, find bag, and analysis sheets. Get this photographed and download a brief to our website. You might as well send some pictures down to Villahermosa in case someone wants to come and see for themselves. We’ll start on a group paper tonight. Oh, and e-mail a photo or two to Boulcher and Kirmond,” Lauren said sweetly, her eyes glittering with ice.

She longed to see the condescending smirk vanish from Boulcher’s fat face when he saw the stone. She might at last get some deserved respect from the man, but doubted that even this would have any impact on that fossilized mind. It was more likely he would be maneuvering to make sure a percentage of any publicity limelight fell on him.

Archaeologists were a queer breed. They did not lust after riches or even fame. They lived or perished on recognition, and getting published first counted for everything. There was no way she would allow anyone to steal her thunder, especially Boulcher or Kirmond, which, of course, was a ridiculous attitude to have from the learned community who should know better. After all, they were just men, she thought comfortably.

Satisfied, she clapped her hands and grinned broadly, in her element. This was archaeology she loved.

“Right, let’s break out the tools.”

Martin stared at her in admiration. When the doc got activated, her enthusiasm was infectious and irresistible. He cleared his throat.

“Ah, Dr. Hopking, haven’t you forgotten something?”

“And what could the lovely doctor have forgotten, Martin?” a deep cultured voice inquired pleasantly, his accent barely noticeable. Lauren whirled and regarded the tall, swarthy Mexican. They were so absorbed,

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no one noticed Imatlan climb up.

“You, of course, you clod!” Lauren laughed and motioned to him. “Just look at what we’ve found!”

Another numbered brick, he mused. Whatever it was, it couldn’t be all that important, but he was prepared to humor her. Not wearing his field boots, Imatlan daintily stepped over a pool of mud.

“Driving up, I wondered where everyone disappeared to.” At the sight of the exposed stone, he stared and color drained from his deeply tanned face. “Madre de Dios!” he muttered in a strangled whisper.

Lauren smiled with grim satisfaction. This would put the haughty Dr. Imatlan in his place. Apart from always trying to get into her pants, Kareza had been nothing but a monumental pain and an irritating distraction. She knew he resented her professional presence and held her theories in mild scorn. As far as he was concerned, Temple II and its mounds were a minor curiosity at best. Interesting, but hardly worth serious scholarship. After all, what was there worth digging that wasn’t already thoroughly researched over the last century? Still, she admitted that when he dropped his amorous pursuits and was himself, Kareza could be charming, was very knowledgeable about the Maya, and a good storyteller. He had done a lot of valuable fieldwork, the latest at Belize, before getting more involved in archaeological politics. He and Boulcher would make an ideal pair, she reflected.

Imatlan cleared his throat, clearly dismayed by the find, and looked enviously at Lauren. She was smug and perfectly aware of what she had here. Her discovery made all his work at The Palace mounds seem like an amateurish waste of time, and he felt a chilling stab of childish resentment. This should have been *his* discovery. It was a galling and bitter pill to swallow from the *norteno* woman. Nevertheless, he put on a brave face and smiled thinly.

“I guess congratulations are in order, my dear Lauren,” he said, his voice dripping with feigned sweetness. “It’s a fantastic find and your theories have been vindicated. I planned on going back to Villahermosa later for supplies, but this is far more important. I’ll go now! I’ll organize a press release, with full credit to you, of course—”

“Don’t bother, Kareza. Martin already has that in hand,” Lauren said harshly, her eyes challenging him. Full credit, right. Out of her sight, strutting before the media, it would more likely be a professional

stab in the back. She had clawed with Boulcher and the Mexican authorities to be here, but Kareza, she could handle. His view was that if money was going to be spent at Comalcalco, it should be spent on restorations, not on aimless poking around Temple II and piles of dirt. Well, if any money was going to be spent now, it certainly wasn't going to be spent on The Palace. Eat that, mister!

One of the undergrads coughed and rubbed his chin, embarrassed at this display of turf fighting. Imatlan straightened to his full height and his face clouded as he glared down at Lauren.

"As the site director—"

"And my liaison with the Mexican government, your contribution to my expedition has been invaluable, but don't go muscling in on my dig. You stick to your restorations. Do we understand each other?"

Imatlan's mouth twitched and he shrugged. Formidable indeed. Although a personal setback, the development wasn't necessarily irretrievable. The extra publicity Lauren's find will undoubtedly generate can be turned to benefit his work on The Palace. It may also give him a way to peg back the arrogant lady doctor. Anyway, any ensuing publicity would flow his way as well. Another time, then.

"As you say, Dr. Hopking, this is your dig," he said backing down, the burn of jealousy a crawling pain deep in his belly. *There will be other moments.* He turned, walked a few paces and snapped his fingers. "Chatika!"

With the look of a hurt child, her shoulders sagged as she shuffled toward him.

"Doctor?"

"I want to know everything that goes on here," he growled. When she didn't say anything, he turned and lifted her chin. "Am I clear?"

"Dr. Hopking—"

"This is our heritage and no outsider will rob us of our glory."

Chatika's eyes blazed. "*Your* glory, Dr. Imatlan."

He shook his head. *So naïve and innocent...*

"Your work here is a significant part of your dissertation, my dear. You wouldn't want anything to get in the way of that, like misguided loyalty?"

She hated him then. He was a piece of slime, but she needed that degree. And it wasn't like she would be cheating on Dr. Hopking. He

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smiled and patted her head.

“I am glad we understand each other,” he said and walked down the mound.

Lauren watched Kareza disappear and bit her lip. Chatika looked desperately unhappy. Lauren walked to her, placed a protective arm around the smaller woman and gave her a squeeze.

