

Review

Legitimate Power is a spellbinding story that combines history and technology with international intrigue to create an intelligent thriller sure to satisfy every hardcore enthusiast of this genre. What makes *Legitimate Power* such a compelling book is that the author seamlessly combines the old and the new; the old being two old burial chests that contain bones and an unusual crystal. The new is the concept of solar energy and its various potential innovations, in the center of which lies the unique crystal. Add murder to this political intrigue and you've got one terrific story. The best part is that the prose is engaging and crisp without being overly technical, making *Legitimate Power* an easy read. Highly recommended!

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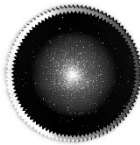
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LEGITIMATE POWER

By

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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 Vanessa...and the promise that life brings

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Chapter One

The pickaxe sang as it glanced off the rock and the handle vibrated in Cheber's hands, which made his palms tingle. He arched his back and grunted as aching muscles protested this unaccustomed abuse. After a loud exhale, he squinted at the pale blue sky unbroken by any cloud and adjusted his shades. The four olive trees that bordered the back stone fence offered meager protection from the relentless sun and he longed to rest his weary body under one, preferably with a cold beer in hand. Bees flirted around red amaryllis and hollyhock blooms. If only it were not so hot, clearing rocks from Alisa's growing garden plot wouldn't be such a burden.

"I've been waiting *weeks* for that ground to be cleared, Cheber Shaken!" she raged at him over breakfast, taking the fun out of getting up this morning. He winced, coffee cup poised before his lips, wishing she'd stop nagging for once, resigned to suffer another miserable day.

"I don't ask much from you, and as the Lord is my witness, you don't give me much. How I came to marry a sniveling worm like you, I'll never know."

"I'll get around to it," he grumbled sourly, not wanting to meet her eyes.

He *had* been putting off the unpleasant chore. Besides, the plot she already had was sufficiently large and kept her occupied enough. What did she want, a farm? The scraps of vegetables she managed to eke out of that parched soil weren't worth the labor, but eating natural was the current gossip in their social circle and Alisa did not want to be left behind. Besides, it was August, not a good time to be planting anything.

"You'll get to it this minute! I don't want to see you wasting the few days left of your vacation staring at the TV or loafing with your friends. Hear me?"

"I hear you," he said wearily, knowing he'd have no peace until he got the depressing job done.

Perhaps if he dug a deep enough hole in that dried-up plot, he could fit her in it. The problem was, he still loved her. What was worse, she knew it and took advantage of it, making his life a drudgery. There didn't seem to be any way to satisfy her demands. What did the

woman *want*?

“Look at you! Still only an accounting clerk—”

“Management accountant.”

“—and Eran is already a supervisor, and both of you joined the company together. Neta will start high school this fall. She’ll need things. On your worthless salary, I don’t know how we’ll make ends meet. You’re a spineless weakling with no consideration for me or your daughter,” she hissed and tightened the sash of her green nightgown.

Her breasts shook as she gestured at him, and he was momentarily distracted by more pleasant thoughts. That’s all they were... thoughts. He could not recall the last time they shared any intimacy, and the way things were going, that was not likely to change. Doesn’t the Torah say that a woman is a man’s field and he should till his field? Unfortunately, that field was mostly barren of any love and warmth these days, overgrown with weeds.

He lowered his cup and glared at her. “If you took a job—you’re a qualified graphics designer—it would help, you know.”

She planted her hands on shapely hips and snorted. “If I had married a *man*, I wouldn’t need to work!”

After that, breakfast did not sparkle with conversation.

Cheber leaned against the pickaxe and frowned. He worked hard at his job, but he didn’t play the office politics game. It simply wasn’t in him. Eran told him he was due for a promotion by end of year as a section manager administering the company’s internal audits. It would mean at least eighteen hundred shekels a month more, but he knew it would not be enough to shut Alisa’s prune face. He should never have moved to Arnona and built this fancy two-story stone mansion for her, saddling himself with a lifetime mortgage. Nothing he ever did pleased her; not even his unflinching love. Hers had dried up somewhere along the way and he wondered what he did to trigger it.

