

Review

When you open one of the books from Stefan Vučak's 'Shadow Gods' series, you know you are going on an exciting journey through an alternate star system. He successfully combines science fiction, terrorism and romance. The romance between Terr and Teena is allowed to slowly simmer as Terr goes from infatuation to deep love. I found it fascinating to watch their relationship develop even if it seems ill fated. Vucak is a master of dialogue; he never allows it to sound stiff or false. His plots are sharp and intricate. He is meticulous in paying attention to detail, and while the words flow smoothly, they also have a quality of passion.

Readers' Favorite

Books by Stefan Vučak

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Shadow Masters

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IMMORTAL IN SHADOW

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 Mal ... a long path together

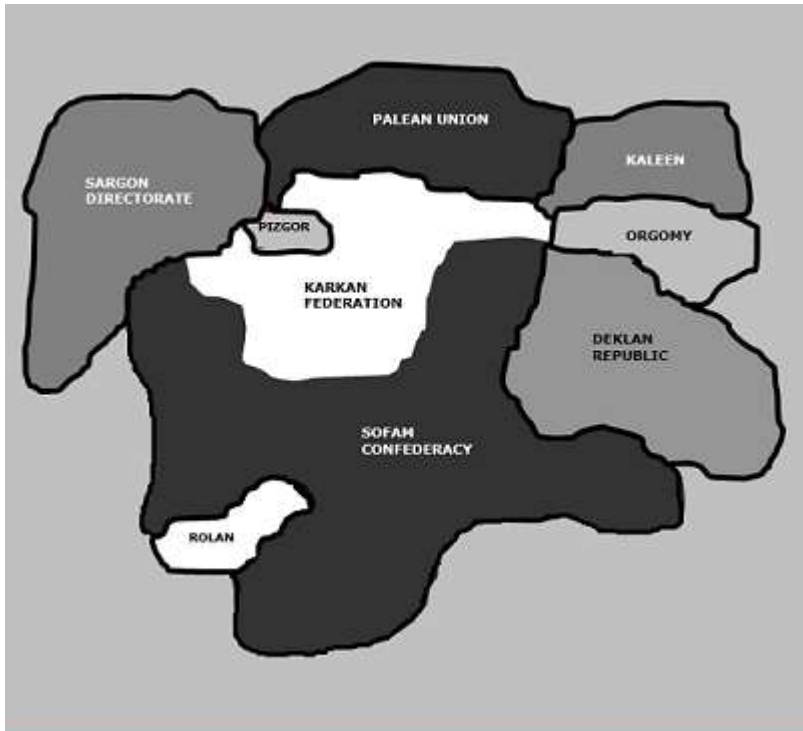
Acknowledgments

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Cover art by Laura Shinn.

<http://laurashinn.yolasite.com>

Map of the Serrll Combine



Composition of the Serrll Combine

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

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

Principal political blocks:

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

Composition of the Executive Council

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

Chapter One

Lying on the hard bunk, eyes closed, Tanard allowed the background hum to carry him into blackness and oblivion. It was but a small step to make, for the ship *was* carrying him into oblivion. It wasn't exactly death, but it might as well have been. Death was preferable to the nightmare of eternal imprisonment waiting for him when the prison transport made its last planetfall. Grounded, he would never again feel a deck beneath his feet or the tug of far stars. No, the tug would always be there, but he would not be able to answer it. It was perhaps a greater cruelty. They should have shot him, it would have been a kinder fate, but they let him live and he planned to exact full toll for that oversight.

The ship whispered to him in the darkness of his mind.

Gravity changed and the deck shifted slightly, almost a tremble, as the transport dropped into normal space. His skin prickled and a hot flush raced through his body. Oblivion would have to wait, for a little while anyway. He lifted his head to meet Winn's steady gaze.

"Not long now," Tanard rasped and swallowed, absently touching the scar running across his neck and mangled throat. He ignored the dull burning left in the wake of his touch. The pain was familiar now, almost a friend; another companion in the dark, and one that was slowly killing him.

Winn grinned and slid his long legs off the bunk. His large black eyes, framed by a narrow triangular face, shone with anticipation. Freedom! Or at least a chance. He turned and shook the prone figure on the next bunk. The figure groaned, looked up and blinked vacantly.

