

Review

Filled with suspense and intrigue, *F/X-26* takes you through the ruthless world of weapons manufacturing companies and gives you a front-row view of how corporate lobbying influences policy-making decisions in Washington. Kostan is a single-minded individual whose limitless ambition and devotion to his company drive his every action. I found the dialogue to be crisp and apposite. The plotting is intricate with a few twists and turns along the way. *F/X-26* hooked me from the beginning, and I was engrossed throughout the pages. I highly recommend it to readers who love thrillers.

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All the Evils

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Strike for Honor

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Autumn Leaves

All My Sunsets

F/X-26

Science Fiction:

Fulfillment

Lifeliners

All My Sunsets

Shadow Gods Saga:

In the Shadow of Death

Against the Gods of Shadow

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Contact at:

www.stefanvucak.com

F/X-26

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 Lydia ... and her search for happiness

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m.a.osiecki@gmail.com

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Chapter One

With a muted rumble, the two hangar door panels slid back and locked into place. Ogdan Kostan waved his hand and smiled at the strikingly beautiful woman beside him.

“There it is. All done.”

Lara Lane bit her lower lip and frowned. Her long auburn hair shone under the relentless September sun as she squinted at the luxury jet gleaming beneath overhead lights. Her tight white slacks showed off her fine long legs to their best advantage. A slash of azure eyeshadow made her brown eyes look even larger. Kostan did not like a woman’s face to jump out at him, but Lane wore her heavy makeup with restrained boldness. Desirable, he would not mind having her, but he had no wish to get entangled in her web of ardent admirers. He could have his pick of fluttering starlets, or anyone else he fancied. The final payment for the jet meant more to him than her body.

From what he had read in the tabloids, Miss Lane had cut quite a swathe through the Hollywood establishment in her meteoric career as a major film star. A very rich and pampered star. Her face and figure sold tickets and filled cinema seats, which was good enough for the studio. He had not seen any of her movies, and after their last acerbic encounter, he preferred not to.

He saw her gaze shift to the handsome young pilot beside her. Kostan figured him to be her latest boy toy and shrugged. It was none of his business whom she took to bed.

“Including the modifications you requested, Miss Lane,” he added in a deeply modulated voice he knew made women look at him twice. He had seen her give him a possessive glance, which

he pointedly ignored. Was her spiteful reaction revenge because he refused to kiss her feet?

A former Air Force major, he had what other men called command presence. With his tall, trim frame, he dominated everybody around him, expecting deference and usually getting it. He did not have to work at it. That's how he was: driven, ambitious, and ruthless. Only the survivors ruled. The rest followed in his jet wash. During his abridged career as an advanced fighter test pilot, they'd taught him well how to survive...at every level. To him, a customer was simply a bag of money, and a competitor someone to destroy because they took money he felt rightfully belonged to him.

Lane glanced at the elderly lawyer beside her. He wore a severely cut black wool suit, his bald head slick under the sun's glare. Kostan concluded the man was probably thinking about an iced drink right then. If he could get rid of the prickly woman quickly, he would relish one himself. He'd been through two of her tantrums and did not like them. Life would be much easier if he did not have to deal with self-important customers. Most gave him little trouble, but the Miss Lane types soured his beer.

Friendly politeness, he told himself.

Without saying anything, she began to walk toward her new sleek luxury jet.

To his left, a modern four-story structure clad in dark smart glass panels housed the corporate office, design and computer labs, and staff amenities. A mix of Californian pine and Australian eucalyptus planted at enormous cost, cradled the grassy complex and the parking lot beside it.

Across the concrete apron, separated from the Vector delivery hangar by two rows of trees and three ten thousand-gallon fuel tanks, a smaller assembly building housed Kostan's pet project. He held high hopes for his F/X-26 Wasp sixth generation fighter concept prototype. The program was gobbling up millions and straining his fiscal position, eating into dividends and

directors' fees reserves, to the grumbling of his board. Screw them! Rebus Aviation was his company and he would do whatever he damn well pleased with it... within prudent business limits. A dissenting director could always be fired, something he preferred not to do. Problems in the company's upper ranks would spread quickly through the aviation community and invariably have a negative effect on sales and market share. Still, there were ways to exert pressure and keep his board in check.

Surrounded by a small forest of trees, the main Vector assembly building took up 80,000 square feet of Los Alamitos ground. With two shifts working six days a week, he produced two aircraft every three months at a cost of thirteen to twenty-two million, depending on the customer's requirements. The Vectors were not cheap and had a nine-month waiting list, but definitely competitive and becoming somewhat of a status symbol. Everybody and anybody could have a Learjet, but a Vector spelled class.

Muffled noises came from the complex, engineers and technicians working on new orders. Kostan had a healthy backlog, more than he could really handle. The board had urged him to expand production capacity, which would increase revenue flow and boost the bottom line. There were sound commercial reasons for him to do it, and tenders for contractors were already out. Construction on the extension would start once the Wasp was accepted for trials by the Pentagon, but not before! If he could secure production, his Vector arm would remain an important revenue stream, but the Wasp would provide most of the company's earnings.

Kostan paid all his employees above industry rates and three weeks paid vacation, but he expected productivity in return and did not hesitate to fire someone, as several luckless individuals found to their dismay. He knew what they called him on the plant floor—Hardass Kostan—and he relished the accolade. They could call him whatever they wanted as long as they did their job.

Hell, on some Sundays, he even laid out a full spread in the delivery hangar. The best in food, wine, and spirits. They may resent his management style, but they were loyal, and that was all he cared.

Rebus was not a union shop and never would be as long as he held control. There would not be any rolling strikes because the canteen interior was the wrong color or the toilet paper was scratchy. Everybody here was a skilled professional on a salary, not a weekly wage. That stopped more than one greasy union rep from butting into his business, although they kept trying to muscle in.

Lane stopped before the open hangar and stared at the aircraft. Even bound to the ground, the jet appeared chained, eager to be in its proper element. Behind it, workers were preparing another Vector for exterior painting.

When Kostan started Rebus, which meant ‘soar’ in Latin, he took a major financial risk by abandoning conventional tube cabin designs for the futuristic-looking manta ray configuration. The layout gave the Vector unprecedented range—the huge wings acting as fuel tanks—and a surprisingly large cabin area. Two Pratt & Whitney PW545C turbofan engine housings that gave it thrust were streamlined bulges under the wide body, fed by a gaping black air intake. Sound absorbing materials inside the airframe and quieter engines cut down a lot of the noise. An active cancellation system further reduced cabin noise through speakers that generated reverse sound waves.

The aircraft had no windows, which greatly simplified construction and reduced cost. A 360-degree transparent aluminum cabin skin gave the pilot and passengers an unmatched external view. A feature that always startled prospective buyers, and which most loved. Standing on its tricycle gear, the aircraft’s white belly paint merged like mist into the top light blue finish. Lane had opted for the smaller six-seater A version, the ten-seater B version preferred by corporate customers. Rebus offered only two

models. Variations meant increased design and manufacturing complexity, staff and support requirements. Kostan did not care which model people wanted. It was money coming in, and that was all that mattered.

The statuesque starlet climbed the five steps and disappeared through the hatch mounted in front of the drooping wings. Kostan stood back and waited for the lawyer and her pilot to get in before following.

The spacious interior looked more like a small lounge than an aircraft cabin. Expensive wood paneling, soft gray carpet, indirect blue-white adjustable full-ceiling lighting, calf leather seats; everything designed to tell people who flew with her that Lane was someone who had made it. A small bar at the rear separated the kitchenette and restroom facilities. At forty to sixty million per movie, the Vector was petty cash for her.

She slid her hand along the varnished wood panel that ran under the transparent bulkhead and scowled.

“This is supposed to be lighter, Mr. Kostan,” she announced frigidly in soft contralto.

He figured her voice could charm snakes.

“That’s what you specified, Miss Lane,” he told her in a neutral voice. “Cocoa walnut.”

“It’s too dark.” She pointed at the crème leather chairs. “They’re too dark as well. The finish is supposed to be sunset beige.”

