

Review

Stefan Vučak's passion for writing science fiction truly comes natural to him as he has written numerous intriguing novels involving extraterrestrials and space travel, and he also hits on the hot topics of politics and religion versus science. Stefan creates magic when the pen hits paper and he does not disappoint in *Shadow Masters*. His imagination and creativity amaze me because his novels are like no others out there that I have read before; they are completely genuine and unique. I love the use of Stefan's descriptive words and the depth of his characters. I could feel the suspense and terror all around me and could hardly set this book down.

Readers' Favorite

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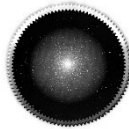
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SHADOW MASTERS

By

Stefan Vučak



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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

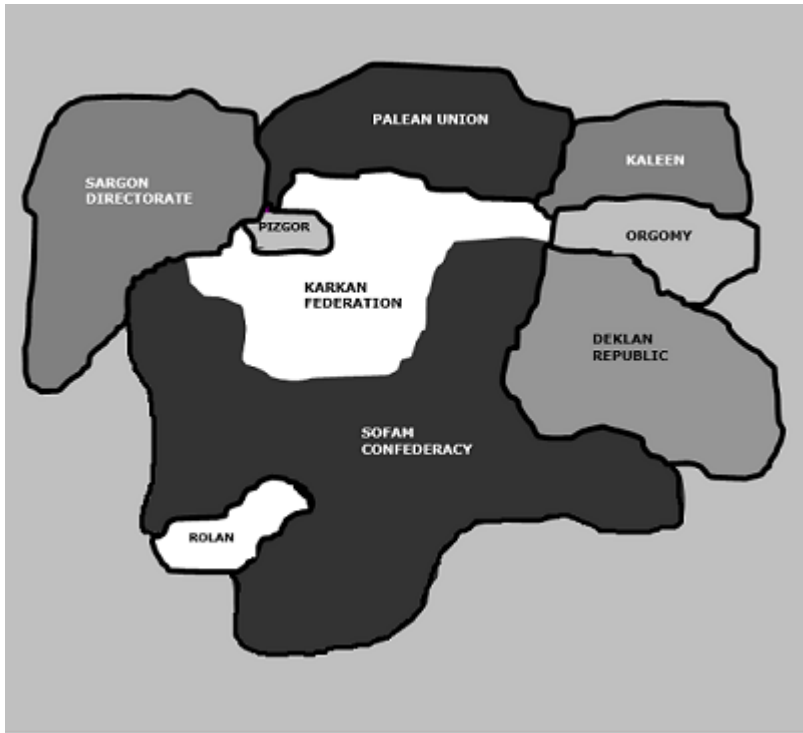
To Roman ...when reaching for faith

Acknowledgments

Mystic Mountain Nebula – Credit: NASA, ESA, and M. Livio and the Hubble 20th Anniversary Team.

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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 Systems	Percentage of Total	Executive 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		
General Assembly	247	100	10
Outposts	40		
Protectorates	34		

Principal political blocks:

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

Composition of the Executive Council

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

Chapter One

Sheeva broke through the dark cloud layer and buttery sunlight streamed into the nav bubble, bathing the command deck with a diffuse golden glow. Below them, bunched white cloudbanks cleaved the horizon beneath a brilliant blue sky. Sensing freedom, the M-1 surged up, ripping the thin atmosphere blanket in its wake. There was no one to hear the rolling boom of its passage. A tinge of violet colored the planet's curve before darkness descended and stars glared back with cold indifference. Earth rolled beneath them as the scoutship shifted course and accelerated toward a gray crescent moon.

Terr lounged back in his seat and let out a satisfied sigh. Everything was right with the world, almost. He'd dodged the chop over the C-32 and his two unwelcome charges were safely back where they belonged. Admittedly, armed with knowledge of the Serrll, unavoidable under the circumstances, but all in all, not too shabby. Still, the Bureau of Colonial and Protectorate Affairs desk drivers might not view his actions in the same glowing light, but right now, he wasn't going to allow the prospect of possible future bureaucratic entanglements spoil his day. Besides, Anabb had forgiven him his little trespasses, however grudgingly. And right now, it was the only thing that mattered.

Okay, nosing around that American carrier group might not have been the wisest thing to do, seeing how it got him shot down, but if Sariman had bothered to warn him of Earth's bistatic laser radar capability, it would have avoided the ensuing complications. Anyway, the canal worm got his butt in the crack properly when he violated the agreed comms protocols, which inevitably led to all the subsequent unpleasantness. What did Sariman expect? That Dhar would leave Lauren behind to die at Comalcalco, with their primitive medical facilities to care for her? Because that's what would have happened had he not taken her. What his brother did was not merely correct, but honorable.

At any rate, Sariman should have known better than kowtow to someone like Laraiana with her caustic behavior and vindictive personality. Serves him right what that got him. He had forgotten that he was foremost a Scout Fleet officer, and crawling to her only got him stomped on. The woman was an opportunistic user and didn't care who

got trampled along the way to her version of success, whatever that was.

Hindsight is such a wonderful tool.

With Earth shrinking behind him, Terr swiveled his seat and grinned broadly at Dhar. “I never thought I would say it, Nightwings, but I’m glad to be away from that nutty place.”

Dharaklin checked the status displays with a quick sweep and leaned back into the couch. He was pleased that Sankri was happy, given the things that had gone wrong. He did not know which was worse, downed by that Aegis cruiser’s point defense system or being recovered by the Russians. Both were grim items at many levels whose repercussions, he figured, were still to be fully resolved by everyone involved, including Earth. Territorial rivalries colored and absorbed so much of that planet’s energy. When he thought about it, were Serrll’s rivalries any different? Despite some difficulties, the mission was done and they were going home. The future was now for them to write.

“I must confess to a level of relief myself, my brother,” he said comfortably, his voice deep and resonant. “Although—”

Terr raised a hand and winced. “I know. You don’t have to remind me. As jobs go, it wasn’t my finest moment ever, but postmortems can wait.”

Dhar suppressed a smile. “Far be it for me to criticize my superior officer.”

“Your unflagging support shall not go unrewarded,” Terr said dryly.

“Comforting, but what I was going to say, my brother, bringing Lauren and Bill to the Moon Base was a grave breach of standing regulations.”

“It was the right thing to do,” Terr said promptly, giving Dhar a hard look. “Never doubt it. I would have been extremely disappointed had you done otherwise.”

“It might have been the correct thing to do and I thank you for your words, but it caused you a major problem with Anabb.”

“I wouldn’t fret it. He’ll get over it.”

“I cannot put it out of my mind. Despite his assurances, there could still be trouble over this with the BCPA.”

“Maybe, but I don’t believe it,” Terr said with more assurance than he felt. The BCPA took its protectorate responsibilities seriously, and Anabb’s Diplomatic Branch umbrella might not be wide enough to

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shield him should they decide to get unpleasant. Ah, to the pits with all of them. “Look at it this way. After cleaning up Tanard, we’re heroes, remember? It wouldn’t look good for the government to be messing with us right now.”

Dhar raised a questioning eyebrow. “It might not look good, but it does not mean they would not do it. Besides, those Captal busybodies have long memories,” he added darkly. “They will find a way to even the score.”

“You worry too much. We’ll handle it, if and when,” Terr growled and stretched his arms. “What can they do? Drum me out of the Fleet? Somehow, I don’t think so. Right now, all I want is to pack up our stuff and get back to Taltair. On the other hand, should those chair experts decide to give us trouble, I can always sweet talk my uncle into dropping the matter.”

“Unless he is after your hide himself,” Dhar commented candidly, but a twinkle of amusement lit his eyes.

Terr sighed and shrugged. “There is always that.”

Dhar stared at his brother for a speculative moment, curious how Sankri could brush off the problem so easily, then turned to check their approach. At one-fifth boost the Moon was getting visibly larger. There was no danger of them auguring in, and SC&C would override if that were the case. He just did not want to appear sloppy.

Although Sankri appeared unruffled regarding the conduct of their mission, he suspected his brother secretly feared that Anabb would see it as a shoddy operation; certainly more so than worrying about any Bureau of Colonial and Protectorate Affairs repercussions. Dhar knew how important it was for Sankri to create a favorable impression with their boss. Regardless of any mitigating circumstances and Anabb’s forgiving manner, as a first field test, the job left something to be desired.

“We did get the C-32,” he said gently, reminding his brother that despite everything they *have* completed their mission. That had to account for something.

Terr gave him a wry smile. “So we did. Things can’t be all bad, even if we did leave a trail of confusion in our wake.”

“And we learned something more of Earth’s detection capabilities. That should be good for a footnote somewhere,” Dhar said gravely and Terr grinned at him.

“There you are! They’ll pin a medal on us. Still, if Anabb is going to have us doing more of these crazy stunts, I can see this undercover crap will take some time getting used to.”

“You are not regretting joining the Diplomatic Branch, are you?”

“Tah, the gods will tell,” Terr said gravely. “It’s somewhat wrenching to realize that we’re no longer Scout Fleet, where the only thing I had to worry about was missing report schedules and bending *Ramora*. Although we did end up bending it pretty badly, didn’t we? I do miss her. She was a sweet ship. One thing, though, being with Anabb certainly beats the hell out of routine patrol duty.” He cocked an eyebrow at his brother. “And you?”

“So far, it has not been dull, I must give him that.”

“A strange first assignment, all right,” Terr agreed moodily. “Second, if you count *Zavian* and bagging Tanard. He is some piece of work. You know, I almost feel sorry for him.”

“He took out his M-3 and wiped out innocent merchant ships, my brother,” Dhar reminded him sternly.

Terr nodded. “Yes, he did. And what’s more, I can understand why he did it.”

“There is a world of difference between understanding and condoning. And that’s what the Paleans were doing, condoning open piracy.”

“Well, he’ll have plenty of time to reflect on Cantor. And talking of reflection, we left Earth with a lot to reflect over as well.”

“The C-32’s data? Hard to imagine that somehow we left the ship behind,” Dhar mused and shook his head.

Terr grinned. “Yeah, and there’s no one left to blame now. I wonder what Earth will make of their download? They’ve got so much potential, yet still so tribal and territorial.”

“Not like us at all, are they?” Dhar added softly, pointing out the illogic of Sankri’s argument.

Terr could not say anything, afraid if he started picking at it, examining the rivalries between the Servatory Party and the Revisionists, the looming Sargon/Palean merger, Deklan’s religious fundamentalism, raiders plaguing shipping corridors, he wouldn’t like the inevitable conclusion. Technology always magnifies a society’s moral and ethical shortcomings.

Surface Command and Control guided them in and the little scout

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glided over jagged peaks that hid the Serrll Moon Base in perpetual northern polar darkness. With the base installations spread across the crater floor like a toy erector set, the ship hovered for a moment, then settled on the softly glowing landing ring beside a brooding M-3. An access tube immediately slid from a gray wall and connected with a muffled clang when the clamps engaged.

Terr slapped his thighs and stood up. "Might as well get this over with. We could get lucky and leave without being noticed."

