

Review

When I pick up a novel by Stefan Vučak, I know I am in for a thrill ride. His books seem to have a life of their own. They take readers by the hand and lead them through a landscape of political upheaval, intrigue and scandal. I have enjoyed his previous book, *Cry of Eagles*. *Strike for Honor* certainly did not disappoint me. He has created realistic situations, lifelike characters and convincing dialog that place readers in the midst of what could be a disastrous political situation. If Stefan Vučak's previous books set a high bar of excellence, *Strike for Honor* has surpassed that bar.

Readers' Favorite

Books by Stefan Vučak

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All the Evils

Towers of Darkness

Strike for Honor

Proportional Response

Legitimate Power

Shadow Gods Saga:

In the Shadow of Death

Against the Gods of Shadow

A Whisper from Shadow

Shadow Masters

Immortal in Shadow

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STRIKE FOR HONOR

By

Stefan Vučak



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Dedication

To Daniel ... grasping at life's opportunities

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Chapter One

A distinctive pealing blare tore the dawn silence as a warship announced its departure. Vincent Pacino could tell the difference between a man-of-war and a civilian tub. He raised an eyebrow and shrugged. The ship out there would not be the only one leaving this morning. He tried not to let the thought spoil the moment.

Placing his cup on a black saucer, he sighed with contentment and sat back against the chair. He patted his trim stomach and grinned.

“Ah, that was good.”

Linda peered at him over the rim of her mug, holding it between both hands. Her large deep brown eyes shone with amusement, and the right side of her full mouth lifted. He wanted to climb out of his chair, reach for her and squeeze her until her helpless squeals were reduced to loving surrender. Apart from wearing a dashing white uniform, he still didn't know what she saw in him, but he wasn't about to question his luck.

“I don't know where you put it,” she said candidly and shook her head in bemused wonder.

Framed by short raven hair, her soft round face glowed with suppressed laughter. Despite her seemingly cheerful demeanor, there were lines of concern in the corners of her eyes. Vin pretended not to see them. Besides, there was nothing he could do, not right now. He could only hope that she wouldn't hurt too much while he was away.

“Despite your unfailing efforts to turn me into a pear, my sweet, this body will never give in,” he declared comfortably.

The small table between them was littered with remnants of their breakfast. His usual fare of two fried sausages, accompanied by eggs done over-easy, with toast to mop up the remains, didn't seem extravagant to him. Two cups of strong black coffee generally bedded the whole stuff down. It took fuel to power his five foot eleven frame.

Some of his fellow officers doing penance in Yokosuka went native and turned up their nose at traditional American cuisine, never giving up trying to seduce him with superbly cooked local fare. Despite em-

bracing all things Nipponese, one or two still harbored a secret weakness for Big Macs, which made Vin roll his eyes. Still, he admitted to developing a taste for Fukagawa-meshi and gourmet sashimi. There simply was no accounting for taste.

Linda's eyebrows arched as she lowered her mug. "A pear?"

Her soft contralto, mixed with an exotic touch of Southern accent, never failed to enthrall him.

"It's all that bracing sea air keeping me in shape, or maybe the extracurricular activities we indulge in after hours," he said with a lewd smile.

She giggled and tossed a piece of toast at him. "You're crude, Lieutenant."

"Guilty, ma'am." Vin's grin faded. "Will you be all right? It's only an eleven-day deployment, but I hate leaving you alone, especially when—"

She waved him off. "We've already packed most everything, and Leighton has the paperwork. We're not lugging furniture or appliances. I'm a navy wife, remember? I've done this once or twice before."

"So you have, my sweet. I'll check with Leighton before we shove off."

"I have it under control, Vin," she assured him in a patient voice. "Don't worry about it."

Commander Leighton was a friend and would make sure the Housing Services Center red tape was all squared away. Vin didn't want to handle last minute snafus because some fool rating forgot to forward his Detaching Endorsement L20/L01 form.

Knowing when to give up, he reached across the table and grasped her right hand. The skin felt smooth and cool, and he loved running his fingers and palms over it, constantly amazed how a woman's skin seemed to have a texture unlike anything else, made to be loved.

"I'll try not to, but this isn't a routine rotation. If it weren't for the FTX—"

"I know what a Key Resolve exercise is. We've been through one last March."

The annual joint Field Training Exercise, conducted by the Combined Forces Command within the Korean Theater of Operations, was a defensive rotation to test rear area security and stability. It was also a firm demonstration to deter war with the Democratic People's Republic

of Korea. Pacifists on both sides of Congress claimed it was needless provocation. Perhaps it was, but as a serving naval officer, Vin believed in the value of positive deterrence. At any rate, his opinion wasn't sought. He was just told.

He glanced at a copy of *US Today* beside him and Linda frowned.

"You worried what the North Koreans might do?"

"I'm always worried what those fanatics might do," he muttered sourly and pointed at the headline. "It's been a couple of years since Sung Kang-dae and his henchmen ousted 'Glorious Successor' Kim Jong-un after his father's death in 2011, and he's still consolidating his position. Besides, Jong-un was just a kid. Imagine someone like that made a four-star general and commander of their armed forces, for God's sake!"

"He was only twenty-six or twenty-nine at the time?"

"Nobody knows for sure and the PROK aren't telling. They're a secretive bunch. But there was no way a seasoned old bird like Sung would sit back and allow someone so inexperienced to become Supreme Leader. Despite talk of political and economic reform, Sung is a military hawk and things haven't changed much in that country. Not so you'd notice."

"You think they might interfere when they supposedly sank *Cheonan* in 2010?"

Vin pursed his lips and shrugged. "They could, but I hope not, and they'd be crazy to try it. From all accounts, Larry Tanner is having a good round of what everyone is saying are favorable talks with their government to lift sanctions and open up trade. The country's a basket case. Why aggravate the situation with stupid posturing?"