“It is. The hangar and interior lighting is making everything appear slightly darker. Once the aircraft is out and in the air, you’ll be able to appreciate the true colors.”

“I want them changed,” she declared stubbornly.

Kostan suppressed a sigh of frustration. After four flight tests to check avionics and handling, her aircraft had been ready for delivery three weeks ago, but she kept insisting on more changes. Small things, but they took time and diverted manpower and resources from other builds. He charged her dearly for them, but

he wanted Lane and her aircraft out of the hangar, freeing space for the next client. However, the customer was always supposed to be right. Wasn't that what they said?

The young pilot wisely chose to devote his attention to the forward interactive touch screen control panel, clearly wishing not to be involved.

"You made two changes to the color scheme and materials already, at considerable expense to you. Another change will be equally expensive and further delay delivery."

"Don't patronize me. I want the changes made at your own cost!" she snapped. "This is not what I specified."

The lawyer beside her cleared his throat. "Lara—"

"I won't have it, Jules! This is not what I ordered," she insisted in a slightly shrill voice.

Undeterred, Kostan opened the folder he carried and rifled through the pages. "Your last contract variation, Miss Lane. If you look at the attached samples, you will see they match the interior decor."

"I don't care! I want the stuff changed."

"Very well. I'll take you to the material samples room and you can make your selection. You understand, this change will delay delivery by at least two weeks and will cost around forty-five thousand dollars."

"Ridiculous! This is your screw-up, and correction will be done at your expense."

Kostan had enough and turned to her lawyer. "Mr. Levisson?"

The lawyer cleared his throat again. "Lara, Mr. Kostan has fulfilled every condition of the contract, and you're being unreasonable."

Her brown eyes flashed at him. "Unreasonable? Unless he makes the changes I want, at his cost, I won't take delivery or make the acceptance payment. Moreover, I'll sue him for everything he's got."

"Lara—"

"I mean it!" She turned, hands on shapely hips. "Well, Mr. Kostan?"

"Your decision, Miss Lane, but I will not bear the cost for any changes, and you can sue me if you want."

Levisson touched Kostan's arm. "I accept delivery in Miss Lane's name."

"Jules!"

"That's enough, Lara!" Levisson retorted sharply, showing more backbone than Kostan gave him credit. With a touchy client like her, he needed to show backbone. The alternative was to be a doormat. "This pettiness doesn't become you."

Lane pouted at her lawyer. "We'll talk about this later."

Kostan turned to the pilot. "The aircraft is fueled and you can take it out. While you're playing with the thing, Mr. Levisson and I will finalize the paperwork." He bowed to the starlet. "It has been a pleasure, Miss Lane."

Actually, it had not been, but the final two million instalment would make up for the angst he felt right now. Normally, he would celebrate a handover with a bottle of champagne and toasts all-around. In Miss Lane's case, he preferred to drink the stuff by himself after she left.

Outside the aircraft, he waited for Levisson to come out. The elderly man climbed down and held out his hand.

"My apologies, Ogdan. Miss Lane is having problems shooting her latest movie and—"

Kostan grasped the man's hand. "Forget it. Let's sign off the delivery and warranty papers, and she can gnaw on her problems inside her new toy."

Levisson laughed. "Sometimes, I want to take her across my knees and give her a good spanking."

"I'd be happy to do it for you," Kostan murmured, picturing her squirming lithe body on his lap, his hands roaming over it. Pleasant images occupying his mind, he led the lawyer toward the admin building.

At thirty-four, he abandoned a successful Air Force career to pursue a dream. When he started, there were some sleepless nights and doubts at the wisdom of his decision. Had he stayed in, he might very well have been a brigadier general by now, but he had eyes on different stars. Getting a new aviation company off the ground and breaking into the established aerospace manufacturing club had left many startups as mangled wreckage. He succeeded because he put together a team of hardnosed businessmen, experts in the commercial aviation space, and experienced designers and engineers to push his concept. Mariana stood beside him through it all, encouraging, supporting and comforting him when things looked bleak, and there were such moments...until now. She was no longer part of his life. Those years also made him hard, determined to sacrifice everything and anybody in his drive to succeed, even his marriage. He had not wanted to lose Mariana, but some things just happened.

After eight long years, first scrambling for startup capital, site construction, planning, design, prototyping, fighting for Federal Aviation Administration and European Union Aviation Safety Agency certification, part of his dream had become a reality. His Vector line had succeeded spectacularly, which enabled him to fund the F/X-26 project, his ultimate goal. The civilian aviation armchair pundits had scoffed at the Vector's radical design, calling it 'Kostan's folly'. Undeterred, he pushed on, his market research convincing him that customers were ready to embrace a new concept in luxury business jets. The company's sales figures and strong share price had left his detractors floundering in his wake.

Inside the foyer's subdued opulence, large prints of Vectors in flight covered the walls. Solid wood shelving held promotional material extolling Rebus Aviation's achievements and the superiority of its products. Kostan spent a lot on advertising in aviation magazines, TV ads, and social media, including YouTube. His back orders attested to its effectiveness and evident dismay of his

competitors still stuck in traditional aircraft construction mentality—something he relished. The industry grapevine said that Bombardier Aviation and Cessna were designing their own offshoot of a manta ray business jet configuration, which made Kostan smile, but it was without humor. Rebus was starting to make a serious impact on the private and corporate luxury jet market, which had slowly silenced his scoffing detractors. His customers appreciated the novel design, spaciousness, and the fuel/range ratio the Vector models offered. Any ulcers suffered by his competitors were signs of approval as far as Kostan was concerned.

Their footfalls echoed on the veined brown marble floor as he steered Levisson toward the two elevators. It cost him a bundle to lay out the lavish foyer, but first impressions counted. The subdued elegance reassured potential buyers that they were dealing with professionals. Word of mouth advertising by proud Vector owners also helped move sales of the unusual aircraft. Owning one meant membership in a very exclusive club.

In passing, he nodded to the attractive Mrs. Teena Cooper clicking away behind her curved reception desk. Always attired in a dark conservative business jacket and hugging slacks, short silver hair that framed an attractive face made up to draw a second look, she projected the Rebus corporate image of sophistication and accomplishment. She also acted as the front-line sales person. Her smooth professional persona and cool confidence helped secure several deals, able to talk intimately with male and female buyers. Kostan was not a trained businessman, but he knew what made the world turn.

He would not mind going out with her, but he had a rule he never broke when dealing with women: don't get involved in a marriage triangle. He did not want to meet a grisly end at the hands of an enraged husband.

When the elevator door opened on the fourth floor, he smiled warmly at Sirena Ellis, the corporate secretary and his invaluable

executive assistant. At twenty-nine, her slim frame and pale blonde hair projected poise and efficiency. Her indigo eyes lingered on him momentarily as he led Levisson to Duncan van Dunn's corner office. Time to cool things with her perhaps. He had not intended the relationship to develop, but with Mariana going, he allowed himself a regretted indiscretion.

Thick dark green carpet muffled their footsteps. The open floor plan had lots of lush potted shrubs that provided a semblance of privacy. Soft blue ceiling lighting conveyed an atmosphere of calm and tranquility. Everyone here was a manager, engineer, accountant, or some legal weenie. The floor had only two offices, Kostan and van Dunn's, and a spacious boardroom. Some had grumbled not having a private office, accustomed to such privilege in a past job. He knew how to take care of that kind of snobbery. Go back to where you came from, he told them. No one did, of course, for two simple reasons: generous salaries and bonuses, and an unmatched opportunity to work on cutting edge aviation technology.

He knocked on the solid Brazilian cedar door and opened it when he heard a muffled 'Come in'. Van Dunn looked up from his wide gray executive desk littered with papers, a large computer screen, a multi-function phone station, and pushed back his keyboard.

"How's it going, Ogdan? All done?" the Chief Financial Officer queried in a surprisingly deep voice coming from his five-foot nine heavy frame.

His white hair, unusual for someone only forty-seven, complemented his penetrating gray eyes that missed nothing. A former Boeing and Learjet executive, Rebus Aviation co-founder, van Dunn was a trusted friend and kept Kostan's feet firmly planted on the ground of reality, sometimes having to short-circuit the managing director and chief executive officer's nebulous ideas. Kostan readily admitted that Rebus would never exist with-

out van Dunn's extensive knowledge of the shark-infested aviation industry and convoluted management accounting practices. He learned painfully to trust, something that did not come easily to a test pilot reliant on his own skill.