"We there?" Railee mumbled indifferently.

"Depends on how far off we transited," Winn said.

Their eyes connected, the same thought clear on both their faces. After two years of hell it would all end soon, one way or another. That it could also end in their deaths didn't even occur to Winn. He was past caring. It was a luxury that got in the way of simply surviving, which he'd gotten tired of too. A real death now or death on Cantor later, there didn't seem to be much of a difference. Still, he wasn't about to give up on life just yet.

Railee did not particularly care whether he lived or died either. Captivity had toughened him, and the interrogations, first on Anar'on, then on Kalakan, made him hard beyond his years. His jailers were not cruel or in any way mistreated him physically. That would have been a sign of consideration, an acknowledgment that he existed, that he mattered. No, what they did was far worse. They had taken away all hope, but he didn't hate, not exactly. His captors did what they needed to do. It was inevitable really. His fate was decided when he made his choice to join Tanard and become a raider. He could pretty it up with words of patriotism, a fight for Palean imperialism, because that's what it was. When the façade was stripped away, he had forsaken his commission in the Fleet and sold his soul to prey on helpless merchants. What price idealism?

It was a cosmic jest, but he was still to get the joke.

He planted both feet on the hard deck, stole a quick glance at his commander's scarred face, the disfigurement a comforting sight now rather than a shock it once was, nodded and strode into the bathroom.

Tanard watched his weapons officer and the corner of his mouth twitched. He caught Winn's amused expression and jerked his head at the bathroom door.

"He has come a long way."

"We've all come a long way," Winn said fatalistically, crossed his legs and stifled a yawn. Tanard grinned.

Was that his first officer talking? Railee may have lost his youth and innocence, lamentable perhaps, or perhaps not, but Winn had probably changed most of all. No longer timid and hesitant, he was now confident to the point of indifference. With nothing to live for, Winn now dared to even challenge him. Tanard approved of the transformation and wondered mildly if his first officer would revert to type if they ever managed to get off this rust bubble. He hoped not. For what he intended, he needed Winn cold and hard. They would all need to be cold and hard.

Railee emerged tugging down the tunic of his prison blues. He plopped on the bunk and propped himself against the bulkhead, hands locked behind his head.

"What's the name of this dump again?"

"Feron," Winn said and bobbed his head, his thin hands twining in

a characteristic nervous gesture.

“Feron,” Railee repeated in a high voice like it was something dirty and made a face. “Picking up more unfortunates for Cantor’s fodder mill, I’ll bet.”

“Like you cared.”

“You’re right, I don’t care. Why should I? Do any of them care what happens to *me*?”

“Probably not, and I don’t care either.”

“My friend.” Railee looked disgusted.

Tanard frowned and the two of them fell silent. He wasn’t conscious he had shown any displeasure. He only knew their inane chatter distracted him. Over the last two years the other two came to know his moods intimately and acted without him having to say anything. They were better than a wife, he mused sardonically and his irritation evaporated.

He forced himself to sit still when every fiber in his body ached from the strain of waiting. Would the plan work? Would they be able to get off the ship? Once on the surface, how will they evade the inevitable hunt that would ensue? It could all be an elaborate trap, a plot to kill them. He was being a paranoid fool and knew it. Le Maran would not go to all this trouble merely to have him killed. If the Alikan Union Party Provisional Committee wanted him out of the way, he would already be dead. There would be no need for such elaborate sidestepping. His frown deepened.

The worst part being on board, none of them dared talk openly to vent their feelings and frustrations for fear the cabin might be monitored. It probably wasn’t, but they couldn’t take that chance. It was maddening. What he craved was a release, to pace around, to rage and storm, to let his bottled emotions free before they consumed him. Of course, that would never do. Even on a prison hulk, a commander’s dignity must be preserved, which amused him intensely. Any dignity he might have had was stripped away on Anar’on by the unsmiling, shadowy Wanderer interrogators. At least the three of them had a cabin to themselves, for which he was thankful. Arranged that way?