Did she love him, or was their existence reduced to a cohabitation contract until Neta was married off, leaving them free to find what they never had together? There *was* love somewhere long ago and he tried to figure out where they mislaid it—where *she* mislaid it. He had given her his all. He remembered clearly the chance meeting in the sprawling Tel Aviv University library one sunny afternoon between

LEGITIMATE POWER

classes. She wore a knee-length beige skirt and black blouse, black hair tied in a bun, her large almond eyes drew him inexorably within striking range of her delicate perfume, his captivity completed by a radiant smile. Like every young man with raging hormones, he'd had fleeting relationships, but he knew immediately that this woman was different.

Going out, talking about themselves and their life plans, she displayed determination, a toughness to succeed in a commercial world dominated by men. All warning signs, but he ignored them, willing to die for her. He wanted to study mechanical engineering, but was too lazy to put in the required effort. Higher mathematics and physics demanded a lot of work, and he settled for an accountancy course, majoring in management. Both in their final year, studies took up most of their time, but mutual magnetism overcame such a minor obstacle. Those were mad days, exhilarating days, and each knew where it would lead. The road since had turned into endless days of weariness. Even the joy of having Neta only emphasized his growing loneliness.

On reflection, he should have stuck with mechanical engineering.

From the open garage doorway, the Sephardi number he'd absently been listening to ended and the DJ let loose with a Yehudah Poliker light rock piece. Staring at the broken ground at his feet, dry and unforgiving like Alisa, he sighed and shrugged. He would get her damned garden plot extended, which should take her off his back, if only for a little while. It was his own fault really. He always sought to please her and accede to her every whim, which only succeeded in generating scorn and contempt from her. He had been too accommodating, that was the problem. Perhaps it was time to start pleasing himself for a change, no matter what the consequences. A man can take only so much.

In the valley below the rolling hillside, the crowding suburbia of Sur Bahar pushed back available land. Far in the east, the Judean Desert shimmered in the rippling heat. He picked up the pickaxe and clenched his teeth. A beer would go down nicely right now, he reflected, but he would have to fetch it for himself. It would never occur to Alisa to bring him one—although long ago, she used to—or condescend to help him rake away cleared stones. Shaking his head, he figured the beer wasn't worth facing her caustic invective.

The pickaxe clanged against the same rock and he swore. He drove

the pointy end under the thing and heaved, but it refused to budge. Muscles straining, he gave a hard jerk on the handle and sprawled back as the rock gave way. He stood, patted the dust off his clothes, and glowered at what turned out to be a small boulder. As he bent down to roll it out of the way, he faced a black opening in the ground. Biting his lower lip, he groped for a pebble and dropped it into the hole. A hollow clang told him he'd struck a cavity, which made his shoulders sag in disgust. Instead of an extended garden, Alisa now had a cellar! Perhaps if he shoveled in all the loose rock he'd dug up, he might fill it before she noticed anything and gave him more hard time.

The back of his land sloped down slightly. A stone fence separated it from the stepped terraces hugging the hillside all the way into the valley below. Water running down the hill long before Arnona was settled probably found an entry somewhere and dug out the hole—leaving him with a major complication. First things first, though. He needed to find out the size of his problem. It wouldn't do having the ground cave in under him. As he gazed at the opening, a grin creased his smeared face. It might be just large enough for Alisa. Nobody would ever find her.

Contemplating the pleasant thought, he reached for the spade and gingerly cut away soil around the gaping opening. It seemed like the hole extended toward the fence, which made sense. What he needed was some light. He straightened and strode quickly toward the doorway that led into the garage. Inside, he cast a glance at the neat shelves of tools and paraphernalia accumulated over time, and reached for a boxy orange 6V torch. He grasped the handle and walked out clicking the switch to make sure it worked. The radio DJ was pontificating on a song he was about to unleash on his listeners, but Cheber paid no attention as he strode out.

He lay on the ground and thrust the torch into the cavity. The yellow beam revealed a rough chamber some one-and-a-half meters deep, not more than three meters long, nearly rectangular, the end sealed by a large white slab. He froze when the torch exposed two small stone chests. He had stumbled onto an ancient burial site! What a damn nuisance. Whoever lay entombed here was not very important as the chamber lacked any stone lining.

“Cheber!” a shrill voice shattered the silence, making him wince.

LEGITIMATE POWER

“What on earth are you doing down there?”