Funny how the fates worked. Fresh out of the Air Force, he finished lunch at New York's The Capital Grille on E 42nd Street after securing startup loans from unsmiling bankers, nursing a celebratory whiskey at a bar, when this bulky man slid onto a stool next to him and ordered a bourbon. Kostan lifted his tumbler in a salute, remembering the first words they exchanged.

"To a successful day," he told the stranger.

The man nodded and lifted his glass. "What's the occasion, if I may ask?"

Kostan grinned. "I just conned eighty million out of three banks to start a venture that will leave them crying over their balance sheets if it fails."

The man chuckled. "Sounds like you got the better of the deal. By the way, I'm Duncan van Dunn."

"Ogdan Kostan," he said, and they shook hands.

"And this risky venture?"

"A new line of luxury jets."

That's how it started. Van Dunn abandoned a lucrative career with Boeing and gambled everything on Rebus. Kostan listened when his friend, armed with a BSc in robotics and an MBA from Seattle University, offered an opinion. Never married, it made van Dunn's move to California less unsettling. Kostan helped him find a nice place in Los Alamitos, and van Dunn turned it into something even cozier when two years later, he met Regina, a physiotherapist with her own thriving practice. They never formalized their partnership, content to take things one day at a time. That's how it had been for the last six years. What physiotherapy she practiced on van Dunn, Kostan did not know, but the way things were going for them, it looked like it might last. They had no children, devoting everything to their work, and

Stefan Vučak

both appeared to like it that way. Charming hosts, he and Mariana had many fine dinners at their place, and returned the favor.

Eight years since that fateful meeting, he mused.

He smiled and waved a hand at his partner. "All done. Wrap it up and give him a bottle of champagne. He deserves a reward for his penance serving Miss Lane."

Levisson laughed. "Thanks, Ogdan. It has been a privilege working with you."

They shook hands and Kostan walked out, two million better off. Time to check up on the next aircraft delivery.

* * *

"To sum up, Rebus Aviation liquid assets stand at forty-eight million, with outstanding liabilities of seventy-six million from unsettled borrowings to fund the F/X-26 Wasp project," Duncan van Dunn announced quietly. There was no need to shout in the elegantly appointed boardroom lined with white oak panels and thick green floor pile. Apart from carafes of coffee and trays of assorted pastries, the cherry wood table glinted under subtle full-ceiling pale blue lighting. They used an 85" Sony Bravia mounted on one wall for presentations and video conferencing.

"This leaves the company highly leveraged, but sales over the next twelve months will earn us approximately one hundred and twelve million, which will comfortably offset current liabilities," van Dunn finished and rubbed his chin in a characteristic gesture.

Several board members looked at each other, clearly uncomfortable with the low liquidity position.

"That's crap and you know it," Kevin Decrot declared sonorously, an unlit cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth. "That one hundred and twelve million is gross earnings. After fixed and operating expenses, we'll be lucky to net twenty. That's a lousy seventeen percent earnings ratio. Since Ogdan started siphoning funds for his Wasp, we'll be straining to meet our next six-

monthly dividend payment. I don't have to tell you how the market will react if we reduce the percentage."

Kostan bit his lip, determined to keep his temper under control. His right index finger softly tapped the table, the only sign of irritation.

"What you're really saying, Kevin, you're worried about your director's fee, bonuses, and options," he interjected mildly, which generated smiles around the room.

At the far end of the table, Sirena Ellis kept minutes of business-relevant points. Since everything said at a board meeting was relevant in one way or another, her hands were busy on her laptop. Even if she missed something, a ceiling fisheye recorder taped every meeting. Similar cameras were placed throughout the building and all assembly areas. When initially installed, two board members objected to what they saw as unwarranted intrusion into confidential discussions, but Kostan quashed them. They needed cameras, he claimed, because their discussions *were* confidential and market sensitive. He did not want any misunderstandings if someone questioned the minutes. As chairman of the board and major stockholder, he got his way. Anyway, access to the footage was restricted to board members and his chief of security.

Decrot glared and his face turned a mottled red, which highlighted his liver spots. "Damn you, Ogdan! That was uncalled for. I'm simply exercising my legal fiduciary responsibility to the company by voicing a legitimate concern over your profligate use of Rebus resources to fund a personal pet project. A project that has already cost us one hundred and eighty-six million with nothing to show for it!"

Kostan was tempted to tell Decrot what he could do with his fiduciary duty, but refrained. A semblance of order had to be maintained at these meetings. Nevertheless, he was beginning to get tired of the man's defeatist attitude, stinking cigar and all.

Vance Spiteri, a former United and American Airlines operations manager, stirred and cleared his throat.

“I hate to say it, but Kevin has a point.”

Kostan firmed his mouth, disappointed at Spiteri’s conservative attitude, expecting support for a visionary program. If successful, it would net Rebus billions in government orders. Even if Pentagon rejected the aircraft, the innovative design, use of novel construction materials, open system architecture, and digital 3D manufacturing would spill over into his commercial Vector arm. Research investment always paid off eventually.

Eventually...

Okay, he would give Spiteri the benefit of the doubt. The man was looking after the company’s overall short-term financial position, which as a director was his job. He glanced at the only woman board member.

“Leona?”

“We all voted—”

“I didn’t!” Decrot growled and shifted the cigar to the other side of his mouth.

“—to approve the F/X-26 program and knew what we were getting into,” Pollard pointed out with quiet authority. Coming into the fold as a Lockheed Martin concept design executive, she was in her element, not intimidated in any way by the men around her. A charming person with a cutting dry sense of humor when not wearing her director’s hat. In the boardroom, the lady was a cold, calculating machine, all business. Kostan paid a lot of attention to her advice, not always followed. He set policy and direction for the company. If his board did not like it, they could seek other opportunities.

“Admittedly, the program is some eighteen million over budget and four weeks behind schedule, but we have done well to limit our exposure,” Pollard continued. “Every development program runs over time and budget. You only have to look at my former employer’s F-35 fiasco as a textbook example how not to

run a project, but the practice is systemic across the industry.”

“That might be, but in the end, Lockheed did produce a fully functional multi-role fighter!” Decrot cried out. “The F/X-26 is a concept prototype that uses civilian power plants and doesn’t have military avionics. Even if accepted, the Pentagon will demand a full-scale model, which Rebus doesn’t have a hope of delivering. We don’t have the necessary infrastructure or finances to build it.”

“If the Pentagon accepts the concept, Congress will give us a grant for a full-scale upgrade,” Pollard pointed out reasonably.

“Maybe! Congress is not in a generous mood these days. I say, let’s cut our losses and divert resources to expand Vector production. That’s our primary income stream and we shouldn’t risk the company’s health on an ill-conceived project. Our competitors are scrambling to catch up, which gives us a limited window to grow market share. We should build dominance before they roll out their own versions and overwhelm us with larger manufacturing capacity.”

“We *are* growing our market position, Kevin,” Kostan said and pinned the director with his eyes. “Tenders are out calling for construction of an additional production facility, or have you forgotten?”

“Something that won’t start until mid-2022. That’s ten months of wasted time, and we’ll be borrowing a further ten million to set up the necessary plant and equipment. Money we would not need to borrow if we scrapped the Wasp project. Borrowings and interest payments are unnecessarily eating into company profitability and eroding our stock value.” Decrot took a deep breath and stared hard at Kostan. “As a major stakeholder in this company, it is my duty to point out that you’re driving us into the ground pursuing a reckless fantasy.”

Sitting at the head of the table, Kostan swept his gaze at the tense faces around him, gauging his support. He did not worry

about Duncan van Dunn. The older man was not only his founding partner, but a firm friend. They had their differences and sometimes heated arguments on how to run the company. Generally, Kostan had to yield to van Dunn's experience and business knowledge. What Kostan brought to the table was vision and drive, and a wide-ranging understanding of military fighters gained through personal experience as a test pilot. Anyway, van Dunn had always known of his dream to produce an unmanned sixth generation advanced tactical fighter. Kostan was not prepared to wreck the company to fulfill his dream, but he would do whatever else it took to make it succeed. Whatever it took, damn them all.