He sensed the ship slow and stop. It was a subtle change in the background throb of small ship noises that after a lifetime of Fleet service, he recognized instantly. The alarm siren wailed then, which made

everyone jump, and the milky ceiling changed to pulsing amber. The hatch snapped open into the bulkhead with a sharp clang.

“Abandon ship! This is not a drill,” the computer blared. “Everyone to their assigned survival blister.”

Le Maran had done it!

Instead of excitement, Tanard felt a calmness that surprised him. Then again, it wasn't so surprising. Training had prepared him to face action with composed resolution, and he was certainly facing action now. He grunted, stood up in a single flowing motion and gathered the other two with a glance.

Now that the moment had come, Winn hesitated; mortified that he could still feel indecision. Was he a coward after all? Then his mouth firmed and his eyes darkened as he turned to Tanard.

“Just don't let them take me...”

There was a wealth of emotion behind those simple words and Tanard was touched. Winn *had* changed, enough to realize that there were many kinds of death, not merely losing one's life.

“Then let's make this work, okay?”

Satisfied, Winn nodded, glanced at Railee and jabbed a long finger at the open hatch.

“Right! Let's get it on!”

Tanard lunged and grabbed his arm. “Wait!”

The young fool would get himself killed! He stepped to the hatchway and carefully peered into the corridor. Dazed prisoners peeked cautiously out of their cabins and looked uncertainly at each other. The computer repeated its warning and the passage began to fill. If the ship was indeed in danger, there was no time to waste. At the end of the corridor a hatch cycled open and two burly marines stepped through. Several prisoners made a dash past Tanard toward a row of four survival blisters at the far end of the passageway, their access hatches already gaping open.

“Stand to!” one of the marines bellowed and leveled his phase rifle. A pale violet beam struck one of the fleeing prisoners in the back. The man yelped, flung up his arms and crumpled to the deck in an untidy heap, unconscious.

With the siren still wailing, the prisoners now turned their attention on the marines. They had perhaps moments to escape from what may

be a doomed ship and the guards were gunning them down. A heavysset individual, teeth bared, eyes glowing with blood lust and hate, launched himself in a flying leap at the two guards. The violet beam sizzled along the ceiling as others rushed into the melee; the ungainly, heavy rifles useless for any close-in work and the guards were dumb to bring them.

Tanard nodded. It was time to go.

“The far blister,” he said and slapped Winn on the back. The three of them ran toward the open pods. Several inmates were already scrambling through the hatches.

The siren stopped its wail.

“Disregard! Disregard!” an angry voice boomed over the intercom. “Computer error. Everyone into their cabins now. Repeat. Disregard abandon ship! All security sections, round up the prisoners!”

Hearing the command, some of the prisoners stopped and stood still, not quite sure what to believe. The downed guards lay still on the deck. The heavysset man picked up one of the rifles and marched deliberately toward the blister pods.

“Disregard be damned,” he growled, trailing cronies in his wake.

Winn did not relish arguing it out with the guy. He reached the blister and dived through the hatch. Railee gave a triumphant yell and plunged in after him. A body sailed out of the hatch a moment later. Tanard elbowed aside the luckless individual trying to scramble back in and jumped into the gloomy interior.

“Go!”

Winn stabbed the pulsing yellow purge pad with a stiff finger and the hatch clanged shut, cutting off the panicked screams outside, leaving only the faint sound of futile pounding. Tanard piled into a couch as the blister surged down the launch tube. The restraining field caught them, then released when the blister reached stable boost.

Winn quickly checked the main display plate. Three other blisters were clearing the stationary transport. Feron hung above them, a blue-green world covered in fluffy white gauze. After eleven days of staring at nothing but gray bulkheads, it was a gorgeous sight.

“Any threats?” Tanard demanded and leaned over Winn’s shoulder.

“Showing three survival blisters in terminal descent,” Winn said, scanning the display plates. “Make that four. Two VLBCs in a holding pattern nine hundred talans to port. No Fleet units within detection

range, but this thing doesn't have much of a sensor suite," he added with an apologetic scowl.