"Ideology," Linda murmured.

"Yeah. Think how much blood has been spilled around the world over that one!"

"It would ease tension if they simply shut down their nuclear facilities at Yongbyon."

"It certainly would. Sung said that he'd do it, citing its construction as an outdated policy by Kim Jong-il, and an unwarranted drain on the country's resources. All true, but they haven't made any moves to shut them down yet."

"But if Tanner is hopeful—"

“I reckon he’s one of the best Secretaries of State we’ve had in some time, but it’s hard to figure what Sung really wants.”

“He wants to hold onto power and not be beholden to anybody. And I’m talking about China and Russia,” Linda said wryly and Vin grinned.

“You got that right, my sweet. Anyway, that’s all high politics and way over my pay scale. It’s not my worry. I just don’t feel happy running out on you like this.”

“Vin, cube it, okay?”

He squeezed her hand and grinned at her characteristic expression. Two years younger than him, at twenty-four, her maturity and poise was of someone older. Navy life had toughened her, made her more self-reliant and confident. That independence helped steer both their careers through some demanding times, with a lot of love in between.

His posting to the 7th Fleet base at Yokosuka, Japan, had been a promotional leg up, but it also created a degree of strain on their personal life. A navy career was never easy on a relationship. After eighteen months on USS *Curtis Wilbur*, his application to attend the Naval Postgraduate School at Monterey, California, for a master’s in Systems Engineering, had come through. It meant twelve months on shore away from salt and spray, but it would be worth it. On graduation, he would also receive another half stripe. A lieutenant commander at twenty-eight wasn’t bad going and fitted his planned career curve. The fact that he finished fourth in his class at Annapolis, and had so far ticked all the right boxes, did not hurt his fast-track path either. In today’s right-sized navy, every tick counted. There were far too many lieutenant commanders willing away their time with shore appointments, and Vin wasn’t planning to join them.

“Your Dad has us squared away with an apartment in Monterey, and my Mom is seeing to the furniture and the curtains,” Linda said easily. “We’ll be arriving in style. I hope you like chintz. You just go ahead and enjoy your manly games with the Koreans and don’t worry.”

“Manly games? Never mind.” He chuckled and patted her hand. “I knew I could count on you. Chintz or not, we’ll have some serious time together once we’re in Monterey. It’s a promise.”

“I won’t mind it at all,” she said softly, a world of expression in her voice.

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He sighed, understanding her completely, but there wasn't anything that he could do about her loneliness. Not right now. Navy life was tough on wives, and they would just have to work it out.

"Yeah. I know this hasn't been easy for you, has it, my sweet?"

"Yokosuka and Tokyo were interesting, and teaching math and science at Kinnick High filled my days, but it'll be good being home again. At least the school's on the base and I was spared having to commute somewhere else."

Vin nodded. The Yokosuka Naval Base was a huge 570-acre complex, having to provide military facilities for 25,000 people and housing for 19,000 American personnel. Although the figure was lower these days as some had elected to leave following the massive earthquake off Sendai in 2011. However comfortable the base was, for her, home was still Norfolk, where he managed to snag her after a whirlwind courtship during his posting there with Fleet Forces Command. Monterey might be on the other side of the continent, but from Japan, it was all the same thing...almost.

"Besides, I'll be able to take my master's in education at California State while you're doing yours," she added and lifted her chin, daring him to challenge her, which he did not intend doing. She was also a dedicated professional and not just a curvy body.

"Right! Enough of this jawing." He slapped the table with both hands, stood up and patted down his service blues dress jacket. There would be time to talk after the Field Training Exercise. He glanced behind him and frowned. "Where's my duffel bag?"

"In the car," Linda said and hastily piled stuff into the dishwasher, then grabbed her brown leather bag from the credenza.

"My girl! Let's do it."

Vin picked up his visored cap, jammed it on his head and strode out of the narrow kitchen. He heard a click as she locked the apartment door and they walked down the corridor toward a bank of two elevators. He pressed the down button, clasped his hands behind his back and stood at the at ease position. He wasn't even aware he was doing it. After years of service, it was habit, the reaction coming automatically.

Outside, even though it was late February, the air had a lingering crispness that made Vin's skin tingle. Crowded by nine-story tenement towers and lesser buildings, the open parking lots were clearing as duty

personnel made their way to various administrative offices and support facilities. Civilians would be opening shops along Main Street and other establishments. This morning, more than the usual number of cars were heading toward the docks to board Fleet ships made ready to steam into the Yellow Sea where they would meet their Korean counterparts. Other cars would be streaming in from Ikego Hills, Negishi Heights and surrounding suburbs. It was impossible to house everyone on the base.

The sun still struggling to clear the housing complex, dark shadows shrouded the parking lot. Small mounds of snow huddled in corners. Linda shouldered her bag and ambled toward a dark red Honda Civic parked two rows back in the designated lot for their apartment tower. Dressed in a cream knee-length skirt and smart business jacket, she looked trim and attractive. Admiring her legs, Vin allowed himself a moment of distraction.

The front and rear lights blinked and the car gave a beep as she deactivated the security system. She opened the driver door, tossed her bag onto the rear seat and climbed in. Vin got into the passenger seat and buckled up. After glancing at him to make sure he had his seatbelt on, she pressed the starter button.

Following a line of traffic heading toward the docks, most of them with Navy registration tags, Vin felt a building excitement at the prospect of going to sea again. His ten-day leave was over, and only granted because of his pending relocation Stateside. He couldn't help it. The sea was in his blood and the deeps had his soul. He was a sailor and the open ocean was his first love. A strange love that had captivated his mind ever since his father took him to Halona Point to gaze at the majestic Pacific rollers that traveled all the way from Antarctica, to smash themselves against Oahu's shores.