Vance Spiteri was a tight-assed, granite-hearted son of a bitch, but a consummate businessman. He cut it the way he saw it and Kostan could take it or lump it. The man was impartial and totally pragmatic. He may have concerns, but he never questioned the potential financial windfall if an upstart company such as Rebus managed to upstage the big boys in the industry to produce the next generation air superiority fighter. Even if the concept failed, the Vector program would eventually recoup any short-term financial loss to the company, and Kostan would devote his energy and resources to expand production.

He had no concerns about Leona Pollard. A visionary like himself, she had weighed with vernier precision the F/X-26 risk/benefit profile. In many ways, her thinking paralleled his own, which was not a surprise, and one reason why she was a board member. A formidable woman with impressive credentials, they had their run-ins, but it was always professional and impersonal, focused on the company's health.

His board were valuable assets and made significant contributions to his understanding how the major aerospace defense contractors operated. He would need that knowledge to formulate tactics how to push the Wasp to the Pentagon.

That left Decrot. The hardnosed Northrop Grumman director bought his board seat with eight million when Kostan launched Rebus Aviation in 2013. Money he badly needed to set up the Los Alamitos design and production facilities. Between them, the three external directors contributed twenty-six million for the startup. A loan of an additional eighty million from three banks and a public non-voting stock offering gave him the financial backing to launch the company. Each member received a block of preference shares proportional to their contribution, Kostan retaining fifty-one percent and total control. He initially offered van Dunn twenty-five percent, which his partner declined. Retaining control of Rebus, he told him, gave Kostan freedom to push his policies and agenda. He should not risk losing that control if the board ever ganged up on him, a possibility in any business regardless of initial congeniality.

Decrot never supported the F/X-26 program, more interested in sucking income from the company. Vector sales meant more profits and greater director's returns. The other thing Kostan found worrying of late, had Decrot leaked privileged information to Northrop? He folded his arms over the table and looked unwaveringly at the scheming man.

“Do you want out, Kevin? Just say the word. I don't want anyone on my board who is not prepared to give me his or her undivided support. I don't mind constructive criticism and helpful suggestions—that's why you're a director. What I won't put up with is destructive dissent, which you have been sowing for the past two years ever since I launched the F/X-26 program. Rebus Aviation is my company and its ongoing health my number one priority. I believe the Wasp can succeed if we can convince the Pentagon and Congress to support it. Not only succeed, but generate a substantial fifteen-year revenue stream for us.”

“If it succeeds!” Decrot snapped. “My time at Northrop and Raytheon opened my eyes to what goes on in the Pentagon and

congressional appropriation subcommittees to secure new weapons programs. We spent millions in bribes and kickbacks to buy generals and admirals, House and Senate reps. You're an irritating minnow to those guys and they'll swallow you whole."

He pointed his cigar at Kostan. "Let's say the Air Force likes the Wasp. What about the other services? The Navy is already testing a sixth generation fighter configuration under its NGAD program. Do you think they'll abandon the time and millions spent to embrace your toy, which is only a demo prototype anyway? You think that Lockheed and the others will give up their concept designs? I know that Northrop certainly won't, and I'm not divulging any confidences here. The military-industrial complex is worth hundreds of billions and it's a closed club. You're pouring company money down a black hole, Ogdan, without any hope of getting a return."

"I wasn't hatched under a palm tree, Kevin," Kostan said mildly, his eyes hard with dislike for the pushy shit. Dislike that had been bubbling for two years. Time to sever the umbilical. "My Air Force test pilot days taught me a few things about weapons appropriation, but I don't pretend to have your insider expertise. That's why I brought you on board. I need you to push the Wasp, but I ask you again. Do you want out?"

"You needed me to get Rebus off the ground and start the Vector program. Had you told me of your plan for the F/X-26, I wouldn't have looked at you."

"Well, Rebus is operational and profitable, which means I don't need you that badly to put up with your constant bitching." Kostan turned to van Dunn. "Pay him out, Duncan, and give him a brass watch. Get Legal to draw up the necessary paperwork." He turned to Decrot. "You're fired, you ghoul!"

Decrot gaped, realizing he had pushed too hard. "You can't do that!"

Kostan raised both eyebrows. "I can't? As the majority stockholder, I can do whatever I damn well want. Collect your hat and

crawl back to your Century City mansion.”

Stunned, red with rage, Decrot stood and shook a fist at Kostan. “You’ll regret this, Ogdan! You haven’t heard the last of me.”

“The only thing I regret is not kicking you out two years ago. Now get out, or would you prefer Security to throw you out?”

Decrot shot Kostan a venomous look and clamped his teeth on the cigar. The solid cedar door slammed as he stomped out.

Paying out Decrot’s eight million investment would not make a significant long-term dent to the Rebus bottom line. Sale of one Vector would more than recoup the shortfall in cash reserves. Kostan was happy to have van Dunn crunch the numbers and assess the impact on the marketplace when the news broke. As long as dividends were issued, investors would not care much if one director left. Board changes happened everywhere all the time.

“Disgusting man,” Pollard muttered. “I’m glad he’s gone. He tried to proposition me a couple of times,” she declared and winced at what had obviously been unpleasant experiences for her.

Everybody chuckled, which eased the lingering tension.

“I take it the rest of you don’t share Mr. Decrot’s misgivings?” Kostan swept his eyes around the table.

Vance Spiteri cleared his throat. “He was an obstructionist and I won’t miss him, but I do have one caveat. The Wasp prototype is almost done, but regardless of extensive computer simulations, we all know that flight testing always digs up bugs. If a major design flaw is uncovered, it might be very expensive to fix. We might even lose the prototype in a mishap. We almost lost our first Vector on its maiden flight. Should the F/X-26 cost profile start to look wobbly, I expect you to review the program without prejudice.”

The others murmured in assent.

“I was going to do that regardless, Vance. Even if I had any

reservations, Duncan would stomp on me and I'd face an insurrection."

"Believe it," Spiteri said with a grin, which created a round of smiles.

"Decrot did raise valid points regarding the difficulties we'll face pushing Wasp through the Pentagon and the appropriation subcommittees," Kostan admitted, "but I believe we can weather them if we do this right. If there is nothing else..." He glanced at Ellis. "Please revoke Kevin's system and site access privileges. Do it now."

"Yes, sir." She nodded, stood, and walked out.

Kostan heaved himself out of the black leather chair and grinned. "Thanks for coming, everybody."

"Like we had a choice," Pollard added in her usual dry style and everyone laughed.

"You can now return to your villas, climb into a heated pool, and clip dividend coupons."

"And I know somebody who will help me do just that," Spiteri said wryly.

Van Dunn hung back as the others drifted out, wishing Kostan good night.

"Something bothering you, Duncan?"

"Mmm. Was it wise to fire Decrot? He's been a monumental pain, no argument there, but when he left, he took with him invaluable knowledge and experience how to handle Pentagon and Congress. That knowledge will be hard to replace. He's also a serious security risk now."

"We need to find somebody else," Kostan acknowledged. "Can you and the others take care of it? This isn't something I can give to HR."

"Of course, and I have contacts."

"As for being a security risk, Decrot is aware of his responsibility as a director. Anyway, the confidentiality and nondisclosure agreement will ensure he keeps his mouth shut, or I'll see to it he

never serves as a director anywhere.”

“What if he tells Northrop about the Wasp? He is one of their directors.”

Kostan looked Duncan in the eye. “If he does and I find out, I’ll break his legs.”

Van Dunn blanched, then grinned. “I always enjoy your dry sense of humor. We may have lost Decrot, but you still have a valuable contact in General Lang Schuman, your old Edwards Air Force Base boss.”

“Mover Schuman? He’s a friend, all right, and a major general now,” Kostan said with a smile, remembering the powerful man with a touch of fond nostalgia. They still kept in touch with an occasional phone call, but he had not seen Lang in three years. Where the hell did the time go?