"I like your optimism," Dhar said, doubting that they'd be able to simply slink away, but the prospect of leaving the Moon Base and its internal byplays felt good. He looked forward to an assignment where they would not need to use the hand of Death, provided Anabb kept them together. It would be unsettling working without his brother at his side, although he knew a day would come when that might be necessary. He thought about it, but never quite got around to deciding how he would react. It won't be pleasant, he knew that much.

Tah, whatever the gods decided.

They took the cable-tube down to the main deck and proceeded to the access tube hatch. It was a short walk through the brightly lit tunnel to the other end. Standing at the entrance, Terr tapped a brown sensor pad. It pulsed and the hatch opened at the SMB's launch level. Sweet, acid, rancid smells assaulted him as he strode into the base and his face wrinkled with distaste. He still found it hard to ignore the ambient odors. A familiar figure waited for them in the corridor.

"Sir!" the young Deklan officer barked and stood to.

Terr smiled affably at the boy's stiff features. The kid had gone through a lot and probably enjoyed little of it.

"Doing penance, Mister?"

Dreading this meeting, Third Scout Tembel allowed himself a small grin. "No, sir. The executive officer has requested that you see him at your convenience."

"First Scout Patrlin?"

"Yes, sir." Tembel tried to cover his embarrassment and his face colored. "With Master Scout Sariman under close arrest, Mr. Patrlin is in temporary command."

"I see. Very well. This is a convenient time as any. Lead the way."

Tembel's blush deepened and he cleared his throat, wishing he were

someplace else. If only the deck would open up and swallow him.

“Sir...I want to extend my personal apology to you and Mr. Dharaklin for everything.” The image of two humans sauntering into the chamber that housed the C-32 and Sariman suddenly standing behind him, quietly ordering him not to report it, still haunted him. It was wrong, he knew it, but Sariman was his superior officer and he was a lowly Third Scout. He was carrying out orders! It didn’t help him sleep better.

Terr patted the boy’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t your fault.”

“That’s the point, sir. I think it was,” Tembel said miserably, his large wide-set eyes tragic and lost. Mr. Terrlls-rr ended up gravely wounded as a direct result of what he did and the Earth woman almost died. He shuddered to think of the political consequences set into motion by his seemingly innocuous act.

“It took courage to say what you did, Mr. Tembel,” Terr said softly, sympathizing with the boy’s dilemma. “If you’re ever placed in a similar position again, you’ll know how to refuse an illegal order.”

“Yes, sir,” Tembel squeaked, turned and marched stiffly toward the nearest cable-tube. Disobey an order? Not so easy when you were on the bottom rung of a career ladder. Still, he was relieved that the Diplomatic Branch Head of Mission didn’t seem to hold the incident against him. A negative report from him would have been an effective career gasper.

Terr stared after the boy, shook his head and walked after him. He hoped the experience hadn’t scarred him too much. Well, the kid would just have to learn to deal with it. In adversity the spirit grows. Sometimes, though, there was too damn much adversity.

The ride up was taken in uncomfortable silence. When the cable-tube hatch opened, Tembel hurried toward the base commander’s door. The two translucent panels parted with a hiss and he stood to.

“Diplomatic Branch Mission, sir!” he snapped, glanced at Terr and hurried off.

Terr gave him a passing nod of encouragement and walked into the office. It was still hot and humid as he remembered. Patrlin was standing behind the matte black desk, waiting for them. Behind him, a floor-to-ceiling window screen provided a dark Moonscape backdrop. The

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Karkan hissed and extended his arm at the formchairs before the desk.

“Please be seated, and thank you for seeing me.”

“No problem. I planned on doing so anyway before departing,” Terr said formally and settled himself into a chair. The Karkan’s demeanor was cold, his body language hostile, and Terr wondered what soured his milk today.

“Quite.” Patrlin’s tongue flickered.

The green scales shimmered when he tilted his head. With Sariman under arrest, he expected taking over the SMB permanently, a natural reaction given his seniority and experience with Earth. Not to mention a year on this barren rock. Not getting the coveted promotion was a source of intense personal irritation and what he considered a blight on his record. Didn’t Sector TACOPSCOM trust him to do the job? It was a First Scout billet anyway. He wondered if this young pup sitting before him had anything to do with it. Probably not, he decided grudgingly. The boy didn’t appear to be the type to involve himself in service politics, at least not yet. Besides, they’d hardly seen each other. Terr had no reason to sabotage his career. Ah, Laraiana? She represented a much more realistic possibility and something to be looked into. He had been rubbing her the wrong way. Stupid female! Did she expect him to fall at her feet because of her powerful Captal connections?

“With destruction of the C-32, I take it your mission here is now officially concluded?” Patrlin grated with forced politeness.

Terr suspected that more lay hidden behind those seemingly innocent words, but right now, he couldn’t be bothered figuring it out. There would be enough explaining of his own once he got to Taltair, to worry about the Karkan and his problems.

“It is. I’m recalled and I intend to lift immediately we clear our quarters.”

“And the Diplomatic Branch does not anticipate any adverse fallout from its unorthodox disposal?”

The temporary SMB commander might be concerned that Earth was contaminated by information gleaned from the C-32’s computer, but Terr didn’t think so. The Karkan was probably covering his own position, worried what effect Earth’s heightened security posture might have on future Serrll overflights.

“I cannot say, First Scout. The BCPA will undoubtedly carry out an

evaluation to make that determination.”

“Of course.” Patrlin curled his lips and gave a slow hiss. “An awkward situation with Master Scout Sariman, Agent Terr. Awkward and embarrassing. For a senior officer to have done what he did...” he trailed off and shrugged. “Due to your imminent departure, TACOPSCOM considered that you carry Sariman back to Salina. Fortunately, and I agree with them, COMROLOPS vetoed the idea. Besides sparing you any personal discomfort at having him on board, this is an internal Fleet matter and of no concern to the Diplomatic Branch.”

“I wouldn’t have consented to the plan regardless of any suggestion coming from TACOPSCOM. Not without orders to that effect from Taltair,” Terr said stiffly, annoyed at the very idea. The thought of having Sariman underfoot for two or three days was, how would he put it, distasteful.

“Yes, certainly. But, and this is also somewhat awkward, I do have a request from Scholar Laraiana.”

“Oh?” Terr’s face fell at the thought of confronting the woman again. He’d hoped he had seen the last of her. She was a blanket of darkness that hung over her like a menacing thundercloud, ready to stab forth lightning at everyone around her. What brought him within her range, he couldn’t tell. Surely the GS-4 shuttle’s loss couldn’t be the cause of her evident deep-seated enmity. Was it because he refused to click his heels before her? “What’s *her* problem?”

Clearly uncomfortable, Patrlin winced. “I’m not insensitive to the fact she casts a frosty pallor over everything near her, but in this case, it would be better if you heard it from her,” he said by way of sidestepping an imminent explosion and tapped a pad on the inlaid console in his desk. “Mr. Tembel, please ask Scholar Laraiana to come in.”

“Yes, sir.”

Terr exchanged a questioning glance with Dhar, who shrugged. Well, at least it was made as a request, he conceded, not a demand. But coming from her it might be hard to tell between the two, he decided somewhat uncharitably. It was just that the woman irritated him unbearably. Like having sand in his underwear.

“Has she been treading on *your* toes?” he asked and Patrlin hissed, clearly not relishing having the acerbic scientist around.

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“When you decided to return the Earthman and his woman without first consulting her, she came raging to me, insisting I hold them, ignoring the fact I had no jurisdiction.”

“I regret any inconvenience—”

“Not your concern, Agent Terr,” Patrlin said heavily. “I told her if she had a problem with the Diplomatic Branch Head of Mission, she was free to complain to the Branch Director, which I suspect she already did and received scant support for her trouble.”

The door panels slid into the walls and Laraiana strode through, surrounded by a cloud of coldness, a shield against the world. She carried herself with her usual haughty bearing and imperious authority, impatient of underlings, expecting to get her own way. Her pale blue eyes scanned the office occupants like mapping sensors. Of medium height, her one-piece dark blue coverall hid a curvy figure. But it could be a block of ice for all the warmth it held, Terr reflected. His defenses came up with an audible clang. It was an instinctive reaction.

Laraiana glared at Patrlin. The man had thwarted her once. Was he going to do it again?

“You told him?”

“Given I have no authority over Agent Terrlls-rr, I thought it advisable that you made the request yourself, Scholar,” Patrlin said stiffly, not at all awed or intimidated by her presence. While he sat in this seat, he made the rules here and she can make a complaint to the BCPA if she didn’t like it. Even if she *had* already complained, he was not going to repeat Sariman’s mistake by deferring to her.

Laraiana bit her lip in frustration and filed away the insult. It was clear the Karkan would not be manipulated, at least not directly. However, another word or two in the right ear at COMROLOPS and she was certain that Patrlin’s uncooperative attitude would change smartly—if he valued his career. She would not be interfered with, least of all by the bovine military or male underlings. Expect deference and you will get it.

“Very well.” She turned to Terr, annoyed that the boy was sitting in her presence. Another score to settle later, but right now, she needed to remain focused. She swallowed her resentment and took a deep breath. “First Scout, after your thoughtless destruction of my GS-4 shuttle, Salina Tactical Operations Command has grudgingly sought fit

to provide me with a replacement. This is great news as it means I'll be able to resume my research program with a minimum of delay caused by your, ah, clandestine operation. Fortunately, it won't be dispatched for another five days."

"Fortunately?" Looking at her, Terr suppressed a smile. The woman cannot help herself. Push and grind until something gives way. Still, he was intrigued enough to listen. It could be amusing watching her crawl to him cap in hand, so to speak.

"Yes. You see, this gives me a perfect opportunity to check out the shuttle's systems and have Salina make the necessary modifications that would otherwise have to be done here, which would further delay my research program. To do that—"

"You must get to Salina," Terr finished for her, knowing what was coming and not bothering to hide the irony in his voice.

"Precisely. Since you're going—"

"Scholar Laraiana, I hate to spoil your day, but I'm not going to Salina," Terr said, relishing prolonging her discomfort. She was too easy a target and he really should not be baiting her.

She waved her hand with an impatient gesture. "I understand. But it would be a minor detour on your way to Taltair to take me there." She swallowed her chagrin, hating having to beg, especially before this boy. She would rather eat glass, but then there was her mission to consider, for now. "I am asking that you please transport me to Salina."

Terr nearly laughed at her expression, a mixture of loathing and pleading, knowing full well what it cost her to ask. Grudgingly, he admitted it was a reasonable request. For a pleasant moment, he savored the temptation to hide behind a façade of officialdom and tell her to go through channels, but it was a fleeting indulgence. Although it would have given him momentary satisfaction to see her rage at him, there was actually no valid reason to refuse her. Besides, when the dust of acrimony settled, he could be in for a reprimand from the BCPA *and* Anabb. Personal satisfaction or not, she simply wasn't worth it. BCPA's rancor he can handle, but he didn't want to give Anabb another reason to be upset with him. Not right now, at least.