Kenneth Pacino, a young lieutenant commander serving with the 3rd Fleet out of Pearl, also shared his yearning and faraway look, focused on the deep blue of a clear sky and unbroken expanse of ocean. Vin loved his father and cherished their moments of intimacy, but those moments were far too brief when they came, and infrequent. He did not understand why his father had to be away so often and for months at a time, resenting his absence. His mother tried to explain it to him once, and although he only partially understood, it was with intellectual

detachment. It wasn't until he stood above Halona Point, watching the creamy rollers march in, allowing the soft tropical breeze to flow around him, smell the iodine-laden air, he decided that he would also sail the deeps. When his father took him aboard his *Spruance*-class destroyer, the conversion was complete. He would follow the family tradition and join the Navy.

But he still resented those long gaps between their reunions.

He took a quick look at Linda's profile, relaxed as she concentrated on her driving, and his eyes softened. The sea might be his first love, but she had fulfilled something else, a part of him that by joining made him complete. His love for her was of a different order and he had been startled when he realized there was room in his heart for her and the tug of an open sea. As a Navy brat herself, it made things easier, but he knew she pined for him when his ship had to sail. Sometimes that created a pull within him from opposite directions, but he could not be with her always and remain what he was, no matter how much he wanted to.

After he got his master's, did he want to ask for a shore billet, devoting himself to applied research in advanced weapons? They talked about it fleetingly, but Vin yearned for command of his own ship above everything else. A shore assignment would never get him there. At best, it would make it a long proposition. Right now, the sea was in his veins and he needed to be there, no matter how much his heartstrings dragged at him. She understood his need, because that's what he was, which only made it worse.

He would make it up to her once they were in Monterey.

As they neared the docks, he could see tall loading cranes cluttering the harbor docks. Navy personnel were everywhere: officers, ratings and toiling gangs. Across the water, two tugs crowded the sleek 567-foot long USS *Shiloh*, CG-67, a *Ticonderoga*-class Aegis cruiser, getting ready to depart. Her functional boxy superstructure and rear helicopter housing didn't make her graceful, but her business was dealing out death, not stand in review.

Linda pulled the car to a stop before a guarded gate at Sherman Pier and switched off the engine. She looked at him and her brown eyes turned misty. He reached for her. With a strangled sob, her arms were round his neck.

“There, my sweet. It’s only an exercise,” Vin murmured softly into her short hair after swallowing a lump.

She pulled away and dabbed at her eyes. “I told myself I wouldn’t get emotional.”

He smiled and brushed her cheek with a finger. “It’s all right. You can be emotional for both of us.”

“Just don’t be a hero, okay?”

“You’re talking like I’m off to a war.”

“With North Korean boats shadowing you, no one can tell what they’ll do.”

“I’ll have a powerful ship under me with all the missiles and guns I want to fire. They’d be crackers to try something.”

“If they do, make sure you duck. And that’s an order, Lieutenant.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.” He pulled her tight and their lips met. Her soft mouth opened and the first touch of her velvety tongue made him feel all prickly. Joined in a dance of abandon, he wondered what the hell he was doing trading her for the sea. Having to come up for air, he broke the moment and looked deep into her eyes. “Keep that thought,” he said and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

She tittered and fisted him on the shoulder. “Dirty old man.”

“Always, my sweet.” He glanced at the digital watch on his right wrist and sighed. “Got to go. Love you.”

“Me too,” she said, clearly distressed despite the brave little smile she gave him.

He wanted to say something comforting and endearing, but words would only make it trite. Abruptly, he unclipped his belt, opened the door, stepped out and slammed it shut. As he made his way to the rear of the car, its trunk lid popped open. He retrieved his dark blue duffel and walked toward the guard post without looking back. He heard the Honda accelerate away behind him.

Saying goodbyes had never been his strong suite.

A marine, the semi-automatic on his right hip within easy reach, stepped out of the small windowed shack and saluted.

“Morning, sir.”

A second marine inside the shack watched them both. Vin could see three M16A2 rifles mounted on the back wall. He returned the salute, slid the duffel to the ground and dug out his wallet. He handed the ID

card to the guard who passed it to his buddy. After a computer check, Vin got his card back and the marine saluted again.

“Give ’em hell, Lieutenant.”

Vin saluted with a grin as the gate rolled back on its tracks. “Cocked and locked,” he said and picked up his bag. He paced slowly into his world and breathed deeply. The green water was smooth and there was hardly any wind.

Walking down the pier, he was barely aware of background noises permeating the air like a pervasive blanket: cars, forklifts, trucks, prime movers, and the constant hum of machinery—a harbor readying itself for a major deployment.

Tied portside, a thin thread of gray smoke lingered above USS *Curtis Wilbur*’s rear stack. The warship’s sharp clipper bow cleaved the air as it rose into a clear sky. Massing 6,900 tons and 505 feet long, painted drab gray, the *Arleigh Burke*-class guided missile destroyer was a powerful ship. Armed with multiple Mk 41 vertical launch cells that could launch Tomahawk or Standard attack missiles, Evolved Sea Sparrows for defense, VL-ASROC antisubmarine missiles, five inch/54-caliber main gun, torpedo tubes and a Phalanx CIWS close-in defense system, the ship could hold its own. Two MH-60 Sea Hawk helicopters housed in a stern hangar extended its reach when sub hunting. Pushed by four GE gas turbines powering two shafts, going better than thirty-six knots, the ship was also demonstrably fast.

Admiring the ship’s sleek lines, he once told Linda he couldn’t wish for more.