“These days, he’s a big Pentagon wheel earning his bread as Director of Acquisition and Technology, which could be very useful. He knows everything there is to know about weapons systems procurement. From the military perspective anyway. He reports to Trudy Riggs, Undersecretary of Defense for the Acquisition and Sustainment Agency. She hates the armaments contractors with a passion and is always seeking ways to cut wasteful duplication by the services. She could be an ally. An intro from Schuman and I think she’ll talk to me.”

“Mmm. She might be interested in the Wasp, but you have to remember that House and Senate appropriation subcommittees approve and fund projects. We don’t know anybody on Capitol Hill, and Schuman is not a player in that arena.”

Kostan waved a hand in dismissal. “We talked about this before, Duncan. Everybody has a button to push. We just have to find theirs and push it. It’s another reason why we need to find a replacement for Decrot, somebody who knows how to play in that space. Let’s table that for now, okay?”

“Going home?”

“Not much to go to these days. Mariana’s lawyer has served

the divorce papers and my lawyer is going through them. Nobody wins here except the lawyers.”

“I’m sorry this had to happen.”

“Me too.” Kostan slapped his friend on the shoulder. “I’ve got a few things to take care of. See you in the morning.”

In his office, he walked to the bar cabinet and poured himself a tumbler of 46-year-old single malt Glenlivet. He plopped in two ice cubes—a barbaric thing to do to a malt whiskey—and took a hefty sip. The stuff went down smooth, with a mere hint of smoky peat aroma and flavor. At the price he paid for the stuff, it should go down smooth. He sat down, swiveled the black leather chair, and gazed at the long shadows outside. The F/X-26 assembly building was quiet, but bright lights from tall poles lit the Vector plant. The afternoon shift would end at eleven and the place would finally be dark and silent. He planned to run three shifts once he built the new assembly plant. Perhaps he should start three shifts now and bring forward construction of the plant extension. The downside, a third shift would require an expanded workforce and additional materials, which would drain funds to pay for them. Even if production increased to one aircraft a month, the cost/profit profile numbers might not add up. He would have a talk with van Dunn about it.

He took another sip of whiskey and turned to face the front wall that housed a TV and his professional library. He had a more extensive collection of books and periodicals at home going back to his Academy days. Everything to do with civilian and military markets was of interest, including several heavy volumes on aerodynamics and aircraft design. Not a PhD like Harvey Bennett, his chief architect, he had to delve deep into some esoteric aspects of air and fluid dynamics, electrical and mechanical engineering, for his master’s as a test pilot.

Duncan van Dunn was right. Decrot had left him with a gaping hole in his knowledge base to push the Wasp. General Schu-

man would help, but that was not a substitute for direct understanding how congressional appropriation worked and having personal interaction with the people involved. Duncan was also right when he said that Decrot had become a serious security risk.

Knowledge of the F/X-26 had not leaked...yet. He intimated to anyone who asked what was going on in the smaller assembly building that he was testing a new Vector model. The *Wasp* *did* look like a Vector and had the same external frame architecture, but that was where the similarity ended, and why the frame had a current bill of \$186 million, with probably some six to go. Cheap when compared to hundreds of millions the major players put into their concept designs. They always overreached, though, designing multi-role airframes that did not do one thing well and satisfied nobody. Not all that cheap if he added design and testing costs spent on the Vector, which served as the structural prototype for the *Wasp*.

So far, there had not been any security breaches, and all the F/X-26 personnel had signed nondisclosure agreements. That did not guarantee absolute security, but Kostan doubted that any of them would risk a ruinous court action if they blabbed. A Pyrrhic victory at best if existence of the *Wasp* became known prematurely. The threat of being industry blacklisted should be an added incentive to keep their traps shut.

Should Decrot be annoyed enough at him to talk to someone—more than a remote possibility—not only about the *Wasp*, but the Rebus Aviation business model in general, Northrop and the others would come sniffing. They would mount their considerable Pentagon and Congress influence to kill the *Wasp*. Something he could not allow. Once the prototype was flight-tested and demonstrator ready, he did not care who saw it. He *wanted* everybody to see it then. By that time, he would have wormed his way into the congressional appropriation subcommittees. He hoped.

Like any leak, Decrot had to be plugged...permanently. He

disliked this option, but the world out there did not reward a runner-up, only survivors. To remain a survivor meant mitigating risks. Whatever it took.

His face relaxed in a fond smile as the memory machine took him back to his days at Edwards, pushing and jiving F-22s and F-35s through the sky against Air Force and Navy pukes with his hair on fire. A natural pilot, he understood instinctively what made an aircraft fly and why, and he used to be the best at what he did. Before he resigned, the Air Force wanted him to go to Lockheed's infamous Skunk Works in Palmdale to work on concept designs. He may have been a little idealistic then, but not that idealistic to give the Air Force a sixth gen air superiority fighter for the price of a monthly salary check.

He had fun at Edwards, though. Punching out of an F-35 once by pushing it out of its performance envelope had not been a whole lot of fun at the time. The crash left a hole in the desert and some very expensive scattered spare parts. Far from being mad at him for totaling one of their precious airframes, he received a commendation for identifying a flight characteristic active duty pilots would not have to find out the hard way.

To bend the F-35 Lightning through its parameters was pure joy, but he adored the Lockheed Martin/Boeing F-22 Raptor, able to outperform the venerable F-35 in almost every mode. In an attempt to make the Lightning fit all, the aircraft was so expensive and complex to operate and maintain, many wing commanders left them parked in hangars, afraid to fly them in case one of the pilots cracked it. This left pilots, eager to take their machines into the blue, with no option but to spend time in a simulator, which was no way to build flight proficiency. A fighter pilot was in his element pushing the envelope against an opponent intent on doing the same thing to him.

The F-22 was a generation ahead of its time in concept, but still mid-1990s technology, and typified everything wrong with design of high-performance aircraft and their manufacturers. A

new design simply cost too much and took far too long to roll out as operation-capable. That left Congress bailing out manufacturers because the aerospace giants were too big to fail, which only reinforced the vicious cycle of inefficiency.

Current doctrine was once again reverting toward the discredited notion of standoff missiles and advanced avoidance avionics as the future of aerial combat. They tried that in Vietnam and pilots got their asses creamed by simple Soviet-made MiGs roughing it in dogfights.

Kostan sighed and shook his head.

Well, if the Air Force and the Navy wanted standoff engagements, the F/X-26 would give it to them, including unmatched dogfighting capability. The proof, though, was in doing it. He could not be entirely certain the Wasp *was* that capable until he took it into the air. Computer simulations were not a substitute for hands-on testing. Vance Spiteri was right about that. Alex Laumer was Rebus' chef test pilot and twelve years younger, but Kostan would take the Wasp up on its maiden flight, albeit from a remote control station. He hated to admit it, but he could not match his reflexes against Laumer, and dogfighting was a young man's game. Anyway, nobody would be coming at him on that flight with guns blazing. After years of redesigning and testing, he *had* to be the first to take it up.

In many ways, he was lucky to get Laumer. Four years ago while driving an F-15 at Eglin AFB, he punched out of the disabled aircraft and damaged his spine. Nothing debilitating, but it prevented him from flying high-performance military jets. Kostan heard about it from one of his contacts and offered Laumer a job testing Vectors. Faced with a permanent desk job and not much of a military future, Laumer accepted.

A knock and Kostan looked up. Sirena Ellis opened the door, paused, and gave him a sultry smile. Something in her eyes told him this was not a business visit, at least not company business. He reached under the table and cut off the security camera feed.

Some things were better done that way.

Without saying anything, she closed the door and walked toward him. She stopped behind his chair and her fingers began to massage his neck and shoulders. He sighed with contentment and leaned back. A moment later, her long blonde hair fell across his face. Her sweet breath made his skin tingle as soft lips sought his mouth. The kiss progressed into a passionate embrace and he dragged her onto his lap.

“I just wanted to say good night,” she murmured, her eyes smoldering with passion.

“And this is how I say good night,” he said gruffly, and pulled up her skirt so she could straddle him. He reached up and ripped off her filigree black panties. After fumbling with his zipper, he thrust into her hard and she gasped. Hands on his shoulders, she leaned back.