He lifted his head and studied her for a moment. She had put on a white cotton blouse and cream pants that hugged her supple figure. As she stood behind the steel-railed balcony, black hair cascading over her shoulders, light lipstick outlining full lips, she looked pretty in bright sunshine. Her face though, creased with scorn, was devoid of warmth. Was she planning to go out again? Perhaps she was seeing another man? A stab of fiery jealousy made his teeth grind. No, she wouldn't do that, content to make his life a misery. He should sell the house; the proceeds would be enough to keep her and Neta comfortable, and he would move back to Tel Aviv. Lots of high paying jobs there, and he'd be shut of her.

Unfortunately, he'd been saying that to himself for some time, but never acted on the thought. He simply could not bring himself to cut the bond of love he had for her, even if it was not shared. Staring at her, his thoughts tumbled as he contemplated life without her.

“Come down and see,” he shouted back indifferently as he got up and walked into the garage.

He took the small metal ladder off its wall hooks and carried it to the hole. When he lowered it, he heard Alisa gasp.

“What in the world...”

Not listening to her, he picked up the torch and climbed down, relishing the sudden coolness. He had to bend to prevent his head striking the jagged ceiling as he made his way to the stone chests. When he knelt down, he recognized them immediately—ossuaries. People found them all the time, tucked into shallow holes dug into hillsides. As a Jew, Torah law bound him not to desecrate the resting place of the dead, but Cheber wasn't orthodox, to the lament of his parents. He lifted the torch and played it over the large seal stone. Clearly, over time, water and erosion had piled up rubble and soil in front of the burial chamber, hiding all evidence of its existence.

Given the rough state of the chamber, the ossuaries did not hold anyone with wealth or status. Perhaps not, but they still may have some value. If he sold them to one of the dealers who peddled so-called genuine antiquities to tourists swarming Jerusalem's Old City, they might bring in badly needed shekels. It could also stop Alisa's whining, for a time anyway. Besides, he would need the money for

material to fill the chamber.

“Come out of there at once!” Alisa demanded and he peered up at her, seeing her disgusted expression framed against the opening. “I cannot trust you to do a simple job without you complicating it. Lord preserve me.”

Something snapped inside Cheber and he didn’t care anymore to be her foot mat.

“If you don’t shut up, this hole is large enough to hold you and your waspish tongue,” he told her calmly, amazed to hear his words and feel the flood of relief they produced, a catharsis that burned away the layers of suffering surrounding his soul, leaving him clean and invigorated.

She gaped, her mouth hanging open in astonishment. “How dare you talk to me like that!”

“I should have done it long ago,” he declared and crouched beside the nearest ossuary, feeling her oppressive weight roll off his shoulders. He *should* have told her off long ago. Unrequited love wasn’t worth giving up his dignity. There were limits and she just crossed the dividing line.

Strange markings decorated the lid and sides. He gently pushed the ossuary, but it didn’t budge. He placed both palms against the edge and applied more force. The chest leaned back slightly. Nodding, he worked his fingers under it and gently lifted. It wasn’t overly heavy, perhaps eight to ten kilos. He shuffled toward the ladder and grunted as he lifted the stone chest through the hole onto solid ground. He heaved the second ossuary through the opening, picked up the torch and climbed out. Standing beside Alisa, he tilted his head at the chests.

“What do you think of that?”

“Two burial caskets. Big deal. What are you going to do about the hole in my garden? I can’t walk around with that thing here.”

He clenched his fists, holding back his temper. “Don’t you understand? This could be the break we’ve been looking for. They’ll fetch twelve thousand at least.”

“Who’ll want to buy two ossuaries?” she scoffed. “The markets are filled with them.”

“Maybe you’re right, but let’s take a look at what’s inside before we throw them back, okay?”

LEGITIMATE POWER

“Bones, that’s what’s in there.” A frown creased her brow. “Shouldn’t we report this or something? The Antiquities Authority could give us a bad time if they found out.”

“We dug them up in our backyard, for crying out loud. This isn’t a declared archaeological site.”

“Talk to Eran. He collects such trash.”

“I don’t have to talk to anybody. I know what I’m doing.”

“Just like you knew when you dug up that hole.”

“Peace, woman!”