“The man’s a pig, dearie,” she murmured. “Beneath our contempt.”



## About the author

Stefan Vucak has written eight Shadow Gods Saga sci-fi novels, which includes *With Shadow and Thunder*, a 2002 EPPIE finalist, and six contemporary political drama books. He started writing science fiction while still in college, but didn't get published until 2001. His *Cry of Eagles* won the coveted 2011 Readers' Favorite silver medal award, and his *All the Evils* was the 2013 prestigious Eric Hoffer contest finalist and Readers' Favorite silver medal winner. *Strike for Honor* won the gold medal.

Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cellphone systems. He applied his IT discipline to create realistic storylines for his books. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends time as an editor and book reviewer. Stefan lives in Melbourne, Australia.

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## **Shadow Gods books by Stefan Vucak**

### **In the Shadow of Death**

An extraterrestrial craft is discovered in an ancient Mayan pyramid and the knowledge throws Earth into social and political turmoil. As a new agent in the Diplomatic Branch, First Scout Terrllss-rr is tasked to destroy the craft before international tension throws Earth into open conflict.

### **Against the Gods of Shadow**

Facing economic sabotage by Palean raiders, Pizgor pleads for help from the Serrll government. Second Scout Terrllss-rr is tasked to find the raider base and expose Palean's duplicity. Terr is forced to battle a Fleet ship that leaves them both badly damaged and leads Terr to confront forces that threaten to destabilize the Serrll itself.

### **A Whisper from Shadow**

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### **Shadow Masters**

With his mission on Earth completed, First Scout Terrllss-rr is returning home, only to be intercepted by an Orieli Technic Union survey ship. The encounter sends ripples of consternation throughout the Serrll Combine. In an attempt to establish a link between a raider network and the AUP Provisional Committee, Terr's cover is compromised. To extricate himself, he has to raise the hand of Death.

### **Immortal in Shadow**

On his way to a prison planet, Tanard, a renegade Fleet officer, escapes and vows vengeance. He is recruited by an extremist Palean group to raid Kaleen worlds. First Scout Terrllss-rr must find the secret base that is supporting him before the Wanderers rise up and unleash Death's wrath on the Serrll.



### **With Shadow and Thunder**

The Orieli are caught in an interstellar war and now they are about to drag the Serrll Combine into it. Betrayed by his Wanderer brother Dharaklin, First Scout Terrllss-rr crashes to Earth in a sabotaged ship. He now has a whole world after the secrets he holds.

### **Through the Valley of Shadow**

Bent on revenge, Terrllss-rr pursues his Anar'on brother to the fabled world of the Wanderers—and face judgment by the god of Death. On their frontier, the Serrll Combine is plunged into a savage encounter with a Kran invader, showing them a glimpse of a dark future.

### **Guardians of Shadow**

Having destroyed a Kran invader, Terr, Teena and his brother Dharaklin, head for Orieli space where they will begin their cultural exchange mission. In a devastating Kran attack, Teena is taken and Terr seeks to rescue her. To win a war that threatens to consume the Orieli and the Serrll Combine, the fabled Wanderers must march against the Krans wielding the hand of Death.

## **Other books by Stefan Vucak**

### **Cry of Eagles**

2011 Reader's Favorite silver medal winner

Iran's nuclear capability represents a clear national threat to Israel, but the United States and Europe do nothing. A Mossad black ops team sabotages a refinery complex in Galveston, plants evidence that incriminates Iran, confident that an enraged America will strike back in retaliation. But the Mossad team makes one small mistake, which the FBI exploits to uncover the plot before America vents its wrath on Iran and plunges the world into political and economic turmoil. An award-winning thriller that will leave you at the edge of your seat.

### **All the Evils**

2013 Eric Hoffer finalist

2013 Readers' Favorite silver medal winner

A researcher in the Secret Vatican Archives uncovers a papyrus that claims Jesus was John the Baptist's disciple and the second Messiah. To prevent the tractate from becoming public, the Vatican secret service engages an assassin to silence anyone who has knowledge of the papyrus. It is up to an FBI agent to unravel a series of murders and prevent the assassin from killing him.

### **Towers of Darkness**

A Wyoming mineworker discovers a human hand bone embedded in a forty million year-old coal seam. An anthropologist, Larry Krafter is sent to recover the bone and unearths a human skull. Instead of receiving acclaim when he publishes his discovery, vested establishment interests seek to discredit him, using murder to do it.

## **Strike for Honor**

2013 Readers' Favorite gold medal winner

In a joint exercise with the Korean navy, Admiral Pacino's son is one of the casualties from a North Korean missile strike. Enraged that the President is more interested in appeasing the North Koreans, forgetting the lost American lives, Pacino decides to make a statement by bombing military facilities in both Koreas. His court-martial puts American foreign policy under public scrutiny.

## **Proportional Response**

2015 Readers' Favorite finalist

The Chinese populist faction, the Tuanpai, plan to trigger a global disaster that will devastate America. In the aftermath, the FBI identifies China as the culprit, but don't know if this was a rogue operation or a government plot. Fearful of American retaliation, China invites U.S. investigators to find that proof. Under a cloud of mutual suspicion, America readies itself for a military confrontation. A mind-bending expose of international politics!

## **Legitimate Power**

What happens when a person living on the outskirts of Jerusalem digs up two ossuaries and finds a strange crystal the size of a smartphone able to repair itself when scratched and turns into a perfect mirror under laser light? When the crystal is put on the shadow gem market, suspecting that it is not natural, an American collector buys it, wanting to tap into its hidden potential. When the Israelis learn what it is, they want it back...as do the Chinese...as does the American government, which sets off a race to get it, no matter what the cost in shattered lives.