A few minutes later, he slowed and her face glowed in ecstasy.

“I love it when you’re strong and manly,” she whispered into his ear and sagged against him. After a satisfying ending, she gave a long sigh and patted down her skirt. “I needed that.” She tilted her head. “Did I tell you that you have the clearest blue eyes I have ever seen?”

He smiled and brushed her hair. “You haven’t.”

“Well, you do.” Her finger traced the left side of his chin. “Where did you get that scar?”

“I hit a door.”

She gaped, then laughed. “And all this time, I thought it was a battle wound or something.”

“No medal for this wound, I’m afraid.”

“Medal or not, you’re still my hero,” she declared, eyes bright. “I think I’m falling for you, Ogdan Kostan.”

“I can’t help what you think,” he said brusquely and reached for the tumbler.

She pouted. “I thought you loved me. All this time, the things we did together, I took it that you cared for me.”

“I do, but that doesn’t mean I want to marry you. I made that mistake with a colleague and I don’t want to repeat it with you. We both enjoyed our little fling, but that’s all it is.” He took a pull of whiskey.

Bright red spots colored her cheeks. Hands on hips, she glared at him. “You’re a bastard, you know.”

He laughed at her. “Don’t tell me you thought this meant something to me? We’re not children, Sirena. You enjoyed this as much as I did.”

“I’ll tell Mariana!”

He shrugged. “Go ahead. She’s divorcing me.”

“I can understand why. I’ll make you pay for this! If you think you can string me along and then cast me aside, you crossed the wrong woman,” she hissed with hate and swung her hand to slap him.

He caught her wrist and smiled coldly. “You were saying good night.”

She climbed off him, glared, and strode out. His office echoed to the sound of a slammed door.

He took a long sip and rubbed the stubble on his chin. Ellis was smart, accomplished, and very efficient, but lately, she started to become demanding and possessive. What they had was merely a diversion to relieve tension. Nothing else. He never said a thing to make her think he wanted it any other way. Women, though, had their own ideas about relationships. With Mariana going, the last thing he needed right now was a clinging lover.

Would Sirena turn on him out of spite? With her insider knowledge, she was quite capable of doing considerable damage to him personally and to Rebus. He did not want to find out the hard way. There was simply too much at stake. Another risk factor to mitigate?

You shouldn’t have started things with her!

Brilliant observation. Easy to be wise after the fact. Mouth pursed, he picked up the phone and pressed a direct line button.

“Yes, sir?”

“Can you come to my office, Gene?”

“Be there in a minute.”

Kostan stared at the large computer screen and logged into the security system. He clicked on the Directors folder and nodded when he saw Decrot’s access privileges revoked. He pulled the keyboard closer and scrolled down the list until he came to the senior staff directory, then clicked on the Sirena Ellis sub-directory. When the window opened, he cancelled all her access privileges. He might be overreacting and she could breeze in tomorrow morning bright and chipper as always, but he could not risk being wrong. The fire of loathing in her eyes had burned very real. If he turned out to be wrong, he would apologize handsomely and make it up to her: flowers, dinner, the works, but he would make it plain no more messing around.

A knock on the door and the heavysset Gene Lockyard, the 47-year-old Rebus chief of security, stepped in. At six-foot three, bald, dark brown eyes and square jaw, the Cherokee man intimidated by his mere presence. Muscles rippled under his white shirt, the result of regular iron pumping.

“Take a seat, Chief,” Kostan said, using the man’s former Air Force rank. He stood, stepped to the bar cabinet, topped up his tumbler, and poured a fresh one. He held out the glass to Lockyard and sat down.

“Bottoms up.”

Lockyard took a swallow and smiled. “I see you’re still drinking cheap booze.” His voice rumbled like dying thunder, or rocks rolling in a barrel.

“Can’t afford anything else,” Kostan said comfortably and fondly regarded his former maintenance line chief.

A cocky captain on top of his curve, he thought he knew it all. However, he still had some rough edges that needed polishing. For some reason, Lockyard seemed to like him and took particular care of any bird he flew. He even instructed him in the

plane's idiosyncrasies not in the manual. As a test pilot, that knowledge was worth a life, and Kostan had never forgotten. When he resigned to set up Rebus Aviation, he offered Lockyard a job as security chief...and work of a more delicate nature.

"How's your brother? Still a major?"

"Ronald? He's a lieutenant colonel now based at Fort Hood in Texas. He had another son a few months ago."

"Glad to hear it." He gave Lockyard a speculative look. "Do you miss it?"

"Sometimes, but I like this job better. More money and less hours. I still keep my hand in occasionally teaching your bright-eyed geniuses how to look after an aircraft. Your Vector, though, it's all computers and fly-by-wire. A young man's game. The world doesn't need grease monkeys like me anymore. Perhaps not a bad thing and why I like my current job. For you, it might be more money, but you're also pushing more hours...and it cost you a marriage."

"Mariana and I had it good for a while, but somewhere, we both realized it wouldn't work," Kostan muttered, the yesterdays fading into memory. "She liked being a pilot pushing Gs more than being a wife, and I liked designing aircraft more than my marriage."

"Yeah, a raw deal for both of you."

"Once we realized we were strangers living under the same roof, it ended. I didn't help things by messing around." Kostan straightened and looked Lockyard in the eye. "I have a security risk, Gene...possibly two," he said firmly, making a grim decision. "Decrot has decided to leave us, which could make my life very difficult if he talks to Northrop or somebody else. He doesn't have access to design specs, but what he does know about Rebus would be damaging enough if leaked. Remove him. Tonight, if possible."

Lockyard chewed his lower lip. "Century City...It can be done," he said at length. "You mentioned two problems."

“Sirena Ellis.”

Lockyard’s eyes grew round. “A case of a woman scorned?”

“Something like that. My fault, really.”

“I told you before, Major. Women will be your death.”

“Your brilliant insight is always appreciated, Chief,” Kostan said irritably. “Just get it done.”

“Can do.”

“The usual bonus will be deposited into your account for each job, including all expenses, of course.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Both are sitting on my six and I got to shake them off.” An old fighter pilot’s term when an enemy aircraft hung directly behind him ready to squirt off a missile or hose him down with cannon rounds. “There is one more thing I want you to do. I’ll have the F/X-26 prepared for initial flight testing in two weeks or so if Bennett and his crew don’t screw up. Then comes the hard part.”

“Getting the Pentagon and Congress weenies to accept it?”

“I’m sure General Schuman will help—”

“He always held a protective hand over you at Edwards.”

“—and I have some familiarity with Pentagon’s procurement procedures, but he’s now part of the Foggy Bottom establishment, and I can’t count on his unreserved support. He may want to, but Pentagon procedures and stroking his career might not let him.”

“Guys like him are always under a lot of pressure from the aerospace boys to back their systems.”

“You’re right. The problem is, I don’t know anybody inside the House or Senate defense subcommittees and how they work. That was supposed to have been Decrot’s job. I know the names of the major players and the general process, but that’s not nearly enough for what I need. With him out of the picture—”

“You want me to find out who does what to whom and who gets laid. Is that it?”

“That’s it. I want an insider’s perspective. Everybody has a button, Gene, and I want you to find which ones I can push. If you can’t find one, make it up.”

The security man grinned broadly. “You certainly got my button.”

Kostan laughed. “I’m afraid I can’t take credit there. You pushed that one yourself.”

Lockyard tossed back the last of his whiskey and stood. “I’ll let you know about the body jobs tomorrow. As for the other stuff, it’ll take a few days and may need a trip or two to Washington.”

“Whatever it takes.”

“Good night, Major.”

“Night, Chief. Take care.”

“Always, boss.”

* * *

Kostan slowed and turned his dark blue BMW 8 Gran Coupe onto Salmon Drive. Although past seven, dusk still lingered, enough to soften the headlights of oncoming cars. Not an exclusive part of Los Alamitos, Rossmoor was not that old to have sprawling mansions festooned with creepers. The area nevertheless attracted discerning buyers. Things were different eight years ago when he first came. In 2013, the suburb still had a frontier feel, housing personnel from the Joint Forces Training Base, the Walt Disney Company, and two major universities. Now, giants like Space X, Deloitte, and Starbucks, among others, had set up camp here. He played at the Old Ranch Country Club and was a member, but not often enough to keep down his handicap.