"It will be a pleasure, Scholar," he said at length. "Please be ready to depart within the hour."

"Why...thank you," Laraiana forced herself to say after overcoming

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her surprise. She fully expected him to refuse and was ready to threaten him, but she wasn't ready for this quick acceptance. Perhaps the boy had more sense than he showed. Nevertheless, this in no way deflected her determination to ruin his career. He had it coming to him. "I shall be ready," she said stiffly and walked out without a backward glance.

"A hard personality to warm up to," Patrlin muttered with a rueful shake of his head as the door panels clicked shut. "You were wise to accede to her request, Agent Terr."

Terr's smile was grim. "It'll give me a chance to throw her out the lock."

Patrlin stared, then hissed with amusement, his tongue flickering. "Perhaps a better outcome. Regarding the GS-4, I must inform you that a formal inquiry will be held into its loss and both of you will be required to provide affidavits, supplementing the SMB's SC&C sensor logs."

"I understand," Terr said. It was standard procedure and to be expected. He gathered Dhar with his eyes and stood up. "If there is nothing else, First Scout, we shall be on our way."

Patrlin rose and glared at Terr with obvious dislike. "There is one more thing, Mister. What Master Scout Sariman did to frustrate your mission cannot be condoned, but if the Diplomatic Branch intends to conduct another one of its operations around Earth while I am base commander here, don't you be part of it. Is that clear?"

Terr's mouth twitched, but it was without humor. "I shall keep it in mind."

Karkans!

Rit!

Chapter Two

A soft chime shattered the silent stillness of his quarters, drawing him away from images of strangely shaped text displayed by the Virtual Interface. He'd been studying Kran cursive for some time now and still found it unfathomable. He did not expect to crack the enigmatic writing, he had linguistic specialists, but over time it became one of his hobby drivers. After what he and his crew went through after transiting the Karina Shield Nebula, he wanted to learn what motivated the machine creatures' drive to annihilate all intelligent organic life. He hoped that cracking the text would provide a window into their thinking. It also gave him something to distract himself with.

On his right, four softly contoured beige couches surrounded a low oval table. A shallow blue-veined purple crystal bowl, filled with sparkling mineral shards, stood reflected against the table's polished surface. Soft pile covered the deck and kept darkness at bay with its indirect amber glow.

"Karhide Zor-Ell?" the housekeeping computer prompted diffidently, the smooth masculine voice floating before him. It was a voice he had come to know intimately. In a world where he could not unburden himself to anyone and still expect to command, Cent Comp remained the only faithful confidant. It was a delicious irony of fates that he could be closer to a machine than another living being. It wasn't merely a machine, but that was semantics. Enclosed in a bubble of duty and responsibility, surrounded by his officers and crew, he was alone. Yet, for all its demands, isolation and emotional toll command exacted, the self-questioning, doubts and sacrifices, he could not imagine himself being anywhere else. He had found his destiny.

For the right to command, he accepted and paid the price willingly a long time ago. The yearning to reach beyond himself and grasp the stars brought with it a measure of personal fulfillment was surely worth the price. Looking back, had he known its true cost when he could still choose to turn away from it all, would he have been as eager? It was a question without meaning, an exercise in imponderables, for that other version of himself who first trod on his path of destiny where he now

stood was but a pale shadow of what he had become. A gulf of experience and knowledge separated him from his younger self that was deep as the chasm between the stars.

“What is it?” he asked and mentally suspended the VI image of Kran text.

“No deviation in the emission trace from a subspace distortion field consistent with a small vessel, Karhide. Range is now one-point-six light-years. Speed, point-two-two standard boost. Course analysis confirms heading toward nebula NB-9, fifty-eight light-years in our rear port quadrant. No divergence since initial detection.”

A tight smile of grim humor tugged at the corner of his powerful mouth. There it was again, another anomaly. The entire damn system ahead of him was one teasing, murky irregularity and reason why he wasn't heading home right now. Analog, frequency modulated, and digital carrier wave comms signals were intercepted coming from the third planet, but nothing to indicate subspace capability. Moreover, all energy signatures were consistent with a pre-spaceflight culture. There wasn't a single profile indicator to suggest a technology able to support a craft now being tracked. Yet such a ship was out there and clearly subspace capable. So where did the diabolical thing come from?

Energy leakage from the planet's moon hinted at another potentially far more troublesome and exciting possibility. The system must be occupied by aliens, keeping watch on an emerging culture? It gave him one more tantalizing reason for wanting to take a closer look, delaying his departure.

There was duty and there was home. Zaron, deep in the Orieli Cluster with the entire White Cloud galaxy a magical swirl of stars wheeling seemingly within reach. From here it seemed an unimaginable distance to the steep hills, tumbling waterfalls, thick forests and gentle valley of the family estate. His parents would be there, always glad to see him, but there was no one else. An older brother lived in Skaro, a prominent member of the Klanina Caucus administration. They were cordial, but never close. Their differing interests, desires, and goals kept them too far apart. He didn't know where his sister's ship was, patrolling somewhere in the White Cloud. He smiled, remembering his little mischievous Tilla, an officer now. Slowly, the smile faded.

Once, someone did wait for him.

He could see it vividly, the platform tumbling out of control to slam into a wooded hillside. Its screen down, there was nothing to protect the two occupants. Before they hit, she threw herself at him as he wrestled with the controls, shielding him with her body. It took a long time for the hurt to fade. She was only a memory now and he'd moved on—had to move on—leaving her behind.

There were no lasting relationships afterward. For a while, he hadn't wanted one, and later, his duties left him with few opportunities. Oh, one or two women he knew would not mind drawing him out of his shell, but he was in no hurry. When life expectancy was one hundred and sixty, at forty-six, he figured there was still time enough for love.

"Project plot," he ordered harshly, not expecting to see anything new. He had studied the initial emission trace thoroughly. Immediately, his lounge dissolved and he found himself in naked space. Ahead and to his left, painted against the tactical plot overlay, pulsed a blue dot of the unknown ship. A faint red line extended from it toward a distant nebula.

"Confirm point of origin and display," Zor-Ell asked, knowing the answer, but going through the motions anyway. A red line backtracked from the blue dot toward the third planet and the image expanded. At extreme resolution, he could make out the whorls of white girthing the pretty blue world. The quarter moon hung back pearly and aloof, brooding in the planet's protective shadow, hiding whatever secrets it held.

"Opturkarh Karth has altered course to intercept the craft as per orders and raised preparedness status to condition two," Cent Comp advised, showing *Valon's* green track veering gently to port toward a pulsing red square along the alien's course where the two ships would eventually meet. "The intercept triangle will be closed in seventy-six minutes under current flight parameters."

"Very well." Although he didn't expect a confrontation with the alien vessel and was not looking for one, he fully approved Karth's caution. Besides, it was standard operating procedure. He found that size can be deceptive and cannot be relied upon as a guide to capability. This far from home and the information they carried, overconfidence could be potentially disastrous.

By not deviating from its course the unknown ship indicated that

Valon hadn't been detected or it wasn't bothered by his presence. Zor-Ell considered the former far more plausible and wondered how long it would take before the alien ship became aware of him and what it would then do. Though, with his ship running stealthy, he didn't consider it likely the alien would detect him at all until *Valon* exited relational normal. A nagging thought bubbled and surfaced. It was all very well trying to establish contact with the strange vessel, but if he was inadvertently trespassing, a growing possibility, what if other ships appeared; heavier, more powerful ships? And if they resented his presence?

Well, he was out here to make contact, be it friendly or otherwise. Considering what they endured on this survey, he would prefer not having to bare his teeth, and very few species were openly hostile. There was always a causal factor that triggered a response.

"Detach VI coupling and inform Opturkarh Karth I'm on my way up to PFC."

The neural link with the ship's central computer severed at once. He blinked hard as reality crashed into his senses and the lounge materialized around him. Breaking the link with Cent Comp always left him with a sense of loss and inadequacy. Through the VI, *Valon's* entire sensory array and ship capabilities, plugged directly into his cortex, was available at his disposal. Without the VI coupling, operating the powerful cruiser would be unmanageable.

For all its undoubted advantages and benefits, in a broader sense, that same technology also exacted its levy of social misery, perhaps an inevitable byproduct. Who would want to face the travails and uncertainty of life's burdensome reality when the nearest VI coupling delivered at a whim tailored and infinitely varied perfect and safe alternatives. Faced with the limitations of his senses, he fully appreciated the dark attractiveness of those alternatives. Unfortunately for some it was the only sane substitute when life became intolerable. Clearly, where such abuse was practiced it could be argued that the Orieli collective social structure had failed somewhere in support of its citizens. But he could and did maintain that freedom of choice and free will meant freedom to escape from personal responsibility. Not everyone was able to realize their dreams and he was not going to judge those who faltered along the way.

“Opturkarh Karth has acknowledged,” Cent Comp said softly.

With determined strides, Zor-Ell walked toward a glowing concave alcove set into the wall, stepped in and turned to face the lounge.

“Initiate personal transport to PFC.”

In a moment of unbearable pressure and cold, he was hurled through the trans-dimensional threshold. Materializing, he waited for the transceiver’s after-effect tingle to subside, and then mumbled an improbable suggestion to the device. Every time he used the thing, it felt like his body was being sliced and squeezed to a point at the same time, which in effect it was.

He stepped out of the PT alcove and automatically swept his eyes around the ellipsoid of Primary Flight Control, taking in information from ceiling-high full-dimensional holoview status displays running the length of Command level, a protruding platform that curved along the long axis half way up the chamber wall. Swivel-couches faced the holoview repeater readouts from the main operations stations below, projected along the platform’s edge. Using voice commands or touch-recognition backup pads, provided authorized access to all ship’s functions when not hooked through the VI coupling.

Operations was three kanampirs below the command level. A giant bowl, its inner surface mounted one continuous backup console, above which were displayed three kanampir-high holoview images. One showed a schematic of a yellow star with a family of ten planets and a vast outer ring of scattered debris and planetesimals.

On his left, three watchkeeping officers looked up from their repeaters and nodded. On his right, two wide swivel-couches were set against the curved command platform. Simple color-coded pads covered the broad armrests. He turned to Karth’s imposing form sprawled in the far couch and sauntered toward him.

“Karthide,” Karth said with a friendly nod.

Zor-Ell grasped the armrests and eased himself down. The couch contoured itself around his body and he relaxed into its soothing embrace.

“All right, Opturkarh. What do we have?”

“Interesting case, but nothing much that I can add to what we already know,” Karth said briskly and his pale pink tongue ran quickly round black, fleshy lips. “No matter which way I look at it, the drive

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emission signature suggests a small craft. Something like our RV/4 dart. Probably a scoutship or courier of some sort.”

“Mmm.” Chewing his lower lip, Zor-Ell extended a finger at the repeater plot. “That ship has no right being out there,” he complained belligerently.

“It certainly isn’t from around here,” Karth agreed. “Whoever they are, they haven’t occupied the system. Apart from emission leakage coming off the third planet’s moon, we have nothing.”