Behind the ship, tied along its starboard side, lay a sister destroyer, *Mustin Lassen* and *Fitzgerald* were laid up for major maintenance and would be missing the scaled down FTX, no doubt to the chagrin of their skippers. Apart from them, everybody else was going, except the carrier USS *George Washington*. She would also miss this exercise, a deal to appease the North Koreans. As the Fleet’s deputy commander, Rear Admiral Kenneth Pacino—due to get his third star in the fall according to the grapevine—would be running the exercise from his command ship, USS *Blue Ridge*, LCC-19. Vin wondered what his old man was doing now. Probably giving his chief of staff ulcers, he mused sardonically.

Despite the fact that both of them were at Yokosuka, he’d had lim-

ited contact with his father. Their respective duties simply made socializing on a grand scale impossible. To make up for it, his mother visited when he was in port and Linda valued being under the wing of an admiral's wife. It wasn't patronage, merely taking practical advantage, and Vin would have been nuts not to accept the social benefits his father's position offered. That's as far as it went, and neither would have it otherwise. The older Pacino's rank was never used to advance or influence his career. Still, it was nice to know he had one admiral in his pocket if needed.

As he approached the destroyer, its arching side looming beside him, the offset gray-black DDG-54 painted prominently on its bow, Vin figured life could be a whole lot worse. He paused beside the gangway guarded by two marines and returned their salutes. Without being asked, he held out his ID. The marine looked at it carefully and made a tick on his clipboard.

Vin shouldered his bag and climbed up the gangway. When he reached the weather deck, he looked up, saluted the colors and then saluted Lieutenant JG, Minny Couper, standing her stint as Officer of the Deck. She looked confident these days; a far cry from her initial eager, trusting phase when she first came on board. Wanting to make a good impression, she micromanaged and drove her team to distraction, which forced Vin to remind her that she was there as a manager. The chiefs were there to look after the sailors.

"Permission to come aboard, sir," Vin said formally. Couper returned his salute.

"Permission granted, sir."

Vin stepped on the steel deck and quickly looked around. There weren't many people about, most of the activity being below decks.

"What's the word, Minny?"

"Set to shove off at ten hundred, as per the advertised schedule. You've got the afternoon watch in CIC."

"Everybody on board?"

"Just about, but—"

"I know. Koslov hasn't reported in."

"Not yet, and Commander Linnen is something pissed," Couper agreed equitably, clearly not overly agitated at the prospect of Koslov getting a reaming.

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“Well, it wouldn’t be a deployment if the XO wasn’t pissed at somebody,” Vin said comfortably and walked toward an open hatchway leading into the ship’s bowels.

Commander Deron ‘Sheet’ Linnen was a good officer and cut the crew a lot of slack, but he didn’t have much time for any prima donna. Senior Chief Koslov’s last minute departure antics definitely fitted into that category. Every ship had a character and Koslov was *Steel Hammer’s*, as the ship was commonly referred to. How people came up with such names, Vin couldn’t figure it. They might as well have called her *Glowing Hammer* after the Fukushima reactors went into a meltdown. *Curtis Wilbur* and several other ships happened to be in port at the time and it was rumored that everything in Yokosuka received a dosing, although according to the official poop, tests showed nothing. The men still joked about it and he was told that other ships had requests for transfers, but none from *Wilbur* went. The men liked how Captain Tyler Woods ran things. For that matter, so did Vin.

He squared everything away and raided the wardroom for a coffee, then went topside. Standing beside the ASROC torpedo launcher, he watched the hands single up the bowlines. At ten a.m. sharp, the ship’s horn blared, sending up a plume of white steam from the forward stack and tugs eased the warship away from the wharf.

It was time to do some paid business.

* * *

Sung Kang-dae pursed his thin lips and stared across the wide table. His small black eyes bulged slightly from a podgy flat face, gave nothing away. Not a tall man, dressed in a drab gray jacket, narrow collar clipped tight around a powerful neck, he nonetheless exuded palpable power. His arrogant, domineering gaze accentuated the impression of instant retaliation if he were contradicted. A hard man to warm up to, Tanner reflected.

Seated on either side of him, the Foreign Minister and the Minister of Public Security, deferred to the Supreme Leader without moving, carefully watching everything, their faces equally inscrutable. They hadn’t said much so far, but both were definitely ‘players’, powerful men who didn’t feel they needed to prove themselves. They were the

ones who got things done and knew it.

Behind the dictator, a thin nondescript individual acted as interpreter.

Sung spoke rapidly in the Hangul dialect, his words brooking no opposition, each point emphasized by tapping the table with a clenched fist. He did not want to appear to be giving away anything, certainly not to a nominal enemy.

“These concessions in no way imply that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is prepared to bow to anyone! Our sovereignty must be respected at all times,” the translator grated.

Larry Tanner kept his face impassive as he listened, his hands folded over the table. The polished surface glinted from two elaborately cut chandeliers mounted on deceptively delicate gold chains. Of course, the chains could not have been gold to support the weight of the crystal. It was needless extravagance, but that was only one contradiction in this torn, wretched country. The bare table was devoid of anything that might distract the flow of conversation.

Everything in the room was large, including the wide windows and table. Frosted glass softened the bright sunshine outside and rounded the sharp edges of conversation. On the wall behind Sung hung a square black-and-white picture of Kim Il-sung, the Eternal President, the man who sought to create a dynasty in his name. The eternal butcher would be more accurate, Tanner thought. But he wasn’t here to pass judgment. His job was to represent the United States and its interests. If successful, wider global interests would also be served, but that would merely be a bonus, icing on the cake.

“Mr. Chairman, the United States has always been prepared to respect your country’s sovereignty in the family of peaceful nations,” he said smoothly, reminding Sung what this meeting was all about—dragging North Korea from the brink of total disintegration and shoring up his own power.