Cheber picked up one of the ossuaries and carried it into the garage, bent under its weight. He placed it on the workbench, switched off the radio and reached for a long screwdriver mounted in a rack. The narrow blade slid easily into the groove between the lid and carved stone side. He levered up the lid and placed it on the bench. Alisa leaned over his shoulder and peered inside.

“Like I said, bones,” she declared scornfully.

They were bones, all right, but that’s what an ossuary was for. Judging by the size of the leg femur, it was not from an adult. What struck him as odd was the elongated skull and the abnormally large eye sockets. He grinned with excitement.

“These aren’t ordinary bones, my dear. The skull is nothing like I have ever seen anywhere. It reminds me of those strange skulls they found in Peru. A dealer I know in the Old City will pay plenty for this.”

Without looking at her, he went out and brought back the second ossuary. The lid came off easily, revealing another set of bones...and what appeared to be a small box wrapped in faded brown leather. Seeing it, his mind filled with images of jewels and riches hidden inside.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Open it!”

Heart racing, he carefully peeled off the leather to reveal a box swathed in purple cloth. The material felt like fine silk as he unwrapped it to reveal a container made of rich brown wood that exuded a faint incense fragrance, covered with the same strange symbols as the ossuaries. A thin line ran around the box a centimeter from the top. He grasped the lid and tugged. It came off easily. Something nestled inside wrapped in white cloth.

“If you’re finished staring at it...” Alisa hissed, clearly impatient.

He snorted and held the little parcel to her.

Hesitating, she took it and fumbled with the cloth, then caught her breath and gawked. In her hand was a rectangular pale orange crystal the size of a small smartphone, only thicker. It seemed to glow with an inner light. Every edge was beveled, and a shallow groove ran along both long sides.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered, clearly awed. “What is it?”

“I don’t know. It’s been machined, but I cannot tell if it is a gemstone. Too large to be an ornamental jewel. I know one thing, it’s worth a lot of money. I’ll take some pictures and make a phone call or two.”

“What about the hole in my garden?”

“Fill it yourself!” he snarled and strode toward the door leading into the house.

He swept his eyes across the kitchen, spotted his smartphone on the credenza shelf and grabbed it. Alisa glared at him when he returned, but said nothing, mouth pursed. Ignoring her, he snapped shots of the ossuaries, the bones and the crystal. He walked back into the house and went upstairs to his study. After powering up the tower computer, he hooked the cell to the USB port and downloaded the photos.

Eran was something of an antiquities collector and had some nice pieces. Cheber had seen them and his friend would talk for hours on the subject, lubricated by a glass or two of smooth claret. Although not overwhelmed with emotion at the sight of a cracked pot or misshapen female figurine, Cheber had nonetheless accumulated a rudimentary understanding of Israel’s tortuous history—from an archaeological perspective anyway.

He scanned the list of Eran’s emails in Outlook and finally found what he was looking for. Over a beer one afternoon, discussing antiquities, of course, and the muddled relationship licensed dealers maintained with the Israel Antiquities Authority—technically, according to the 1978 Antiquities Law, any artifact found after passage of the law belonged to the state—Eran spoke of a thriving trade in all types of objects, from pottery, figurines and rare manuscripts. The IAA wanted to suppress the trade, but it was helpless as the courts and the Ministry of Tourism upheld the dealers’ right to trade.

LEGITIMATE POWER

Eran's email listed four licensed traders with whom he dealt regularly. Among its winding lanes and hole-in-the-wall shops, the Old City had an endless number of outfits selling three-day-old antiques to gullible tourists. The dealers Eran knew guaranteed that he would not be cheated, but Cheber would have to do his own bargaining. He never thought he would need a dealer, but was now glad to benefit from his friend's expertise.

He selected two names, one in the Jewish and one in the Muslim Quarter. Composing a brief email, he attached the photos and sent it off. He wrote another email to Eran and smiled as he pressed the Send icon. His friend was at work, usually taking his vacation in June, but Cheber figured Eran would call as soon as he read the email.

Knowing he faced two hardnosed traders, Cheber started Googling, wanting to know more about ossuaries and their likely worth. His face fell as he read the articles. Alisa was right, the market was flooded with the things. He chewed his lower lip and pondered the situation. There might be lots of burial chests around, but he figured his bones ought to be worth something to a museum or university. However, the prospect of a drawn-out negotiation process with museum authorities made him wince. He wanted to sell quickly and rid himself of the things, and Alisa's nagging.