“But what we do have is suggestive enough,” Zor-Ell noted and exhaled loudly. “I’m afraid we’re facing a quarantine scenario. Well, that’s why we came out here, to meet aliens.”

“First contact protocols are now in effect, I presume, Da?” Karth asked formally, understanding perfectly what the alien ship represented.

“You assume correctly, Opturkarh.”

“I just had a horrible thought,” Karth ventured. “It’s a long way from Karina, but whoever is looking after this system, do they know of the Celi-Kran?”

Zor-Ell’s smile was grim. “More importantly, do the Krans know about *them*!”

“That’s one nightmare I don’t want to even consider,” Karth reflected and licked his lips. “If that abandoned station on System 4-Three did transmit a beacon pulse and the Krans come visiting, there could be trouble...for everybody.”

They surveyed three systems after emerging from the Karina Shield and came across planets that once held budding and thriving civilizations. What they found were obliterated worlds and desolation. Where systematic destruction was avoided the population remnants had reverted to near savagery, struggling to reclaim a lost heritage. What triggered that indiscriminate cycle of extermination some two thousand years ago, could only be guessed at. The clues left by the Krans, including deactivated worker and command units, were both tantalizing and chilling. Of equal importance, and something to be assiduously studied, what stopped them from working their way farther into this part of space? Of course, the nanometric constructs were not around to offer an explanation. Their very name and evidence of their existence was retrieved from historical remnants on cindered worlds.

Karth saw no reason to complain. He’d had his chance to pass up

this assignment. On the prospective commander short list, before this mission started, OSCOM, Orieli Space Command, Bureau of Personnel, offered him a coveted command billet. Admittedly, it would not be a cruiser, but it was a command; an officer's dream to be master under no one and a vital career prerequisite toward any future advancement. The offer turned out to be BuePer's version of satirical humor, which everyone knew it had, for nearly immediately news broke that six ships were being sent through a newly found corridor in the Karina Shield Nebula, and *Valon* was one of the designated ships. Karth could only chuckle at the delicious irony of it all. In fairness, Zor-Ell urged him to accept the appointment, knowing full well the disruption it would cause to his command structure, but was clearly relieved when Karth refused, as much from self-interest as anything else. Karth knew that breaking in a new first officer during a key mission would be a major inconvenience.

It was a mug's choice anyway. Karth was ambitious, good at his job and aspired to command, but to miss out on being part of a survey that came around once in forever? A serving officer could spend several lifetimes seeing nothing more than the same old Orieli Cluster stars or push the settled White Cloud extremities, herding merchants, muscle flexing in some wayward system or chasing down an enterprising marauder. But in that one rare moment when he could reach out for the first time into a truly unknown part of the galaxy, to see for himself what lay beyond the Karina, there was nothing to decide.

The Orieli had studied the staggeringly huge gas cloud and its baffling properties for centuries, but it wasn't the same thing as being there and looking around for himself. That *Valon* could be lost in the attempt, he faced with equanimity. Ships were lost before in that murky expanse, swallowed without trace in the nebula's depths. They even knew why. The possibility that this time it could happen to him did not sway him at all. To his vast relief, BuePer did not raise even a token protest when he declined the posting and agreed to keep the slot open until his return. All officers knew that command billets didn't come up every day, and he feared his resolve to stay with *Valon* would send him to the bottom of the selection list. Career management was a capricious mistress at the best of times.

It hadn't been easy climbing to where he was now. A native of Ceti

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II—the original world destroyed in catastrophic orbital bombardment by the old Zaron Concordiat three-and-a-half thousand years ago, the survivors creating a new beginning under another star; he wanted to space as far back as he could remember. Building and flying model spaceships was one thing, but to actually serve in one meant rigorous schooling and competitive selection examinations. He overcame those obstacles and was eventually admitted into the sector's Space Arm Academy. Trapped for four years in an intensely challenging environment when young blood ran hot, was a testing experience, and inevitably, some failed to meet the challenge. Karth survived the trials, academic and personal, and for his final year was sent to the famed Zaron Academy where a young officer's rough edges were further polished. After graduation, he served a year in a training ship. At twenty-three, a commissioned officer, he received a posting to a Space Arm vessel. Eighteen long years later, promoted to opturkarh, he was assigned as *Valon's* executive officer and a slot on the prospective commander list. Now, three years on, he stood on the edge of another life's milestones.

Zor-Ell was also concerned with the signal from 4-Three, but not necessarily on behalf of aliens represented by the small ship out there. After two thousand years the Krans would have evolved, he was certain of that. If they somehow forced the Karina breach, he was confident that Perilian Sector Command could contain them. But what if they came and stumbled across Orieli worlds like Setlan Eleven from deeper within the galactic arm where there was no gas cloud to hide them? That sector was at the limits of settled space with no major Space Arm facility. Providing military infrastructure was always seen as an afterthought. After all, the Orieli were peaceful and embraced new species. Whatever their physical differences, underneath it all, weren't they brothers? Not to the Krans apparently.

There was nothing to consider. OSCOM must be prepared to meet the new threat and meet them with real warships. Cruisers like *Valon* were armed and powerful, but they were not dedicated weapons platforms. Primarily exploration and survey ships, their hulls were well armored, but once breached, the internal bulkheads were comparatively fragile and vulnerable. To flush out the Krans meant executing more expeditions along the Karina and inward along the galactic arm to find the limits of their expansion and technological advancement. A tactical

increase in Space Arm presence on this side of the Karina would demand a secure passage through the nebula, and that meant establishing a transport portal on this side linked to the PERCOM portal. The effort could be all for nothing if the Krans turned out to be dust, which he doubted. Those things were intelligent constructs, not an organic species subject to evolutionary vagaries. They were still out there somewhere, he was certain of it. But why destroy everything in their path? Finding the answer could be crucial to everyone's survival.

There was, of course, a perilous corollary to seeking them out. Once found, what if they couldn't be stopped? OSCOM would have to face that possibility, and some in the Klanina could undoubtedly urge isolationism and containment; collapse the Karina breach, they would say. Whatever option was taken, the Orieli needed to protect its thirteen hundred systems spread through the White Cloud.

At the moment there were simply too many unknowns to identify available courses of action. One cannot direct disposition of forces, exercise logistics and command, and apply doctrine without understanding the enemy. The problem was, no one knew the Celi-Kran, their motivation, goals and intentions. Zor-Ell had two thousand year-old archaeological data, but that was hardly sufficient to formulate a coherent military strategy in line with political objectives still to be defined. Lack of information could lead the Klanina into inaction, leaving the Orieli dangerously vulnerable. After thousands of years of relative peace and security, would the association of worlds have the moral resolve to accept the consequences of potentially unrestrained and absolute expression of force against an alien species—and themselves? They might not, unless the Krans were perceived a threat to their very existence. Unfortunately, right now, he couldn't say they were a threat, regardless of what might have happened two millennia ago.

They waited in silence for *Valon* to close the triangle.

"Caution. Five minutes to initial point," Cent Comp advised.

"At forty million ampirs, depolarize defense net, match speed with contact and parallel its course," Zor-Ell ordered quietly, attuned to the ship's whispers around him.

"Acknowledged."

Karth grinned. "This is bound to raise an eyebrow or two in that ship."

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Perhaps on both sides, Zor-Ell reflected silently.

* * *

Blackness stared at him from the deeps, thick and impenetrable. Terr sensed an almost sinister quality emanating from that desolate nothingness, like his soul was being invaded and slowly devoured. Even as a child, reaching with tiny hands for the flimsy whorls of light that lit the shadows of his nights, the immense band did not inspire fear, only insatiable curiosity and a desire to grasp the pretty, shiny thing. But right now, he feared this exposed night stretching into forever and where his ship was now taking him. To tread into this chasm meant stepping into darkness deeper than any nightmare.

Stars were few and far apart out here at the edge of this vast nothing. They glowed dull white, hard and unsentimental, loners—leftovers in the dustbin of creation. He was wrong to imagine that stars were pinpricks of light in the tapestry of night. Standing alone in his cabin, hands clasped lightly behind his back, the ship whispering around him, he slowly realized that galaxies were in fact pinpricks of light, and the curtain of night was but a shroud of eternity. And the naked face of eternity was hard to look upon without being scarred by that pitiless gaze.

A shiver of unease ran through his body.

Being moody and morbid, indulging in introspection, catered to his antipathies, merely avoided reality and his responsibilities. Still, wasn't he allowed even a moment of indulgence? He had come far to touch the bare face of night, perhaps too far. Earth had left an indelible imprint of wonder, bemusement and perplexity on his mind that would haunt his days for some time, and he welcomed the prospect of familiar stars ahead that were home.

Pale brown gravity waves twisted and shimmered, roiling with turbulence in the ship's wake.

He knew what was bothering him, of course. Partly, it was reaction to the mildly tumultuous events of his mission whose consequences were still to be played out. Mostly, though, he was still grappling with the realization that by joining the Diplomatic Branch an important phase of his life had ended, perhaps forever. The cloak of comforting familiarity and security that belonging to the Fleet engendered had been

stripped off him, and he was still to find its replacement in the unknown future of his newly chosen path.

But was he being true to himself? Did he genuinely miss his old ship that much and was his future so jarring? Uncertain yes, but daunting and insurmountable? Hardly, and he relished the challenges that were to come. And he was certain there would be challenges, Anabb would see to that. Was this nostalgia for the predictable orderliness of ship command?

Still moody, but somewhat mollified, he turned away from the transparent bulkhead and climbed into bed. He adjusted the blanket just right, wriggled his toes and squirmed with contentment. Yesterday was a closed doorway. The bed was soft and warm and he allowed himself to drift, flushing away distractions and nagging uncertainties.

He was just getting pleasantly drowsy when the comms alert beeped, the sound stabbing rudely through his mind. He jerked, muttered a curse at the unfairness of it all, rolled over and reached for the comms pad.

“Just a few hours of sleep, Nightwings, that’s all I want,” he complained petulantly.

“I am detecting a subspace distortion field consistent with a large vessel, Sankri,” Dhar said apologetically, hating having to wake his brother. But if he didn’t do it now, he knew that Sankri the commander would be more than petulant later. It was also his duty.

“And what am I supposed to do about it?” Terr was being grumpy and knew it, but Dhar spoiled it all by forcing him out of his cozy cocoon just when the demons had finally fled.

“It is paralleling us. Range, forty-nine million talans. The computer estimates a mass of sixty-four thousand mikans. The contact is exhibiting a non-standard power emission signature and shield grid configuration. Course analysis suggests it was probably heading toward Sol. No divergence since first detection. I have gone to initial alert.”

Terr’s brow creased and he sat up, the blanket bunched around his waist. Sixty-four thousand mikans? That made it nearly twice as heavy as an M-4. The ship could be a Sofam Industries experimental design. They liked to conduct live trials of new configurations in secluded places where no one was watching, and here was secluded as one could get. But to carry that mass...

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“How big is the thing?”