“If that’s the case, Mr. Tanner, why does the United States demand that I dismantle the Tongch’ang-dong missile facility?”

“Sir, your defense posture does not require development of missiles with a range of nine thousand miles, like your Taepodong-2. Such long-range weapons have only one function, to project a strategic threat.”

“You would deny us a credible defense posture?”

“Your country is not threatened, sir. Not even by the United States.”

“The rhetoric of your past presidents lends a lie to your statement, Mr. Secretary.”

“The rhetoric of President Walters is not a lie.”

Beside him, Marian Cromatry, Under Secretary of State for Economics, Business, and Agricultural Affairs, shifted slightly to signal his disquiet and alarm at the prospect of annoying the Supreme Leader. Cromatry was worried about his portfolio and agenda, which was commendable, but Tanner required to maintain a global perspective. During the exhaustive and often frustrating talks to date, overlaid with diplomatic protocol and tedious formalities, Tanner *had* walked softly, but firmly, gauging the mood of the North Korean leader and his ministers. A hardliner in the mold of his predecessor, Kim Jong-il, outwardly unyielding, Sung nevertheless appeared to be a pragmatist and a realist, confirming the dossier he had read.

Whether Sung liked it or not, and he undoubtedly didn't, the PROK leader was forced to face the unpalatable truth that maintaining an unworkable ideology would ensure the country's continued slide into poverty and increased unrest. Faced with widespread starvation and economic collapse, despite token attempts at limited market liberalization, not having anything to lose, the people would eventually rise up. The rebellion might be crushed, but the glorious Juche maxims of Kim Il-sung would be exposed as hollow oratory that they were, particularly the Songun—army first—doctrine. If one wanted to live well and have a privileged life, he joined the armed forces, but not everybody could be in the Army. Sung could no longer parade his military might with stomping boots and rumbling missile carriers in the '60s style Soviet demonstrations for the benefit of domestic and international media. It simply didn't wash anymore.

Russia might be a reluctant ally at best, but it had problems of its own and was wary of getting embroiled. China, although an active supporter, had shifted its focus to the world's economic stage and was no longer willing to automatically shield an extremist regime. Sung and his ministers knew all that, hence the talks, albeit reluctant ones.

Across the table, Sung's yellow face was equally impassive, but it was a mask. His clenched fist betrayed inner tension. Both were playing for high stakes with big chips. No one wanted to blink first. With Sung,

however, if he lost, he would also probably lose his head.

“I am prepared to review our intercontinental missile program, provided we reach an acceptable agreement that guarantees our security. But I demand tangible results first!” the interpreter said.

In a gesture of conciliation, figuratively speaking, Tanner pushed his pile of chips to the center of the table.

“To show our good faith, sir, the planned Foal Eagle land exercise has been suspended. With the announcement to scale down your military forces and desire to defuse tensions across the peninsula, your southern neighbor is more than willing to avoid giving the impression that this year’s joint land exercises are in any way an expression of aggressive intent toward your country.”

Sung spoke rapidly after the interpreter finished translating Tanner’s statement.

“That is welcome news and appreciated, Mr. Secretary. But we also want the Key Resolve naval deployment cancelled. It is an unwarranted and blatantly provocative intrusion into our territorial waters. We don’t object if our misguided neighbor wishes to undertake routine training evolutions of its vessels. However, those exercises don’t require the challenging presence of your 7th Fleet.”

“I assure you, sir, the exercise with our South Korean friends is in no way meant to be anything but a peaceful rotation and evaluation of our tactical doctrine,” Tanner said smoothly, which was a blatant lie, of course.

Given Sung’s smirk when he heard the translation, the dictator also recognized the diplomatic doubletalk. Both knew exactly what the annual Foal Eagle/Key Resolve exercises were about. The naval parade of strength was a clear demonstration of America’s intent to crush Sung should he be so foolish to engage in open conflict. The PROK regime may have extended a first tentative gesture of reconciliation toward the West, but clearly, Sung wanted it done on his terms.

It was all about saving face. Although rattling the nuclear threat had a hollow ring these days and the man knew it, his ballistic missile posture was more credible. Kim Jong-il may have been ready to see his country immolated for the sake of some ideological purity, but the men who held power now were not so ready to throw away the gains they

had made and now enjoyed simply to prove a philosophical point. Acceding to Sung's unreasonable demands would also make America appear weak, opening itself to more debilitating claims. What was required here was firm determination to act. Sung was buying and America was selling—at its price. If pushed too far, Tanner could always walk away and everybody knew it. Just as everybody knew he wouldn't. But he might, and that's what kept Sung in line.

He gazed unwaveringly at the Supreme Leader, reminding him that he was now pushing too hard, then cleared his throat.

“As you know, sir, Key Resolve is scheduled to commence in three days' time, as communicated to your National Defense Commission. Its deployment readiness is too advanced for the exercise to be rescinded. However, in anticipation of successfully concluding our introductory talks, the scope of the exercise has been scaled down to five days only. In recognition of the mutual value of our discussions, I want to announce that normal air operations, supported by our carrier, USS *George Washington*, have also been cancelled. The ship will remain in port.”

Sung's eyes flickered briefly in surprise. After a moment, he spoke rapidly.

“That is indeed gratifying, Mr. Secretary,” the interpreter declared. “Much remains to be resolved between us, but your visit here is a first encouraging step. When I hear the United States Congress announce that America is lifting its economic sanctions and is prepared to normalize trade, encouraging other countries to do likewise, we shall begin immediate shutdown of our uranium reprocessing and plutonium extraction facilities as a prelude to converting our reactors to purely civilian use. We shall also invite the International Atomic Energy Agency to monitor the shutdown and conversion program. We are a peaceful nation and have no need of nuclear weapons—provided our security interests are not threatened.”