Trying to value the crystal was much more difficult and turned into a hopeless exercise. Not knowing anything about gemstones, he was stymied. Still, the unique thing had to be valuable. Take it to a jeweler and have it appraised?

His cell trilled and he pressed the phone icon, smiling as he read the caller's name.

"Hi, Eran. That didn't take long."

"You're a bastard, Cheber, did you know that?" his friend replied hotly. "I scratch and scrounge for my collection, and the gods drop two ossuaries in your backyard. I hope you fall into that hole!"

Cheber laughed. "I've got it reserved for somebody else."

"Hah! I keep telling you, old friend. You are clinging to that woman and she's making your life one long torture session. She isn't worth it. Get yourself a new model."

"Like you did?"

"Best thing I ever done. The rabbinical courts these days don't

give you a hard time over a divorce like they used to.”

“I’ll think about it, but it’s complicated.”

“You’re the one who’s making it complicated.”

“Look, you didn’t call to talk about my lousy marriage, and I don’t want to discuss it right now.”

“No, I didn’t. About your find, who did you contact?”

“Yaron and Malek.”

“Mmm. Both are fairly honest. I’d buy the things myself, but I’ve got an ossuary already. As for what they’re worth, you may get three thousand for each. There isn’t much of a demand for them these days. You could try selling them to an overseas collector, but you’ll be buried in government red tape. Not worth it. The unusual bones will be one of your draw cards.”

“You want to buy them?” Cheber asked hopefully.

“What do you want for them?”

“Ten thousand, and I’ll throw in the ossuaries.”

“Sorry, old man. No can do. I’m short of dinero right now. Can you wait until next month?”

“I can’t. I have a hole in my backyard I need to fill.”

“You’ve got money stashed away, but I sympathize. That crystal...it’s definitely an unusual specimen. Before you talk to Yaron or Malek, I’d suggest you take it to a jeweler for an appraisal. It might be worth a small pile.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured. You still okay for dinner on Saturday?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. Talk to you later.”

Cheber switched off, smiled and shook his head. Eran was a character and his new wife a lovely lady. Alisa liked the younger woman and the two often went shopping in the city together. That’s what he needed to do now, shop for a price...and maybe a new model like Eran suggested.

“Cheber! What are you doing up there?” Alisa’s caustic voice shattered the atmosphere and he sighed. Will the woman ever give him a moment of peace?

He got up and padded to the master bedroom. After throwing his soiled clothes into the washing hamper, he showered and dressed in beige slacks and a matching short-sleeved shirt. He pocketed his wallet

LEGITIMATE POWER

and the ring of keys and made his way to the garage. Not bothering to explain, he wrapped the crystal in its cloth and left Alisa staring after him as he climbed into the Honda Civic. He pressed the button to open the garage door and turned the ignition key. The engine fired and purred. He engaged 'drive' and the car surged forward.

Three hours later, weary and badly wanting some lunch, he pulled into the driveway, waited for the garage door to open, and drove in without bothering to do it in reverse to position the car for an easy exit. He slammed the door and barely glanced at the ossuaries on the workbench.

His cell went off and he dragged it out of his pocket.

"Cheber Shaken."

"This is Jamail Malek. I am calling regarding the email you sent this morning."

"I appreciate the call, Mr. Malek."

"Please, call me Jamail. You found something very unusual, Mr. Shaken, and I am not referring to the ossuaries. I have enough of them cluttering my shop. However, I am interested in the bones and, of course, the crystal. Do you want to sell?"

"My price is twenty-five thousand shekels."

Cheber heard a restrained guffaw. "An ambitious price, but one I could not possibly meet. I am prepared to offer you fifteen for everything, subject to an inspection."

"I had the crystal valued, Jamail. It alone is worth more than eight thousand."

"Perhaps. Without seeing it for myself, I could not say. Think about my offer. If you are willing to sell it at a more reasonable price, call me. I bid you good day."

"Thank you for your call, Jamail," Cheber said, but the line was already dead.