“Approximately eight hundred katalans at the longest axis.”

Phew! Big hauler.

“How come we only detected it now?” *Sheeva*’s sensor suite should have been clamoring when the thing broke through the two light-year detection limit.

“I cannot account for it, my brother. The contact was suddenly there,” Dhar said regretfully. Terr suspected he knew why and his skin prickled at the prospect.

“Raise them.”

“Already tried.”

“Okay. Let’s see what they’re up to. Slow to one-third boost and send a single ranging ping. Don’t shoot ’em up until I get there.”

Rit!

Eyes still heavy, he worked his mouth to get the stale taste out and stared vacantly at the opposite wall. Just a few hours of sleep... A narrow green safety strip hugged the bottom of the cabin walls, giving the shadows an eerie glow. With a resigned grunt, he swung out his legs.

The tube hatch hissed open and he swept the command deck with a quick look. He blinked at the harsh brightness, unlike the subdued lighting he preferred, and glanced at the opaque nav bubble displaying the tactical plot, noting the position of the contact. Dhar climbed out of the central command couch and took the right seat. Terr glanced at the main plate and sat down. The unknown ship slowed and was pacing them, still at forty-nine million talans.

“Slow to one-fifth boost. We want to tell them they’ve been noticed. In two minutes, drop normal and come to a full stop. We’ll see if our strange friend out there is curious enough to give us a closer sniff.”

“Slowing to one-fifth boost.” Dhar tapped commands, then swiveled his seat. His eyes were searching. “Sankri—”

“I know,” Terr said gently.

If the unknown ship was not one of theirs, the alternative was sobering. Inviting closure could be inviting an encounter, but his instincts told him no. If the alien’s intentions were less than friendly, it could have forced action before *Sheeva* became aware of it. The thing already demonstrated it could creep about virtually undetected, something he was sure would make CAPFLTCOM go pale. And if this was indeed a

new contact, was he showing arrogance by appointing himself Serrll's ambassador? He didn't really have much of a choice. There wasn't anybody else around to do the job, and he couldn't simply ignore the contact. Call Anabb? That would only be passing the buck and he cringed at what his boss would say about that. Of course, Anabb could view either decision with disfavor, as could Captal. Call the BCPA? Same argument.

Well, since fates appointed him man on the spot...

The unidentified ship slowed with them. Two minutes later, *Sheeva's* distortion field flickered and depolarized. The ship dropped into normal space and waited. Nine seconds later the alien vessel materialized above the M-1, dwarfing it; an astonishing demonstration of precision piloting and chilling in its implication. All Terr saw was a huge black mass hanging above him, obscuring the stars, dispelling any last minute suspicions that this was a new Sofam Industries design. The thing was enormous and he wondered what he'd gotten himself into. He remembered reading somewhere that despite the honor, first contacts too many times ended up being last for the heroic unfortunate. Being a historical footnote was not exactly the obituary he cared to leave behind. Not at this stage of his career anyway. Nevertheless, his eyes glowed at the prospect of a closer encounter.

The tube hatch opened and Laraiana walked in, her imperious eyes cold, trying hard to avoid looking at the object of her displeasure. But she wasn't trying *too* hard. She meant to make Terr's life miserable and saw no reason to stop just because of an exciting development, or the fact that he was doing her a favor by taking her to Salina. Besides, as far as she was concerned, it was his obligation. The military served *her*, not the other way around. They were an anachronism, an outmoded tool that should have been scrapped long ago; too dangerous a toy to be left in the hands of impulsive males playing their juvenile games of dominance.

Terr barely glanced at her and his shoulders drooped in resignation, not in the mood right now to deal with her peppery tirades. He regretted not leaving the vinegarish scientist on the Moon with Sariman, repercussions notwithstanding. They made a perfect pair. But no, he allowed himself to be persuaded by her apparent contrition for past sins. Bar her from the command deck? No, that wouldn't do either. Damn

the woman anyhow, wishing she had slept through this.

“Whatever it is, Scholar, it will have to wait.”

Suppressing a flash of annoyance, she bit her lip. The boy was doing his job, she could hardly fault him there. “I was working when I saw the strange ship in my repeater plate.”

“And it’s here now, we know.” He turned to Dhar. “What do you read?” he asked, his voice soft, calm, hiding the slow winding up of all his senses.

“They are holding approximately two talans above us and we appear to be within what I read is a shield grid envelope. It isn’t anything like what we have. And our own nav screen is down,” Dhar added as an afterthought, aware of Laraiana and the current of tension that now enveloped the command deck in a cloak of doom. What grudge did she hold against Sankri? To his knowledge, his brother had done nothing to the woman to make her so openly hostile. Denying her use of the SMB’s GS-4 shuttle, thereby delaying her research program? Was that it? His brother was simply carrying out his mission. She must realize that. It must be something else.

“Down?” Terr queried with a raised eyebrow, wondering how the alien managed that trick.

“More accurately, it was neutralized.”

“Mmm.”

Terr nibbled at a fingernail. Alien and powerful and curious, and a first for the Serrll Combine in three and a half thousand years. The Bureau of Colonial and Protectorate Affairs will be in little knots over this, perhaps distracted long enough to forget their pique at his handling of the C-32. Don’t worry about it.

The tactical plot showed a rectangular shape with downward sloping flowing sides. It was a dark, menacing black slab, which wasn’t really strange. Why weaken hull integrity with transparent ports when there were more effective ways to see out. Besides, there was nothing to see out a window. At any rate, with hull material whose crystalline structure allowed it to become transparent, windows were irrelevant. The plot rotated the alien’s profile through various views. It didn’t give him any new answers.

Attuned to the keen tension generated by her presence, which she didn’t mind at all, Laraiana stood behind the empty left couch and

arched her neck. She surveyed the plot with critical scrutiny, not really understanding the columns of data flowing across it, and gave a low hiss. She didn't have to understand the data to recognize the possibilities. If this was an alien ship, it was an opportunity to salvage something of her mission after the loss of her GS-4 shuttle at the hands of Earth's forces in such spectacular fashion. Seeing the shuttle shot down, she watched two years of planning and wrangling with intransigent BCPA and Fleet officials sink beneath the waves. To have success snatched from her lips like that was infuriating. She urged Sariman to relieve Terr on the spot for gross negligence, only to see the spineless worm himself under arrest for sabotaging the Diplomatic Branch mission. What a bungle!

In her view, all Fleet officers were a useless luxury and a drain on real work and resources, like her research. Dashing about in warships was so...dated! Macho male childishness. What set her teeth on edge was that she simply couldn't understand why Terr hadn't been swept aside for obvious incompetence, given her evidence and protests to the Diplomatic Branch and the BCPA. Was the boy's uncle holding a protective hand over him? And what a shock it was when he told her that Enlls-rr was a relative, and a powerful one at that. In one swoop, her thoughts of delicious retaliation were dashed from her grasp. But she refused to believe the Commissioner would compromise his integrity by stooping to nepotism. Still, he wouldn't be the first if he did, she admitted candidly. Power was there to be used, which her father ceaselessly drilled into her. Father...

If going through Enlls-rr was no longer an option, there were other ways to exact retribution, and she had a powerful relative of her own.

"What do you intend doing, First Scout?" she demanded haughtily, not able to get the image of M-9s holding station over Hakran, to the impotent fury and everlasting humiliation of the Dumas Conclave and all of Sargon. Such impudence! Her father, a senior Pro-Consul, took it particularly badly. Schooled in the old ways and observance of the Code, the Pizgor scandal and the unmasking of Lemos had hit him hard. That this young officer was responsible, however indirectly, for Sargon's embarrassment and her father's suffering was simply intolerable. But this strange ship may offer an opportunity to erase some of that dishonor, if she could bend the situation to her advantage.

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Terr was about to tell her what he intended doing, but refrained. He really didn't mind antagonizing her, but she simply wasn't worth his time. Her obvious animosity made her an easy target. Why did she have to keep pushing? She did a great job saving Lauren and he took pains to tell her that her efforts were appreciated, but she brushed aside his peace overtures and simply kept on remonstrating. Was it her or just chemistry? Frankly, he couldn't be bothered any longer. Two more days and he'll dump her and her emotional baggage on Salina. They were welcome to her.

"I intend to establish contact, Scholar," he said patiently, eyes fixed on the plot.

"And then?"

"And then we see what happens."

"You're not going to request instructions from the Bureau of Colonial and Protectorate Affairs?"

"I know what has to be done, Scholar. Now if you'll excuse me...Dhar, power down nav deflector grid and stand down."

"Standing down."

Laraiana grabbed his arm. "You're leaving us defenseless! If they—"

Terr cut her off with a chilling glare. "Scholar, you have my permission to observe, not to interfere in the tactical operation of this ship. Is that clear?"

"As the senior representative—"

"Is that *clear*?" Terr repeated with a bit more snap this time, his gray eyes boring into hers.

Bright red spots appeared on her cheeks and her mouth firmed into a tight line. Her eyes blazed with fury. To be treated like some minor functionary by this...this military *moron*! The young man's cold eyes glittered dangerously, seemingly indifferent to her indignation. This wasn't the time. She must keep focused on the broader aspects of this contact.

She gave a single jerking nod. *I will not forget this, First Scout. Count on it.*

Turning to face the main display plot, Terr wished he'd spaced the woman.

"Dhar, give them a comms interrogative."

A second later Dhar looked at him. "Interrogative sent back."

“Hah! At least they understand subspace comms. Not that I’m surprised. Tell the computer to transmit the interlingua data pack.”

“First Scout, this situation is far too important for you to proceed alone,” Laraiana protested in a last ditch effort to regain some control. “I insist that you contact Salina for instructions.”

Terr swiveled his seat and stared hard at her. “Scholar, to be clear, you’re not in a position to insist on anything. Secondly, there isn’t time to seek instructions from Salina or Captal, even if I were predisposed to do so. Which I’m not.”

“And I—”

“Our interrogative has been sent back,” Dhar interrupted her. “This time with a file attachment, tagged with a request for a visual.”

Terr turned and looked at the comms plate. “So they want to chat, eh? Very well. Download the file and let’s see what’s there.”

“First Scout! I—”

“Not now, Scholar!” Intolerable woman! He really should have dumped her out the lock.

Staring at the display plate, Terr broke into an amused grin. He hardly knew what to expect, but the flickering images and scrolling text left him bemused and enthralled. It would take time to go over the material properly, but at least the aliens did leave them with something to go on with. When the download completed, Dhar raised an eyebrow.

“A primer?”

“Fair is fair. We told them who *we* were.” Terr wiped his palms against his thighs and took a deep breath. A lot was riding on how he handled himself in the next few minutes. “Here we go. Open the channel.”

The main plate cleared and he was looking at two aliens. The hair on the back of his neck prickled. He could only see them from chest up, but they exuded a confidence and a dominance that was overwhelmingly compelling. One of them was a beautiful shade of blue-green, growing black around the eyes and powerful mouth. Large brown eyes shone with intense intelligence. His hair was short, black and thick.