Tanner allowed himself a small smile, which Sung saw. The bastard could afford to be magnanimous, since he already held more than sixty nuclear warheads. At least that's what CIA's intelligence claimed. Whether he could launch them or not was a moot point, which nobody wanted tested. Still, dismantling their uranium reprocessing and enrichment plants would be a positive move. It would also ease the enormous

economic drain the facility imposed on the country. Regardless how distasteful it might be to Sung, the bean counters and financiers were slowly taking over, as they had already done elsewhere in the world.

“The President will be delighted to hear this, Mr. Chairman. You understand, resolution of your dispute over the Northern Limit Line might take some time to settle.”

Sung gave a dismissive gesture. “Although an important issue to be addressed in the future, it should not stand as an impediment to fostering a growing cooperation between our respective countries and the world community at large.”

“I appreciate your patience, sir. On the matter of your arms sales to Iran, Syria and Yemen, this is something that troubles us greatly. These countries are open supporters of terrorism and declared enemies of the United States. Curtailing this trade would do much to ease a worldwide problem.”

When the Supreme Leader heard the translation, he leaned back and laughed. “Mr. Tanner, I am prepared to engage in meaningful discussions, but I would appreciate if we dispensed with hypocrisy. Everybody is selling arms to everybody else. It is merely business and a valuable source of revenue for us, as it is for America.” Sung gave a disarming smile. “Besides, after that unfortunate incident with Israel, not something a supposed ally would do, I thought Iran was now your friend.” He stood up and gave a small nod. “I look forward to extending our conversation to mutual gain this afternoon, Mr. Secretary.” He stood up and marched out without giving Tanner a chance to respond or stand. The interpreter hastily scrambled after him.

Tanner watched him leave, having to admire the wily devil. Everything Sung said was blatantly true. He had advised Walters not to raise the issue of arms sales, but the president was adamant. Still, the man was young and had a lot to learn. What worried him was the president’s predilection for running foreign policy initiatives on his own, bypassing the State Department. He didn’t mind initiative, but it needed to be tempered by facts and firm guidance—his guidance—something Walters did not always welcome. Tanner had to give the man his due, though. With a flair for international politics, Walters had shown that he could hold his own with prickly foreign heads of state. The way he handled Sharron Ibrahim last year during the Valero crisis had been an

exemplary display of diplomacy. Walters always cut to the heart of any issue, Tanner had to give him that.

When the door closed after Sung and the interpreter, the Minister of Public Security shifted his considerable bulk in his chair and smiled warmly. Clearly, he did not share the hardships of his countrymen. The atmosphere in the room immediately became lighter simply due to the body language of the two ministers.

“I am afraid, sir, the Supreme Leader will not be joining us for lunch. He has pressing matters of state requiring his attention. However, I am at your disposal and look forward to continuing our talks this afternoon,” he said in soft English with barely an accent, his attitude polite, but friendly. “Which include the limitation of our weapons trade. You must understand, sir, it is a sensitive topic for us, but in this case, I must side with the Supreme Leader.”

“I acknowledge that America is not a shining example of restraint, Mr. Minister,” Tanner said ruefully, “and neither is the rest of the developed world, but actively helping Iran upgrade its missile technology is seen as going just a little too far.”

Kham Chang-uk grinned and shrugged. “You help your friends, do you not? But this is something for us to discuss later, yes?”

The Foreign Minister also smiled from his seat. “Indeed, we have much to go over, and it is fortuitous you’re here at this time.”

The talks so far were guarded and at times tense, but Sung Kang-dae seemed genuinely keen to get America onside, from necessity rather than choice, Tanner reminded himself, with a large helping of self-interest thrown in. It did not matter what his real objectives were. With Kim Jong-il out of the way, and having ousted the former dictator’s youngest son as successor, Sung was unfettered by his predecessor’s repressive policies. Those who objected were ruthlessly removed. The man was clearly not ready to embrace any version of democracy, neither did he crawl cap in hand to China nor Russia, which the American administration was gratified to see. Hardliner or not, he was not blind to the desperate plight of his people and the sorry state of the country. It was simple expediency, not a change of ideology. Feed the people and stay in power.

It was up to the United States to work within those parameters. Tanner had bet his chips and called on Sung Kang-dae to show his hand or

fold. As he looked at the two men across the table, he got the unmistakable impression that he had missed something. They looked smug and pleased with themselves.

“I appreciate the opportunity, gentlemen, to make the first tentative steps which might lead to a more normalized relationship between us.”

Kham laughed openly. “We are alone now, Mr. Tanner. You can dispense with diplomacy, sir.”

Tanner stared at the Minister of Public Security. “I am not sure I understand,” he said cautiously. What was he missing?

Kham shot a quick glance at the door. “Our plans are almost complete and we’ll make our move soon. Once Sung is out of the way, we can talk seriously.”

Tanner felt himself stiffen and his diplomatic mask came down with a clang. “You are planning to depose the Supreme Leader?”

“Don’t act surprised, Mr. Tanner. Mr. Zardwovsky must have kept you updated.”

Tanner fought to keep dismay showing on his face. After achieving what he thought was solid progress with Sung, he now faced a palace revolt that threatened to undo everything. A revolt apparently supported, and perhaps even orchestrated, by the CIA, regardless of any perceived benefits such a revolt might realize. Was the president keeping something from him again, or was this another one of Raymond Grant’s initiatives? Either way the implications were staggering.

“Well—”

“It’s simple, really. We stood with Sung Kang-dae to unseat Kim Jong-un and his collective leadership. The young man was out of his depth. We hoped Sung would usher in real progressive change, but nothing substantive has happened. He used this time to consolidate his own position. If we’re to avert national disaster, and perhaps open conflict with our southern neighbor and your country, we must act now before Sung becomes too entrenched.”