New to the place, he and Mariana used to go to Seal Beach for a swim, Disneyland at Anaheim, and other attractions around Long Beach as he waited for the admin building and assembly plant to be put up. It took a better part of eleven million to buy

up open farm plots between Perimeter Road and HE Road to set up Rebus Aviation. Although the Wasp had a vertical takeoff and landing capability, the Vector did not, and Kostan had to build a 4,000-foot runway. He wanted the Vector to be a VTOL machine, but directed thrust meant installing complicated machinery unnecessary in a luxury jet. Machinery that added weight and increased cost. Before construction started, he had to battle the local council for required permits. The bureaucratic grinding down sucked precious money. For a while, he seriously contemplated relocating his company to Phoenix where authorities encouraged and subsidized high-tech startups. It all worked out in the end. It cost him some gray hairs, though.

Kostan considered leasing land from the Joint Forces Training Base to set up Rebus. The base had two long runways, support infrastructure and personnel amenities he needed, which would have saved him considerable finances. When he delved deeper into the possibility, the hoops he would have had to go through with the Federal Aviation Administration and the military, and the glacial time the process would have taken, forced him abandon the idea. Governments were simply not set up to do things in any timely manner.

Milky lights from tall poles lit the wide street lined with lush trees. Sprawling single and double-story residences on wide lots attested to well-heeled occupants inside. That's what money was for, he figured. He scraped and saved for years on an Air Force salary, lived in basic Edwards AFB officer accommodation and was entitled to a measure of comfort now.

The Air Force satisfied his early ambition to drive high-performance aircraft, but in many ways, it was a juvenile diversion. Age limitations would eventually have pushed him out of the cockpit to a desk job fighting a paper war while he watched younger men bend their machines in the blue. He had nothing to complain about, always far more interested in aircraft design than flying as a career. He had ideas what a modern jet fighter should

be.

At seventeen, he applied to the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs. His father, a pilot for American Airlines who passed the flying bug to his son, did not initially think much of an Air Force career. If Ogdan wanted to do engineering, he said, get a degree and join one of the aerospace companies. He was giving up a Caltech scholarship for the military, of all things. Bull-headed, that's what he was, and never listened, his dad added.

Kostan's relationship with his father was often confrontational. At best, an armed truce. His old man's imposing figure demanded obedience, which as a rebellious and opinionated teenager, Kostan found confining. According to his mother, a characteristic he picked up from his dad. When it came to following his father's decrees, he invariably did the opposite thing, even when following his dad's advice would have created a better outcome. His dad had years of life experiences to back up his views, but Kostan wanted to find things out for himself. He wanted freedom to make mistakes. He wanted his father to show approval and understanding! Just once would have been enough, but the words he became familiar with from his dad were 'stubborn' and 'willful'. Perhaps he was. Over time, those words made him self-reliant and hard.

These days, his mom and dad still lived in Miami—when his old man's flying schedule permitted—but she had retired as a high school teacher some time back and now spent a lot of her time as a book editor and reviewer. Kostan visited once a year, sent birthday and Christmas cards, made an occasional phone call, and that was it. His brother Aitken, a mechanical engineer, lived in South Pasadena with his wife Salina and their two boys. They saw each other three or four times a year, enough to keep in touch. Aitken was also an ambitious and driven man, but he somehow found time to have a family and keep it all together. Kostan did not understand how they did it.

Even at seventeen, he knew exactly what he wanted to do,

already planning for a life after flying. Accepted into the Academy, he began a competitive four-year course, chafing under military discipline when blood ran hot and needed an outlet. Learning to march, carry out the manual of arms, working as part of a team when his natural tendencies were to be alone, served to instill in him a professional outlook on everything he did. The instructors kept him in check and he graduated as a second lieutenant with a degree in Astronautical Engineering. Third in his class, he received a posting to Eglin AFB in Florida where he learned to fly the F-117 Nighthawk and F-15 Eagles. His buddies quickly dubbed him the ‘Flash’ because of his penchant for pushing Eagles to the max, and it became his callsign.

Kostan was an above average instinctive pilot, but when he rotated through the Nellis AFB Red Flag exercise and was shot down twice—simulated—it demonstrated vividly that he did not have the ‘right stuff’ a fighter driver must have to burn up the sky, but he knew that already. He had his sights on a far more challenging career.

At twenty-four, spotted early as a brilliant engineer and tactical thinker, with only nine months as an aircraft commander and 600 hours as an instructor, his CO encouraged him to apply for Test Pilot School training at Edwards, a prize posting. To the surprise of his base comrades, his application was approved. After a forty-eight-week course, he received a master’s degree in Test Flight Engineering and captain bars.

Brigadier General Lang ‘Mover’ Schuman, the burly no nonsense Edwards commander noticed him, took him under his wing, and began to groom him for a fast-track promotion path and work on advanced fighter designs.

Kostan recognized early the tactical limitations inherent in modern manned air superiority fighters and saw possibilities how to overcome them. His ideas were not entirely new. Numerous papers within the military and civilian think tanks paralleled his

thinking, but those ideas never saw root, smothered by entrenched design methodology promoted by aerospace contractors. They still considered a tactical aircraft something driven by a pilot or it was a missile. Drones did not really count, although their role was expanding. Like that French entomologist boffin in the 1930s who proved that bees cannot fly, senior U.S. military officers were ignoring evidence, stuck in outdated thinking.

Unmanned fighters and combat systems in general, that's what Kostan saw as the future of aerial and ground warfare. He would never see it if he stayed in the Air Force, or even if he joined one of the aerospace giants. He would rub everyone's nose in it by building his own fighter and show all those shitters it could be done.

Well, he had the Wasp almost completed. He would then have to prove to the establishment that his prototype could wax every other bird in the air. If he failed, it was crash and burn. Mouth set in grim determination, he did not intend to fail.

Whatever it took.

He touched the remote to open the garage door and turned into his driveway. Two towering camphors kept the wide front yard in shadow most of the day. The lawn looked a little scraggly and he reminded himself to call the people who did these things for him. Behind the trees, a single-story sandstone dwelling occupied most of the lot. He had a nice backyard large enough for a pool, but chose to have a lawn, trees, and shrubs. Rebus had a full-sized pool for all the staff to use if he wanted a swim, and Mariana always preferred to lounge in their hot Jacuzzi. He remembered some fun times they had in it on long, lazy evenings. A wide back veranda gave him shade when he felt like relaxing outside with a glass of wine or whiskey, puffing a mild cigar. He tried to remember the last time he did that, or the last time he and Mariana fooled around.

Two white columns supported a portico in front of the double-door solid wood entrance. Lights shone from the large living

room, which meant Mariana was home. He drove into the garage and the door rolled shut behind him. He glanced at his wife's Merc SLC red convertible, got out, and walked toward the laundry door. Inside, he threw off his Gucci loafers and slid his feet into leather slippers. Mariana looked up from the soft couch, a glass of something in hand when he stepped into the living room.

"A long day?" she queried with detached interest as she reached for the remote to turn down the TV volume where Tom Cruise in *Top Gun* was squirting off a missile. The action looked good on the screen, but it never came close to representing real dogfighting.

"The board meeting took longer than expected," he said casually and moved to the bar. He splashed bourbon into a tumbler, added ice and leaned against the bench.

"Do you want something to eat? Filippa made lasagna."

"Thanks. I wouldn't mind a bite."

She stood and stretched, showing off her trim five-eight slim body. Her short black hair framed a strikingly attractive face. A product of her Mexican parents. Self-confident and outspoken, she did not hesitate to put men in their place, a reflection of her officer training and natural aggressiveness. A fighter jock had to have attitude to mix it upstairs with someone with a similar don't-take-prisoners intention. Since leaving the Air Force, she kept her commission in the Reserves, but spent most of her time teaching aerospace engineering at California State University.