There was nothing subtle about the other alien who gave an impression of towering height and solid muscle. His straight red hair spilled to

his shoulders. Dark brown skin covered a reasonable solid, angular human shape. His red eyes were cold and impersonal, eyes that had seen and experienced everything. Their garments were dark indigo one-piece uniforms, unadorned by extraneous gold braid. On the left side of their chest was a yellow circle emblem packed with a cluster of little white stars.

They intimidated by their very presence.

The blue-skinned alien touched his forehead with the tips of his long fingers and gave a small, but graceful bow.

“Scout Fleet vessel, the Orieli Technic Union extends cordial greetings to the worlds of the Serrll Combine,” the alien said in a rich masculine voice that vibrated with assurance and power. It was a computer translation, but there was no mistaking his self-assured bearing. He carried himself with authority, and given the size of his ship, probably with justification, Terr thought. Well, this didn’t seem to be an invasion, yet.

“On behalf of the Serrll Combine, I bid you welcome, sir,” Terr said cautiously. It seemed a safe thing to say. The alien bared his sharp teeth into what was probably intended to be a smile, but it served to make Terr’s skin prickle. He felt like a child standing before a schoolmaster, waiting to be lectured.

“Da, if I may introduce myself...I am Karhide Zor-Ell, commanding the survey vessel *Valon*. With me is my first officer, Opturkarh Karth.”

“Sir, I am Agent Terrllss-rr,” he said and nodded to Dhar. “My associate, Mr. Dharaklin.”

Laraiana gave a sharp hiss of annoyance when he failed to mention her, but realized that this was hardly the time to make an issue of it. She could not help being forcefully reminded that the aliens were *men*! Even with them, it appeared that women were subordinate. Perhaps they were not so advanced after all.

Terr noted with interest the brief exchange of looks between Dhar and Karth sizing each other up. They were two of a kind. But was he interpreting the alien’s facial expressions correctly? He needed to be careful here. After all, they were aliens and he couldn’t afford to assume anything.

“Da Terrllss-rr...Terr, if I may...If your mission is not a pressing one, I would welcome an opportunity to extend my hospitality to you

and Da Dharaklin aboard my ship.”

Terr blinked. Was the alien kidding? Right now there was nothing more urgent than finding out everything he could about the Orieli, which he suspected Zor-Ell knew. This was going to blow the Bureau of Colonial and Protectorate Affairs right out of its Captal complacency. He pictured Enllss rampaging in tight little circles when his data pack arrived, and suppressed a smile, wishing he could be there to see it. Knowledge of the Orieli would no doubt pour a considerable amount of sand into the Serrll’s ingrained social matrix. Perhaps everyone required a reminder that space was big and they were not alone. But would that reflection act as a uniting catalyst or serve to polarize existing political divides? He was glad to leave that problem to Captal.

“It would be a genuine pleasure, sir,” Terr said warmly.

“Splendid! If you don’t have a means to transfer—”

“I can extend an access tube.”

“Excellent. I await your convenience, Da.” The alien bowed and the display plate faded.

The Orieli ship immediately rotated in place and stopped to reveal the lighted maw of a huge opening in the sloping edge. Terr was sure it was large enough to take the whole M-1 without scraping the sides. Did they expect him to drive his ship inside? No, Zor-Ell was happy when Terr mentioned an access tube. If the alien wanted him inside, Terr figured he would have said so. He realized he needed to watch himself with these guys, and wondered if he was up to it.

“Dhar, bring us into position. Hold at five katalans separation and extend the tube.”

“You’re going to extend an access tube into open space?” Laraiana snapped, unable to contain herself any longer. What the boy proposed was reckless and foolhardy in the extreme. He *had* to see that.

“Hardly,” Terr said, annoyed that she hadn’t thought it through. Zor-Ell would not invite him to dock without taking precautions. He was fairly sure a force field protected that enormous entrance. Of course, there was always room for doubt. Well, he figured he was going to find out quickly enough. Anyway, he had sensors to back up his judgment.

“Moving into position,” Dhar said quietly.

As *Sheeva* closed, the alien ship managed to look even more forbidding. It was impossible to discern detail in the smooth hull. The brightly lit maw opened before them into a hangar bay. Figures stood watching *Sheeva's* approach, demonstrably protected by a force field. The M-1 stopped and the access tube slid out. The docking end slowed near the entrance barrier. With a barely discernable ripple of shifting distortion the tube pushed past the force field and held position several tetalans above the alien deck.

Terr slapped the armrests and lifted himself up. "Dhar, you're with me."

Alarmed that the situation was slipping away from her, Laraiana interposed herself between him and the cable-tube hatch, hands on hips.

"I must be included, First Scout! As an accredited BCPA Mission Leader, I effectively represent the Serrll government and I'm heading this contact."

Terr grinned. He couldn't help it. The woman was insufferable, just when he was prepared to forgive her foolishness.

"Scholar Laraiana, I acknowledge your BCPA accreditation, but unless you hold plenipotentiary endorsement or expertise in alien protocols among your qualifications..."

She snorted and tossed back her head. "You know I don't. I'm, ah, a geneticist—"

"In that case, I hate to spoil your fun, but I can't use you."

"This is an outrage! I rank you! I demand that you contact the BCPA offices on Salina!"

"Scholar, you can demand whatever you want, but I have no time for your remonstrations. Now if you'll excuse me? It won't do to keep our visitors waiting."

"I'll have you broken for this! Captal shall hear of your insolence, First Scout!" Laraiana raged, galled at being thwarted again, and stamped her foot in frustration. Whenever she wanted to exert her authority, some *man* was there to peg her down.

"Be my guest," Terr said mildly, glanced at the comms station and pushed past her.

Swallowing her resentment and chagrin, she reached for his arm. It might not be too late. "Please, First Scout. This could make my career. At least let me join you."

Terr stopped and looked at her. Gone was the arrogance and loathing, but there was still a gleam of cunning in her eyes. She was scheming something. He didn't doubt this contact could make her career; it won't do anything bad for his either if he didn't stuff things up, but could he risk offending the Orieli if she flew into one of her overbearing exhibitions? No one would thank him for the ensuing mess just because technically, she ranked him. But he was *Sheeva's* commander and he could not relinquish the responsibility.

"I'm sorry, Scholar. That just isn't possible."

She paled. Her lips tightened and she swung at him with the fury of loathing and disgust of all men. Before the slap could connect, Terr grabbed her wrist and stared into her eyes.

"You can see why," he said softly and dropped her arm. Leaving her gaping at him, he turned around and pressed the request pad beside the hatch. It opened with a hiss and he strode in. Dhar followed, his face expressionless, but the vertical red slits in his eyes were wide with amusement.

"Main deck," Terr ordered and shook his head. The hatch slid shut.

"That is one imperious lady, Sankri."

"And a monumental pain. I cannot work her out."

"She bears a hate for you that is beyond understanding."

"Yeah. I guess she's naturally mean. Gods, can you imagine what would happen if she started throwing her weight around with Karhide Zor-Ell? Talk about seven years of bad luck! I'll take Tanard and his raiders any day." He frowned and cast a speculative eye at Dhar. "You know what this could mean for the Serrll if *I* should mess up?"

"With exalted rank comes greater responsibility," Dhar rumbled with a straight face, but his eyes twinkled.

"Asshole!"

They walked quickly to the access tube hatch, cycled the lock and made their way along the tube. At the other end Dhar hesitated.

"Bio contamination?"

"I'm sure our alien friends have considered that little detail," Terr said tiredly. "At least I hope so, or this could be the end of two very promising careers."

Dhar raised an eyebrow and touched the release pad. Despite his levity, Sankri was concerned, but some things must simply be faced. In

reality the risk was not great. Diverging evolutionary paths ensured that Orieli viruses or bacteria would not immediately find Terr's, or his, for that matter, bodily environments compatible, but could do so if brought to a Serrll world. Bio contamination is never to be taken lightly. The hatch cycled.

The hangar space was large, but not overwhelmingly intimidating, and from a functional point of view, instantly familiar. On their left three saucer-shaped craft some thirty katalans in diameter, hovered above blue-glowing circles set into the deck. A maintenance gang clustered around open access panels of the first craft. Holoview displays hung in the air, tracing intricate circuit patterns. Along the wall, workbenches were littered with tools, parts and what could be diagnostic equipment. Against the opposite far wall a row of small rectangular slabs lay parked on the deck, their sides smoothly sloping down, vaguely resembling the drooping shape of the Orieli ship. They reminded Terr of sled-pads.

Zor-Ell and Karth waited for them to alight. Although different and alien, Terr recognized the affinity and closeness between them that transcended mere rank. If he read them correctly, these two knew each other intimately and worked as one. Maybe the Serrll and the Orieli were not so dissimilar after all. When he stepped on the deck, Zor-Ell gave a small bow.

"Welcome aboard my ship, gentlemen," he said amiably and held out his hand. Two small brown spheres rested in his palm. Terr noticed faint interference distortion and realized that he, Dhar and the tube were isolated from the Orieli ship.

"Thank you, Karhide. It's a unique privilege being here."

"Da Terr...Dharaklin, please take a sphere. It generates a personal protective field. I regret the necessity..."

"I understand completely, sir." It was strange seeing Zor-Ell talk in an alien language and hear the computer's translation above his head. He reached for the sphere and recoiled momentarily when the force field touched Zor-Ell's hand. The sphere slipped through the field and Terr stared, nonplussed. Some force field! The sphere was warm and surprisingly heavy. He pocketed the object.

"Da Terr—"

"Sir, I gather you're using a formal mode of address. Just Terr will

do fine, if that's acceptable.”

Zor-Ell smiled and nodded. Terr was shorter, much shorter, than his imposing companion, but carried himself with a relaxed poise borne of command and total confidence. His features were firm and strong without appearing rough or angular. There was a hint of a cleft in his chin that added character. A lock of brown-black hair hid a broad forehead. Clear gray eyes looked back at him without guile above an aquiline nose. A small scar on his temple above the left eyebrow showed someone who wasn't afraid to put his body in the way of danger. Of course, he could have gotten that by falling out of bed, Zor-Ell mused, but he didn't believe it. Somehow it didn't fit the profile. Terr announced himself an agent, which implied either a policing or intelligence service. Given his obvious military bearing, Zor-Ell figured it could be either.

Where Terr appeared open and engaging, Dhar held his drawn frame with reserve and restrained power, ready to be unleashed if called for. The vertical red slits of his large orange eyes hinted at something that stirred a faint racial memory, which Zor-Ell couldn't quite place. Dhar's yellow skin was dry, pulled tight over the ridges of his long face, framed by reddish-bronze hair that spilled to his shoulders. His nose, broad and flat, gave him a haunted lost look, like he belonged somewhere else, certainly not in uniform or aboard a ship.