His mind whirling, Tanner pulled himself together. “And who will replace him? You?”

Kham laughed with genuine mirth. “I don’t aspire that high, sir. We intend that Premier Tung In-san be the Supreme Leader. This, after all, is what America wants and why you’re here, is it not?”

“Yes, it is,” Tanner mused slowly. Was the Korean wise to voice

what was blatant treason so openly? He glanced meaningfully around the room and Kham grinned.

“Rest assured, sir. The room is ‘clean’, to use your vernacular. No one can overhear us. There are certain privileges to my position.”

Tanner believed him. He gathered his composure and gave a weak smile. “I am glad to hear that. I would hate to have our conversation, ah, misinterpreted?”

Kham smiled knowingly. “We cannot afford misunderstandings or ambiguities. Rest assured, the Reconnaissance General Bureau men will not be barging in on us. Now, shall we have lunch? We won’t be interrupted and you’ll be able to talk freely.”

Confronted with another and extremely unwelcome dimension to his visit, Tanner found his appetite suddenly gone.

* * *

Barely touching the horizon, the bloated sun colored the wispy clouds with red and orange fire. Clearing the security barrier, the official cavalcade of four cars sped along the apron toward the sleek, specially modified blue and white Air Force Two, a military version of the Boeing 757 with a range of 6,900 miles, waiting on the taxiway, easily able to make the return Pyongyang to Seattle leg of almost 5,200 miles in one hop. He would have to make a refueling stop at the Lewis-McChord AFB before continuing on to Washington, he didn’t mind that too much. He would be home.

Armed guards stood around the large aircraft, facing out, watchful for any disturbance. Given the nature of the North Korean society, Tanner did not expect placard-waving protesters, but he was glad to see the aircraft as a symbol of home soil. He’d had enough of oily diplomacy, veiled threats and starched smiles. The slightly overdone traditional *kim chee* dish at lunch probably didn’t help either. A sample of Kham Chang-uk’s oblique humor?

A light sprinkle of snow covered the open tarmac, the crystals glittering in the fading light. Nobody seemed to mind it.

Preceded by a security car, his limousine stopped beside the ramp and an officer hurried to open the door. He stood at attention and saluted. Tanner climbed out and nodded to the man. A pervasive smell

of jet fuel hung in the air and he could hear engines spool up. A small passenger jet roared down the longer active runway, lifted and climbed into settling darkness, booming as it disappeared. The low Sunan International Airport terminal was brightly lit, an island of modern architecture in a sea of squalor and abject poverty.

When driven from Sung Kang-dae's residential palace on the outskirts of Pyongyang, what he had seen of the neat city impressed him, but he saw only what they wanted him to see. Then again, Tanner didn't need a tour. He already knew what North Korea looked like from endless briefs.

Kham stepped out of his black limousine and strode toward him. Tanner extended his hand and smiled warmly. He had come to have a lot of respect for the manipulative minister and hoped their paths would cross again. Kham gripped it firmly and grinned.

"I wish you a safe return to America, Mr. Secretary." He glanced at Cromatry. "And you too, sir."

"I found our talks most productive, Mr. Minister," Tanner said wryly, not glancing at the official photographers crowding around them.

"Until our next meeting, Mr. Secretary," Kham said with a broad smile.

Tanner turned and began walking along the red carpet leading to the ramp. The honor guard along both sides snapped to and presented arms. Tanner climbed the steps and paused at the hatch a story above the ground. He turned and waved, waited for the camera flashes to die down, then entered the aircraft.

Colonel Grissom saluted. "Welcome aboard, sir."

"It's good to be aboard, Bill. Are we cleared to go?"

"Just give the word, sir."

"Then let's get out of here," Tanner told the pilot and turned to Cromatry. "Come with me."

They walked down the hard gray carpet while a rating closed the door and buttoned up. Tanner got to his private office and heard the engines spool up. Inside, he moved behind the desk, lowered himself into a soft leather seat and sighed.

"God, I'm glad that's over, but we got what we came for, I think."

"A bit more than that, wouldn't you say?" Cromatry said wearing a whimsical look as he stood before the desk.

“You can say that again. If I heard Kham right, we have got a new can of worms.”

“You heard him right. He’s talking about a coup and the CIA are in on it.”

“Sounds like it, doesn’t it,” Tanner agreed.

“I just can’t believe it.”

“As much as I hate Sung and what the little turd stands for, at least we’ve been working with him and making some progress. He is a known quantity, but this? The mess could blow the lid off the President’s entire diplomatic initiative. Remember what happened when Kim Jong-un was deposed? It took us a year to put in new feelers to Sung. I don’t relish the idea of doing it all over with Kham.”

“He seems more receptive to enter into a reciprocal dialogue with us than Sung was,” Cromatry pointed out reasonably.

“Perhaps, but we don’t know what he wants.”

“From what Kham hinted, Grant apparently knows what he wants.”

Tanner ground his teeth in frustration. “You know what really sucks? The idea that Grant sought fit to enter into a diplomatic deal with Kham. Who the hell is running our foreign policy around here? Me or the CIA?”

“Lending a helping hand, perhaps?”

“But under my direction, damn it!”

“I’m happy for you to handle it. I for one won’t mourn if Sung is popped off.”

Tanner snorted. “If it were that simple, I would give Kham a loaded gun myself, but it isn’t. If he goes ahead and China finds out that we’ve been behind it, there’ll be a stink.”

“You’ll have to talk to Grant.”

“For sure, and I looked like a fool not knowing what the hell he was on about.” Tanner raised a warning finger. “Not a word to anybody about this, okay?”