He gazed at the smartphone in his hand and felt a wave of disappointment wash over him. After talking to three jewelers in downtown Jerusalem, each expressed the liveliest interest in the unusual crystal, and all claimed it was not a gemstone. They couldn't tell him what it was, but if he wanted to sell, the highest offer he got was 8,200 shekels. They told him the crystal would have to be cut into smaller pieces suitable for jewelry ornaments. As a single piece, it was a curiosity, but

not worth much. Cheber expected to get a whole lot more, but he could not very well argue with experts, albeit thieving ones, no doubt. He had seen the light of greed in their eyes.

Real gem trading in Israel was done in Tel Aviv, and he was tempted to go there to have the crystal examined, but he didn't really have the time. Besides, after all the associated travel expenses, he might not get a better price. What he was sure to get was more of Alisa's acerbic invective. No, get rid of the thing, fill in the damned hole in the backyard and be done with it.

"Where have you been?" Alisa demanded as he walked into the kitchen.

He placed the wrapped crystal on the table and sat down. "Having the thing appraised."

"And?"

"We'd be lucky to get eight thousand for it."

"Eight? Are you crazy? The thing is priceless!"

Wishing he had never stumbled on that hole, he looked at her. "Maybe. I had a call from a dealer with whom Eran does business. He offered me fifteen for everything: ossuaries, bones and the crystal."

"He was trying to rob you."

"Probably, but at least I now have a better idea what we can expect to make if we sell. Twenty-five thousand shekels, if I can get that much, would come very handy right now. And don't forget the hole we have back there. It will cost a couple of thousand at least to buy soil and gravel to fill it."

"The crystal alone must be worth more than twenty thousand."

"I wouldn't be surprised. If you can sell it for that, go ahead. I'm already sorry I found the damned thing. Right now, I want my lunch."

She was about to snap at him when her expression changed. Staring at him, she pushed back a lock of hair.

"What's gotten into you, Cheber? Ever since you dug up that crystal, you've been behaving very strangely."

He stood, walked to the fridge and took out a carton of mixed fruit juice. Pausing, he gazed at her, realizing she was right. He did feel different, the pressing load of her smothering presence gone, and he realized why.

"No, simply coming to my senses. It's like this, Alisa. We either

LEGITIMATE POWER

start having a relationship or I walk, and you can keep the house. I never wanted it, but I built it to please you and impress your circle of friends. It's a damn millstone and you're welcome to it."

"Did you expect me to live in an apartment, a crowded hovel? I wanted—"

"I know what you wanted, but you never gave a thought to what I wanted, and that was a wife, not a nagging critic. I always loved you, and still do, but that love is no longer unconditional. I am not your doormat, and I don't want to be treated like one anymore."

"You don't know how to be a man."

Her words cut deep and he leaned toward her. "Well, you're seeing him now. My lunch."

"Get it yourself!" Cheeks pink, she whirled and stomped out.

Sighing, he nodded slowly a couple of times and got a glass from the credenza. He filled it from the tap and took a sip. She was right. He didn't know how to be a man. No, he merely kept that part of himself buried for the sake of her love... a big mistake as it turned out.

He sniffed at a pot on the glass top cooker, lifted the lid and peered at the meat stew inside. Fetching a plate and spoon from the cupboard, he helped himself to a large portion, took it to the table, sat down and began to eat, his mind going over what might have been, and of tomorrows yet to be written. He would need to put out feelers for a job in Tel Aviv, he mused as he worked his way through the tasty stew, the ashes of regrets falling around him like dust. He had to say one thing; Alisa knew how to cook. He would miss that.

Done, he washed the plate and spoon and took a last look around the kitchen. It felt cold and alien. He pursed his lips and made his way upstairs into the main bedroom. He dragged a battered cloth suitcase from the walk-in robe and threw it on the bed. Hearing her footsteps, he looked up as she walked in, stopping at the doorway.

"What are you doing?"

"Leaving." Cheber smiled wanly and shrugged. "There is nothing left for me here."

Silence rang in the room as she studied him.

"Not even Neta?"

"Don't start that."

He stood there, wondering what was going through her mind.

“You did it to yourself,” she said after a while, eyes bright.

He nodded wearily. “I know.”

“I despised you because I thought you were a weakling.”

“You wanted someone to dominate you?”

“I wanted a man!”

“You wanted everything, Alisa, and I gave you everything to keep your love, even my self-respect, but you wanted more. Well, there isn’t any more. You took all I had. If you want more, you’ll have to take it from some other man, otherwise it’s time you started giving something back.”