Zor-Ell's scrutiny took an instant as he swept his eyes over the two figures. They made an unlikely pair and he suspected to the lament of their superiors. Unaccountably, he was relieved and his initial misgivings at having to nurse two frightened junior officers evaporated instantly. He sensed that Terr would tell it like he saw it, which Zor-Ell preferred to the stilted formality had he encountered a stuffy senior commander interested in protocol and word fencing. But would the boy be sophisticated enough to understand and appreciate the impact of this encounter, on both of them? Only the crucible of experience would reveal that.

“Thank you. While Cent Comp makes an excellent language bridge, if I can suggest, the Virtual Interface will be more convenient.”

Whatever the alien proposed was okay with Terr—short of drilling into his head. He was prepared to put up with hearing an indirect translation, but if there was a shortcut, he was agreeable. Merely being here, absorbing the sights and sounds of this incredible ship was more than

enough for him.

“Direct exchange through the computer? What does it involve?”

“You consent, Terr...Dhar?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Excellent!” Zor-Ell said and Terr gasped at the simultaneous sound of the alien’s voice in his head. He was hearing Zor-Ell’s words directly when they were spoken. What a translator!

Ultimately tactful, Zor-Ell ignored Terr’s transitory distraction. “If you wish, we can retire somewhere more amiable and accommodating.”

And relaxing, Terr thought ruefully. It was gracious of the alien not to subject the local primitives to an overload of shocks. It was also a remarkable application of psychology. He didn’t mind. He’d glimpsed enough of Orieli technology—like the personal shield he was wearing—to appreciate the web of complexity and sophistication underpinning the ship’s deceptively simple exterior design. Incredibly, he wasn’t even aware of the shield. It did not disrupt his vision, sound, breathing or anything—a useful thing to have. He wondered if he could talk Zor-Ell into giving him the thing, in the interest of fostering mutual relations, of course. In his new line of work, he figured he could use it.

Zor-Ell’s approach hinted that although alien, their thinking processes were sufficiently alike for them to understand each other. They could do business. But in the excitement it would be prudent not to lose perspective. After all, the Orieli *were* alien. What he feared was not their ability to understand one another, but getting into trouble by breaching unstated customs and behavioral mores, which could happen through a seemingly innocent gesture or word.

“We are at your disposal, sir.”

Zor-Ell extended his hand and they walked toward the far right wall. Dhar and Karth followed silently. Seeing Karth and the crew standing idly, watching the procession with interest, told Terr much. The Orieli were an integrated culture encompassing many races and systems. The ship was large, evidently meant to cover considerable distances. An exploration vessel as Zor-Ell indicated, or something much more? Probably both. No one would be so foolish to send an unarmed ship into unknown space, and he didn’t consider the Orieli foolish. One thing nagged at him. They could not be from anywhere close or the Serrll would have run into them long before. Powerful indeed.

Where *did* the Orieli come from? He knew the BCPA had sent exploratory ships all around the Serrll Combine, some farther than ten thousand lights. There was even talk of sending ships to the galaxy core. What they found so far was mostly classified, but they certainly hadn't met anyone like the Orieli.

Zor-Ell stopped beside one of four elliptical alcoves set into the bulkhead. "Our Personal Transport system."

"A matter transfer device?" Dhar queried, his eyes alive with interest.

Karth grinned and shook his head. "Nothing so ambitious, I'm afraid," he said in a sonorous voice. "It's been tried, but with the exception of pure elements, complex molecules, especially organics, don't do too well in the process."

Terr could appreciate that. The Serrll had experimented with matter transfer technologies in one form or another for a long time without being able to achieve that vital engineering breakthrough necessary to make the process viable and safe. The theory behind the idea was sound enough, but its application was unwieldy in the extreme. Part of the enormous problem was the staggering computing power needed to process the matrix of an object being transferred. Decomposition worked well enough; destroying something was always easy. It was the reconstitution cycle that had so far defeated them, involving as it did spontaneous creation of ordered molecular groups. Anything more complex than simple multi-celled organisms came out the other end as blobs of greasy goo.

He looked inquiringly at Karth.

"We sidestepped the classical problems by using one of the available dimensions that underpin the multi-string matrix theorems."

Terr stared, trying not to gape. A dimensional doorway? The idea was...absurd! What he knew of it, string theorems postulate curled point dimensions. On reflection, it wasn't as crazy as it sounded. Forgetting the technical jargon, what was commonly referred to as subspace was, after all, a simple inter-dimensional interface. Well, not *that* simple. Point to point transfer *could* be viewed as two linked nodes through subspace.

When this hits them, the Bureau of Technology and Development would be tearing their hair out while opening a fresh avenue of research.

After all, the Orieli had already proved the concept. Many scientists throughout the Serrll would be extremely unhappy at this development. No one liked having his life's work, career and wedded ideas trashed.

"Gentlemen," Zor-Ell interrupted gently. "Please step inside. I took the liberty of informing Cent Comp of our destination." To assure his guests the process actually worked, he stepped into the nearest alcove, turned two-dimensional and simply vanished. There wasn't even a stir of displaced air.

Terr looked at Dhar, grinned and stepped into the alcove. A scimitar of cutting darkness, infinite and cold, swept through his body, accompanied by an instant of unbearable pressure. He wanted to cry out, but it was a passing moment of irrational panic when he crossed the trans-dimensional threshold. Materializing, he waited for the transceiver's after-effect tingle to subside. Zor-Ell was standing before him wearing a teasing smile.

"Rit! We must get ourselves one of these," he said in awe and Zor-Ell laughed, a pleasant normal sound.

Dhar and Karth appeared in quick succession.

"I trust the Observation Deck will be less distracting," Zor-Ell said and indicated at one group of several low couches clustered in semicircles.

Terr followed him and looked around. The bulkheads were transparent, showing the expanse of the ship's sloping black hull. Around them the stars were bright and harsh. It felt like he was in open space with only the deck and ceiling to give him an anchor to reality. It was an impressive view, but this was technology he understood, although the application might be on an altogether different level.

He settled himself into the couch. It yielded beneath his weight and contoured to support him in the right places. He told himself he must introduce the Orieli to formchairs.

When they were all settled, Zor-Ell crossed his legs and folded his hands in his lap. What he had seen of his visitors, he liked. Both aliens were unpretentious, clearly curious and sophisticated enough not to ask redundant questions. He wondered if they were typical representatives of the Serrll. Probably not, which didn't come as an overwhelming revelation. Being what they were made them naturally superior. He realized wryly the corollary applied to him as well. Would the aliens pick that

up? Gazing at them, he had no doubts whatsoever.

“A somewhat unexpected, but pleasant encounter,” he said warmly.

Terr looked for hidden meanings, but the alien appeared genuinely friendly. He needed to remember that there were many ways to stalk prey. More likely, he was being a paranoid fool. So far the aliens had done nothing to suggest they held hostile intentions. Why would he automatically assume that every encounter must have a military component? A product of his training or a species pattern set against the Serrll’s social matrix? Was Dhar’s observation that they were not so different from Earth true after all? Definitely something for the BCPA’s second guessers to think about.

“And an eventful one for the Serrll Combine, sir. A first for us in some time.” Terr wanted to hint gently that the Serrll had been around for a while and thoroughly explored this section of space. The Orieli might be powerful, but they were now playing in his sandpit.

Zor-Ell noted the inference and took it in his stride. “I have already surmised that we might be trespassing when we detected your ship. A somewhat smaller craft, alone and subspace capable, meant a complex social and technological infrastructure able to produce and support it. The fact that you *were* alone, far from advanced energy sources, suggested immediately that this part of space belonged to a sizeable interstellar union.”

Terr grinned. They understood each other.

“If you are harboring concerns that you will inadvertently offend us in some way, please don’t be alarmed,” Zor-Ell added. “I can hardly expect you to be familiar with our behavioral customs and hope you’ll reciprocate in the same way.”

A wave of relief swept through Terr and he relaxed fully for the first time, at least as far as these extraordinary circumstances permitted. He should have expected that the Orieli would be sophisticated enough to understand potential difficulties that can arise from a seemingly innocent remark or gesture, and make appropriate allowances.

“I appreciate that very much, Karhide. I would feel real bad if I blew this contact by committing an impropriety.”

Zor-Ell grinned. “I am pleased to relieve you of that anxiety.”

“Sir, your course is taking you toward a nearby yellow G star. The

Serrll maintains a base on the third planet's moon..." Terr paused, suddenly suspicious. "You were attracted to this system by energy leakage from our installation?"

"I was ready to head home after a lengthy mission when Sol presented me with an intriguing irregularity. We intercepted carrier wave signals coming from the third planet, but nothing to indicate subspace capability. Yet your ship was out there. When we detected energy leakage from the Moon, the rest wasn't hard to unravel," Zor-Ell said simply and Terr nodded.

"Earth is an emerging nuclear civilization that has recently ventured into space—"

"And is presumably under some form of, ah, care by the Serrll?"

"It is a protectorate."

That simple statement told Zor-Ell much. The Serrll may be territorial, divided by political factions, but despite internal rivalries, they had risen above parochial interests sufficiently to nurture emerging societies. That demonstrated an unexpected level of ethical maturity and behavior.

"Of course. Don't be alarmed. I have no intention of compromising Serrll's trust by revealing my presence to them. I merely request permission to carry out a brief analysis scan."

That was nicely put, Terr admitted. There was damn little he could do to stop the Orieli should they wish to do more than that and both of them knew it. Rolan TACOPSCOM maintained a triad of M-4s in the area, but he had no idea of their current movements schedule, and a force multiplier was not called for here. He knew that the alien's request had little to do with Earth. Any meaningful and productive future relationship between them rested on what happened here and now. He looked into Zor-Ell's large brown eyes and knew the alien had grasped it all.

It was this aspect of the Orieli that chilled him. Zor-Ell's raw intelligence seemed to comprehend things at a dizzying speed. As if reading his mind the alien smiled.

"Your caution is a credit to your duty, Da Terr, but unwarranted," he said gently, pleased that his expectations were not mistaken. It would be interesting to visit their worlds, but under first contact protocols that was clearly not possible.

Terr's mouth twitched. At how many levels was Zor-Ell playing? Formidable indeed. "Are you able to tell me something of your survey?"

"Simple curiosity. Orieli space lies beyond what you call the Moanar Nebula—"

"The Moanar!" Terr let out a silent whistle and glanced at Dhar. No wonder the Serrll hadn't encountered them before.

The nebula was one of nine super gas filaments that girthed the inner and outer galactic cores—a 6,800 light-year long barrier to anyone rash enough to venture into its deeps. It was a stellar nursery of staggering proportions and furious star formation, but also forbidding and deadly; full of ices, organics and metals, highly charged and extremely reactive plasma flows churned by raging magnetic fields. There were regions of intensely hot and dense gas, some up to eleven million degrees. Normally the gas mass was too thin to cause gravitational instability, but given the nebula's average cross-sectional thickness of four hundred light-years the mass profile invariably begins to affect a ship's field precursor when transiting through it. Penetrating deeper, the general mass density eventually causes the field to decay and collapse. Once a ship is forced to drop normal the surrounding mass potential prevents transition into faster than light speed, effectively stranding anybody unlucky enough to be caught inside the nebula, doomed to try limping out at sublight speed. The Serrll lost ships trying to bore through and Terr suspected the Orieli hadn't fared any better.