“You got it. But—”

“I’ll talk to the President. Prepare a summary of the last two days and we’ll go over it after dinner, only on the substance of our agenda, nothing else. One hint...”

Cromatry grinned and paused, one hand on the door handle. “The boss would have told you about the CIA if he knew, wouldn’t he?”

Tanner thought it over. Walters liked to conduct some elements of his foreign policy himself, but on something this big? He could not accept the possibility the president would be running a double agenda without him. Walters simply wasn't experienced or sneaky enough, although he was picking things up fast. Perhaps too fast. That's what Washington did to people. It made them manipulative and devious.

"I would like to think so."

"Well, I'm glad I'm not in your shoes," Cromatry said and walked out.

The C-32 bumped slowly along the taxiway as it headed toward the start of the runway.

Tanner stared at the closed door, then shook his head. Cromatry was a good man, but tended to treat his duties with a marked lack of gravity. Then again, a healthy dose of cynicism might be just the thing to maintain perspective. Right now, cynicism wasn't a bad way to look at things. Cromatry ran his department well, which made up for a lot of sins. Tanner would simply have to factor in this latest development and prepare policy options for the president like he always did. The problem was, in this case, he was short of options.

Damn the CIA, and damn Grant.

On days like these, and there were far too many of them lately, he wondered why he allowed himself to be talked into taking this job. After his stint as ambassador to China in the previous administration, he had been shocked that Walters wanted him, a staunch Republican, to be his Secretary of State. Nevertheless, the appointment gave him a certain sardonic glow of satisfaction knowing the president couldn't find anyone in his party to do the job.

He was serving his country and that had to cut across party lines, didn't it?

He leaned across the desk and stared at four small wall clocks showing world times. It was three-thirty in the morning in Washington. If he rang the president now, it would only make him grumpy and yelled at. Besides, there was nothing Walters could do in the middle of the night anyway.

The aircraft turned, lined up, roared down the runway and Tanner was pressed into his seat. Moments later, the nose lifted and the lumbering jet staggered into the sky.

Meeting the Supreme Leader in his palatial residence had been an historic first, given the prickly relations between the two countries. Tanner did not need to study Sung's ideology. The man was a hard communist and nothing would change him, but that also provided a degree of predictability. What was far more valuable, the meetings during the last two days gave him an insight into the man's psychology and character. Clearly ruthless to have clawed his way to ultimate power, Sung nevertheless suffered from a disease that afflicted all dictators—insecurity. Although not always true, most totalitarian regimes were either overthrown by a popular uprising or toppled by internal treachery. Sung's overtures to America were blatantly designed to forestall both possibilities, something Tanner used to his advantage.

Lavishing twenty-six percent of its national budget on the military, and an unknown amount on its nuclear and missile programs, simply wasn't sustainable, not when the gross domestic revenue and international trade continued to shrink and could not recover because of ongoing sanctions. It wasn't that simple, of course, but he hadn't allowed the little bastard to intimidate him with bluster. Tanner's instructions from the president were clear. If North Korea wanted economic help and opening up markets, they would need to take demonstrable action to disarm. Previous administrations tried appeasement and gotten nowhere for their pains. Actually, the current administration's position was a policy he helped design, bringing the young president around to his point of view after several heated discussions. Thankfully, Walters was a man prepared to take unpalatable advice after having his naïve idealism blunted by a dose of realpolitik.

America no longer sought to automatically support questionable governments merely on the basis that they might have neighboring totalitarian or religious regimes, often one and the same thing. He only needed to look at Pakistan as a prime example of such a failed policy. Having created the Taliban, it had now turned on its creators, somewhat ironic and appropriate in his view.

After doing some paperwork, he showered, changed and felt half human again. He dined alone, not in the mood for Cromatry's genial banter, and he had a lot to think about. He caught up with the Under Secretary after a glass of nice red Burgundy and they went over the

economics side of their visit. At least that part went well and Sung appreciated an increase in American food aid without any of the usually attached strings. By the time he got back into his office, it was eight a.m. in DC. No use putting it off any longer and he really didn't want to.

He sighed and picked up the white phone.

"Yes, sir?" the rating from the comms bay answered.

"Get me the President."

"Yes, sir!"

After a couple of minutes the phone gave a trill and Tanner picked up.

"I have your line, sir."

"Thank you." Tanner replaced the receiver and picked up the brown encrypted secure phone. "Mr. President?"

"Larry, you know what time it is here?" Samuel Walters demanded bitterly. "This couldn't wait until I've had at least my second cup of coffee?"

Tanner broke into a smile. "It couldn't."

"You're spoiling my breakfast and making me upset. That's not a good way for me to start my day. My doctor tells me I should take up stress management. You're not helping, you know. Okay, what is it? Or did you call just to irritate me?"

Tanner broke into a smile. He was allowed a lot of liberty with the president, but he couldn't push it too far. "Sir, we have a situation."

About the author

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

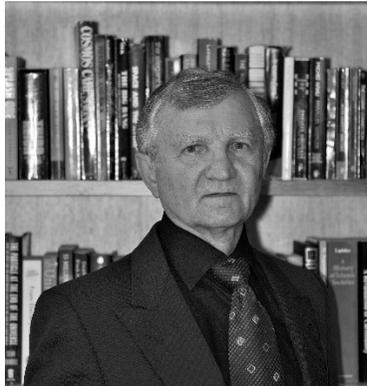
Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cellphone systems. He applied his IT discipline to create realistic storylines for his books. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends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

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Shadow Gods books by Stefan Vučak

In the Shadow of Death

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

Against the Gods of Shadow

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

A Whisper from Shadow

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

Shadow Masters

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

Immortal in Shadow

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

With Shadow and Thunder

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

Through the Valley of Shadow

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

Guardians of Shadow

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

Other books by Stefan 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?