Married life did not make her happy. Then again, he could have done a lot more to make her happy. Had there ever been love between them? Passion certainly, but was that love? Someone said that genuine love meant sacrificing yourself, your wants and desires, for the other person if need be. He never felt that about Mariana. Did that mean he never loved her? He cared for her, but was that love? She had a house and financial security. What else could he give her?

She moved past him, crunched her nose and sniffed, then

glared at him.

“You smell of woman! Who was it this time? Teena or that slut Sirena? You can’t keep it zipped, can you?” she grated, dripping scorn. “Who’s next? Filippa?”

He had not made a move on their pretty Puerto Rican maid, but he thought about it and flirted with her.

“It was Sirena if you want to know. I have to get satisfaction from someone, seeing how I’m not getting it from you.”

“You’re a bastard, Ogdan!”

“Yeah, that’s what Sirena said.” He took a pull of whiskey. He sighed and placed the tumbler on the bar top. “What do you want from me, Mariana?”

“Nothing that you can give me anymore.”

That part, at least, was true, he mused. He had given her everything he could. Everything he was capable of. For her, even everything was not enough. He should never have married. Thankfully, there were no children to complicate the divorce. Both wanted kids, but she held back. At first, she did not want to damage her flight status and Air Force career. When they moved to Los Alamitos, both were busy starting new jobs. There never seemed the right time to have kids. Was there ever a right time?

A driven woman and he a driven man, both pushed life to the max. Did he marry her simply for the convenience of having a readily available romp whenever he came home? The ring of acknowledgment echoed in his mind. He had always been somewhat of a self-sufficient intellectual loner, dedicated to succeed at everything he set his sight on. That determination carried him through the Air Force Academy and subsequent postings. It made him good at what he did, but he never formed solid friendships, whatever the hell that meant. As for women, it was only a bit of casual fun.

He watched her walk into the kitchen, navy blue slacks hugging a trim figure. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her

tenderly. Kiss her like they used to, long and sweet until the sparks flamed into full passion. They had not shared such intimacy in...he struggled to remember. It had been a while, and perhaps the reason why he turned to Sirena.

One evening very much like this one, he came home after a quickie at the office and Mariana smelled perfume on him. Things between them cooled rapidly after that, cooler than they already were. Three weeks ago, she served him the divorce papers. When he picked it apart, both knew for a long time it would not work, and his affair was the last nail.

Mariana bent down, opened the oven door and took out a glass baking tray. She used a wooden spatula to lift a block of lasagna and placed it on a dish. Without saying anything, she slid the plate onto the breakfast table. Right then, Kostan had lost all appetite. He picked up the tumbler and took a long swallow.

"They accepted my application to return to full-time duty," she announced frigidly. "I already had my physical. I'm also keeping my Reserves rank as a lieutenant colonel."

"I'm pleased to hear that," Kostan told her gravely. At thirty-eight, that was not bad. Women had to accept that the Air Force and other services were still dominated by males who resented the intrusion into their profession. Equal opportunity were merely words on a piece of paper to appease Congress and the women's lobby. "When do you report in?"

"Next Monday. I'll be doing avionics testing at Edwards with full flight status."

"You're moving out, then?"

"They assigned me a cottage at the BOQ. A removals van will be here on Saturday to ferry most of my stuff. I'll drive to Edwards on Sunday to unpack everything."

"You missed it, didn't you?"

"Flying? Yes, I did. They allowed me some flight time while I was in the Reserves, but it was mostly desk work." Her severe

features softened and her dark hazel eyes misted. “What happened to us, Ogdan? When we married, it was supposed to last forever.”

“Nothing—” he began, then laughed, a sour sound full of burnt ashes. “I was about to say that nothing lasts forever.” He twirled the empty tumbler between his hands.

“I had a crush on you the first time I saw you,” she declared, an amused smile on her lips. “That was soon after you punched out of that F-35. I just finished an evaluation program at the Nellis Red Flag training range, full of pepper after creaming some macho zoomies from the 64th Aggressor Squadron.”

He grinned. “That was in...2010, I think.”

“August.”

“That’s right. I was having breakfast. You walked straight up to me and asked me out. You looked ready to hose me down if I said no.”

She chuckled. “I don’t know how I got the nerve to do it. There you were, a gorgeous hunk with all the girls after you, a major, and me a raw first lieutenant.”

He probed her eyes. “If you want to know the truth, I saw you a few times before and I wanted to ask you out—”

“But you were too chicken, figuring I was out of your reach. I know. You told me that already.”

“We were both pushing Gs to the max with our hair on fire, and getting together seemed like the right fit,” he said, then frowned. “I didn’t railroad your career, Mariana. I told you from the beginning what I wanted to do and that I planned to leave the Air Force.”

“You did. I’ll give you that, and I’m not blaming you.” She gave a long sigh. “Boiled down, you were never there for me. Your Vectors meant far more to you than me.” She swept a hand around her. “This was merely somewhere you came to sleep. When you started work on the Wasp, I knew it was over. We had some nice times along the way, though,” she added with a wistful

smile.

“Yeah.”

Mariana adored opera, theater, and classical music. South American folk music sent her into ecstasy, but she loathed rap and jazz. Her twin sister Rowena had similar tastes, but the two were not the same. She married a Navy commander and resigned her commission as a lieutenant. They moved to Houston and had a boy and a girl, still happily married as far as he knew. Why couldn't he and Mariana make it work? She was right. This house was merely a place where he slept, not a home.

“You still talk to your sister?”

“Rowena? All the time.”

“About us?”

“She knows I'm divorcing you. Sorry, I don't mean it to sound so harsh.”

“I guess there isn't a soft way to say such a thing. I screwed things up between us, but I can't have a normal life, whatever that means, until I see my F/X-26 program accepted by all the services. That makes me a hard, driven heel. I admit it, but nothing will stand in my way to see the program succeed.”

“Not even me. I know,” she said in a small voice. “I guess your drive and unshakeable confidence attracted me to you, and I was swept up in your dream. But it takes more than a dream and a romp in bed to make a marriage work, Ogdan.”

“Wait six months, Mariana! The Wasp will be flying by then or the program will wash out.”

Well, not quite. There was still the lucrative international market. It would not be easy to break into, but he was not there yet.

She shook her head. “It won't work. What's more, you know it. Today, it's the Wasp. Tomorrow, it will be something else. You're a consumed man, Ogdan. Totally committed to whatever you're doing. That doesn't leave any room there for me or anyone else.”

He looked down at his empty tumbler and slid it onto the bar

top. He wanted to say he needed her, that she made him complete and his heart would ache for her, but it would be a lie. He did not need her. He did not need anyone. The irony did not escape him because he had known it for some time. Perhaps always, but was afraid to hang it out for everyone to see. Now, it was too late, an inevitable culmination of small events.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I screwed it up. That’s all there is to it,” he said heavily and made his way toward the spare bedroom. Losing her, he should feel something, but he could only think about the Wasp. A nice book and some Bach would take his mind off her...for a while.

Still, he would miss her.

About the Author

Stefan Vučak has written eight Shadow Gods Saga sci-fi novels and six contemporary political drama books. 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 cell-phone systems. 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.

To learn more about Stefan, visit his:

Website: www.stefanvucak.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/StefanVucakAuthor

Twitter: [@stefanvucak](https://twitter.com/stefanvucak)



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 Pa-lean 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!

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?

Autumn Leaves

Dural had it all: a loving wife, adorable daughter, and a successful practice as a psychologist – until fates conspired to take his daughter and wife from him. A near miss lightning strike left him changed in several profound ways. This helped him handle his patients, but did not fill a gaping hole left in his heart. A chance encounter and a possibility of new love gave him hope that tomorrow might be a better day.

All My Sunsets

Andrew Payne had a great career as a virtual reality games designer, a woman he loved, and a promising future – until he developed a particularly nasty type of melanoma. His doctor told him he had five years to live, then twelve months, then four weeks. His only hope was an experimental drug, and Andrew took a chance. He had nothing to lose. He recovered, but the drug had reset his biological clock, and he was living in year one. With the prospect of a hundred years before him, the possibilities seemed endless. However, the fates had other things in store for him.