"You went around it?"

"No, the nebula is simply too enormous a barrier and we never had a compelling inclination to come this way before. Its complex gravitational and energy fields defeat even our technology. But we located a temporary breach, a tear if you like, allowing us passage through it. Given its fortuitous discovery it was decided to explore the other side. The breach could close and we might not have another opportunity to visit this side for some time."

From Sol, the Moanar was some three thousand lights away. The Orieli have traveled a long way indeed. Terr wanted to ask whether more than one ship came through, when he realized the obvious and chuckled. For such a major undertaking, of course more than one ship would be sent.

“When you emerged, had you shifted your course a mere ten degrees to port, you would have encountered our worlds.”

Zor-Ell was momentarily distracted and the seemingly innocent remark set off faint alarms. *Okama* had the adjacent portside survey cone. Why hadn't they come across the Serrll? He lacked information to form an opinion and worrying about it solved nothing.

“Perhaps this is a better outcome?” he suggested meaningfully.

Terr appreciated the inference. Landing on a Palean or Sargon world would have caused a sensation. This contact would be sensational enough once the news broke. Besides, everyone needed time to step back and digest the implications.

“As to your next question, Terr, Orieli space extends along the local arm of The Arch, as you call the galaxy. We occupy some thirteen hundred systems. Our real home is a globular cluster twelve thousand light-years above the galactic plane. The Orieli Cluster holds nineteen hundred inhabited, unified systems.”

Terr tried not to gawk. With those innocent words, Zor-Ell had quickly sketched the relative dimensions of their respective cultures, economies, social structure and military potential. Three thousand two hundred systems? The Serrll's 247 systems, not counting seventy-four protectorates and outposts, paled into insignificance beside such numbers. The Executive Council will deliver breach kittens. Perhaps it was a good thing that the Moanar stood between them.

“How do you traverse the distance to the cluster, sir?” Dhar asked and Zor-Ell looked at Karth.

“We maintain several transport portal nodes throughout The Arch. Each portal is powered by an artificial quantum point instability anchored to a local star,” Karth explained and licked his lips

“A singularity?”

Karth grinned. “Not exactly, as the locus is not a collapsed mass. It is more akin to a leakage, a rip in the fabric of the multi-dimensional space-time continuum that is allowed to momentarily fluctuate in place. The resulting energy discharge is harvested and channeled to the portal interface conventionally.”

Terr was sure there was nothing conventional about it, at least not to him.

“Most of our ships are powered by such an energy source,” Karth

added dryly, enjoying the reaction from the aliens.

Terr cleared his throat. He was riding on top of an artificial black hole? Zor-Ell smiled at his expression.

“It’s safe, I assure you. Any failure in the support system and the rip would instantly evaporate.”

“And if it didn’t?”

“The physical laws underpinning the process forbid any other result. Theoretically, it’s possible that under certain circumstances the fissure could momentarily jump into normal four-dimensional space. Being massless, there is no gravitational flux or event horizon and the fissure would instantly collapse.”

“I am relieved to hear it,” Terr remarked dryly, allowing himself a sardonic grin. He wanted to ask something, but refrained. If the quantum point drew its energy from a multi-dimensional rip, why anchor it to a star? That presented another problem for him. How did they overcome frame dragging of the local space-time induced by the star’s gravity well? Of course, the portal’s entry/exit aperture did not have to be near the quantum point rip. However the Orieli did it, the system certainly beat antimatter reactors. He figured that BueTech would have a lot to mull over.

Zor-Ell studied his down to earth visitor, then leaned forward. “Terr, your interlingua data pack has given us a small, but tantalizing glimpse into the Serrll Combine and its culture. The information is welcomed and will be studied thoroughly. For reasons I’m sure you’ll appreciate, apart from sending you a brief primer, I regret that I’m not able to reciprocate more fully. At least not now.”

Normal first contact procedure forbade further interaction, but Zor-Ell had more pressing concerns. Discovery of the Celi-Kran presented a genuine strategic threat to the Serrll, which OSCOM would need to consider carefully before engaging them further.

“I take it you won’t be visiting our worlds?”

“Future contact between us needs to be evaluated at many levels, by both of us. You must understand the need for that.”

Terr understood, all right. He might not be up on the latest first contact protocols, but he knew enough to guess the disruption and possible hysteria that could ensue at the appearance of the Orieli ship on Captal. Appropriate public conditioning, by everybody, had to be done

before formal contact could be considered. Terr figured it would probably require more conditioning on the Serrll's part than the Orieli's.

He looked curiously at the alien. Were the Serrll too primitive to warrant attention by the Orieli? Perhaps not primitive, but certainly insular. After more than five thousand years of comfortable expansion, Orieli superiority would come as a rude shock, and certainly a threat to some.

Definitely more conditioning.

Sympathetic to his dilemma, Zor-Ell continued. "My invitation to you and Da Dharaklin was not intended to demonstrate our social or technical superiority, or alarm Captal with the fact of our presence in your space, but as a genuine gesture of friendliness with an expectation of peaceful future cultural exchange. I anticipate that both of us will benefit from such a relationship."

Terr didn't need to have the argument elaborated. "You're right, of course, Karhide. And premature contact without adequate preparation would cause unwarranted alarm. I can only trust that your primer will go some way toward ameliorating that. Speaking personally, and I hate to say it, but right now the Serrll may not be ready to embrace a new, and what I would like to consider, powerful friend."

Zor-Ell smiled with genuine pleasure. If this alien was an authentic example of Serrll's culture the Orieli could look forward to a profitable exchange. However, Terr's attitude may not reflect that of the Serrll government or its general population. But there was nothing to be done until time came to instigate the next phase.

"I wouldn't hesitate for a moment to visit your worlds, Terr, if the genuine acceptance you showed us was reflected within the entire Serrll Combine."

"But since I don't represent the Serrll..."

"I regret that our exchange at this time has to be out of necessity brief."

"Satisfying my curiosity will have to be deferred. I understand," Terr said and rose. "Karhide Zor-Ell, the Serrll awaits formal contact with the Orieli Technic Union with anticipation."

They exchanged small pleasantries and Karth escorted them back to the hangar deck. He didn't allow them to keep the spheres, which Terr thought was too bad. The access tube retracted and the Orieli ship

immediately moved off, a black shadow that momentarily cut a hole through the stars and it was gone. On the main deck, Terr waited for the tube hatch to cycle and clasped his hands behind his back.

“Imagine it. They came through the Moanar.”

“It could become somewhat uncomfortable for them should that breach close while they are still on this side,” Dhar commented ironically and Terr chuckled.

“I dare say. Still, they can always go over it if things fall apart. Might take them some time to get home, but better than being stuck inside the nebula.” He shot Dhar a sidewise glance. “In the long run, you know what I’d do?”

Dhar was used to Sankri’s mind probing outrageous scenarios and grinned. “I would set up a transport portal at each end. It wouldn’t matter then if the breach collapsed.”

“You got it. Not our problem, though. Prepare an initial data pack brief for Anabb. He will want to alert the Bureau of Colonial and Protectorate Affairs.”

“The worthy Scholar may have already done that for us in our absence, my brother.”

Terr looked pained. “Don’t spoil what has otherwise been a great day, okay?”

“We should also warn Serrll Moon Base,” Dhar plowed on, walking into the cable-tube.

“You’re spoiling my day...”

Dhar was pleased to see his brother in such high spirits, unconcerned at a wave of political and personal consternation bearing down on Captal and Fleet command. Sankri seemed to relish the prospect of witnessing the ensuing chaos. Dhar suspected that his brother harbored a sardonic streak of mischievous cruelty. Cruelty or not, he realized the impact of this simple innocent meeting would be profound, and whose effects were likely to alter the Serrll forever. He glanced at Sankri wearing a satisfied smirk and nodded. Let chaos begin, it said.

On the command deck, there was no sign of the overbearing Laraiana, for which Terr was extremely grateful, his patience exhausted through constant placating of her petty pouting. He slid heavily into the central couch, gave a long sigh and looked up through the nav bubble.

Shadow Masters

The Orieli ship was gone and the stars stared at him with cold indifference. Maybe now, he could get some sleep!

“Resume our base course and get SMB, will you?” he ordered and rubbed his eyes.

First Scout Patrlin looked wary, regarding Terr through the comms plate. His thin tongue flickered from his mouth in a low hiss.

“Is it true what Scholar Laraiana reported?” Patrlin demanded without any preliminaries.

Terr bridled, too weary to play the game. “I don’t know what Scholar Laraiana reported—”

“If you’re being insolent, Agent Terr—”

“First Scout, I called you as a courtesy to advise you that I encountered an alien vessel and I wanted to let you know that they’re heading your way. Scholar Laraiana had no business contacting you, and whatever she might have said is irrelevant.”

Patrlin gave a slow hiss. “You’re right, of course, and I apologize, but the way she put it—”

“I can just imagine how she put it. Forget it.”

“The aliens, they’re coming to Sol?”

“That’s right. They detected an emission trace from SMB’s power core and wanted to check it out. Since Earth—”

“I understand. Do they intend to make contact with me?”

“I don’t know that, but it doesn’t seem likely.”

“Why not? As the Serrll representative—”

“They’re not interested in us, First Scout, at least not at this time. Their immediate interest is Earth.”

“Earth? The place is nothing but a backward outpost.”

“On which we’ve been keeping an eye on for over three thousand years,” Terr reminded him. “The Orieli are on a survey mission and Earth is a curiosity. They’ll be getting around to us in due course, you can count on it, but not right now.”

Patrlin’s tongue flicked out. “Allow us to assimilate the idea of a superior civilization, is that it? Very well, Agent Terr. We shall see what happens when they get here. You wouldn’t know when I should expect them, do you?”

“This is only a guess, but I would say within four to six hours.”

“Oh?”

“I would be surprised if they weren’t capable of at least an M-4’s boost.”

“Mmm. You will be sending me a data pack, just in case?”

“Within the hour.”

“Very well,” Patrlin hissed and cut contact.

Terr glared at the main plate and bit his lip. “Rit! What’s with the Karkans anyway?”

Dhar grinned and shrugged. “Just antisocial, I suppose.”

“Yeah. I’m going below. Call me when you’ve got that data pack brief done. And no more aliens, all right?”

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 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.

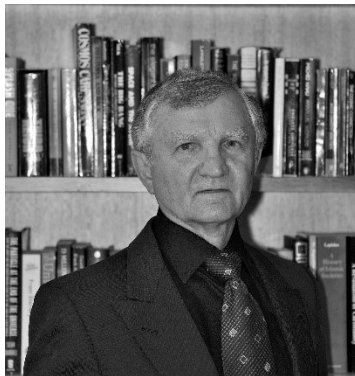
Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cellphone systems. He applied his IT discipline to create realistic storylines for his books. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends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

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Shadow Gods books by Stefan 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 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 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 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.

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?