She pressed her lips, studying him. After a time, she nodded.

“I deserve that, I suppose. Are you prepared to give me some time?”

“No,” he said harshly and felt something tear inside him. Alisa!

“You should have stood up to me earlier, Cheber.”

“Perhaps it’s too late, but I’m standing up to you now.”

“I don’t know if I can change. It might be too late for both of us.”

“That will be your choice.”

“What about Neta? This would rip her apart.”

“You think she doesn’t know what’s going on?” He allowed his arms to hang at his side. “She’ll be hurt, but this is about you and me and where we go from here...if we’re going to have a future. We are either husband and wife having a relationship, sharing everything, or we are two strangers living a lie, and I don’t want a stranger in my bed anymore.”

Her eyes glistened and a fat tear rolled down her left cheek. Seeing her distress, he wanted to rush to her, embrace her, whisper tender things and kiss away the pain, but he simply stood there. She was very good at playing the psychological warfare game and had pulled the sob routine more than once...and he had always given in. He could not afford to give in this time, even as it tore him up to see her anguish. She had to choose the path she wanted to tread, together or separately. He had trod her path long enough.

Sniffing, she wiped her cheek. “This will take time...my husband.”

“No,” he said gruffly and swallowed hard. “Decide now, Alisa.”

Lips trembling, she bit her lip. “I don’t know if I can.”

He exhaled loudly and nodded. “Draw up whatever papers you

LEGITIMATE POWER

want and I'll sign them."

She gaped. "You are divorcing me?"

He opened the suitcase and shrugged. "I guess I am."

Crying openly, she took a tentative step toward him. "Don't leave me."

"I don't want to, but you haven't given me any reason to stay."

"Even if I told you I love you?"

He snorted with disdain. She had played that card more than once and the words sounded just as hollow now. He would not allow himself to be manipulated anymore, or let her take what pride he had left.

"Love? I don't know if you're capable of it."

"Cheber! I want you."

As he looked at her wet cheeks, the tragic expression on her face, realizing that a single act would irrevocably change the shape of their lives, he was tempted to give in again. His heart ached for her, but she had bruised it too badly and he did not want to risk more pain. Despite everything, could they make it work?

"Even though my love is conditional?"

"Because it is."

"Come here," he said gruffly.

With a cry of relief, she was in his arms and he kissed her hard. Her mouth opened and their tongues danced. After a time, she pulled back and wiped back tears. Smiling, she ran a hand through his hair.

"Wow. It's been a while since you kissed me like that."

"We need to practice more," he growled, and his mouth found hers.

"I always loved it when you were strong and manly," she whispered tenderly, smiling into his eyes.

"The old me is back again...for keeps."

His smartphone trilled and he pulled away from her. He brushed her cheek and dug the cell from his pocket.

"Cheber Shaken."

"Mr. Shaken, this is Acaph Yaron. I would very much like to see you and discuss your find. Would three o'clock be convenient?"

He glanced at his wristwatch. It was already after two. "I don't know if I can get to the Old City by then, Mr. Yaron."

"You misunderstand. I want to come and see *you*."

Cheber slowly nodded a couple of times. The old boy certainly seemed keen, which was promising.

“I look forward to it.”

“I heard,” Alisa said as he pocketed the cell. “It sounds...encouraging.”

“Not as encouraging as what we started,” he said and pulled her against him.

“The garden...” she mumbled against his lips.

“You are my garden.”

About the Author

Stefan Vučak has written eight Shadow Gods Saga sci-fi novels 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 Readers' Favorite silver medal award, and his *All the Evils* was the 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 Vučak

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 Terrlls-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 Terrlls-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

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 Terrlls-rr is tasked to destroy the craft before international tension throws Earth into open conflict.

Shadow Masters

With his mission on Earth completed, First Scout Terrlls-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 Terrlls-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 Terrlls-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, Terrlls-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 Vučak

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 mid-bending expose of international politics!

Lifeliners

When everybody is against them, it is tough being a lifeliner, as Nash Bannon found out. Lifeliners are ordinary people...almost. They can draw energy from another person; they live longer and are smarter. Scientists claim that Western high-pressure living and growing sterility in developed countries has triggered the rise of lifeliners, and *homo sapiens* will be replaced by *homo renata* within ten generations. So, what's not to like about lifeliners?