The parked merchants, Very Large Bulk Carriers, were no threat. Tanard pursed his thin lips and allowed himself to relax. The first and most difficult part of their escape had worked out well enough. He did not know who on the transport sabotaged the computer or how it was done, and he didn't particularly give a damn either. Le Maran had kept his promise and that was enough. Too bad it took him two years to get around to it, but Tanard could hardly blame his former controller for that. Busting them off Kalakan, the Fleet's premier Palean base, would probably have taken far more than Le Maran or the Committee was prepared to give. To the Committee's faceless men, the effort just wasn't worth the return. Tanard's capture had caused them enough damage as it is. Even after two years the memories were poignantly sharp and he squirmed in his seat at some of the more unpleasant ones.

The aborted attack on *Zavian*, supposedly carrying the Unified Independent Front delegates, the subsequent running battle with young Terr and the loss of his arm, all were things that haunted his nights and stalked his days. On Anar'on, his Wanderer interrogators had peeled open his mind with detached indifference, laying bare the Committee's secrets, what he knew of them, which was enough, seeing how he was instrumental in the planning and setting up of the raider base on Lemos. Le Maran compromised—hard to see how that could have been avoided—and much of the Committee's operational arm with it. It must have been a grave setback for them, one that would probably take years to overcome, if at all. The Committee was exposed now and the hunters would be prowling. He could still see the probing orange eyes of his Wanderer captors and the image made his skin crawl. When they were done with him, they discarded him, an empty drained shell. The subsequent BueCult and Palean inquisitions on Kalakan were almost mild in comparison.

To have foregone those mind wrenching sessions!

"You're on manual?" he snapped.

"On manual," Winn confirmed, "and I've shut off the transponder." It wouldn't do to let SC&C, Surface Command and Control, take over the blister. Not after they came this far. That gag would land them at the nearest Field where grim marines, brandishing phase rifles,

would be waiting for them to disembark, ready to haul them back into captivity. Winn wondered briefly if the other blister pilots remembered to be as careful, and then gave a mental shrug. It wasn't his problem.

Tanard reached over Winn's shoulder and punched in the nav coordinates he'd been given on Kalakan by an AUP agent.

"It appears we have a reprieve from purgatory," Railee piped, a huge smile wrapped across his face.

"That still remains to be seen," Tanard said gravely and looked at Winn. "How long to touchdown?"

"Three minutes. We'll be crossing the night terminator any moment now."

"Excellent." Darkness would not stop SC&C from tracking them, but it would hinder, if for a while, the local authorities in their efforts to find them once they were down. By the time the blister was located, he would be part of the background scenery. If everything worked out, he reminded himself. There were plenty of things that could still go wrong.

SC&C started squawking almost immediately, demanding they go automatic, they were tracked and would be fired upon if they did not comply. Tanard gave an irritated growl and Winn cut off the verbal tirade. It was an idle threat anyway. Feron was an insignificant world on the Palean/Karkan border and had the most rudimentary Fleet facilities. A transit station at best. Its sparse and scattered agricultural population shunned the metropolitan centers, and the city dwellers were happy to have it like that. It made for vigorous competition during the seasonal tourist trade. Not an advanced world, but its position in a minor shipping corridor ensured it would never be simply another backwater frontier world. That's why it was picked as a staging post for their escape. There were enough offworlders on the planet at any one time, and three more should not raise any excitement. By the time the authorities got themselves organized, he hoped to be off the planet. How were they supposed to *get* off the planet? One thing at a time, he told himself.

"Mr. Winn? Send a single comms ping on the thirty-one point-two C band," Tanard ordered.

Winn glanced at his commander, then punched in the frequency, his flash of resentment that Tanard had kept aspects of their escape

from him evaporated. It was only reasonable. If their flight from the transport had failed, he could not divulge information he did not have.

“Ping sent.”

Almost immediately, a single sharp response shattered the blister’s muted computer whispers.

Railee raised an appreciative eyebrow. “A welcoming committee?”

Tanard gave him a stern glance. “Our escape was meant to succeed.”

“I am comforted,” Railee said unabashed. “It would have been mildly disconcerting if this was simply someone’s idea of a macabre prank.”

Tanard suppressed a smile, but he was serious when he said their escape was meant to succeed. The Palean arm of the Alikan Union Party had gone to a lot of trouble to make sure the resistance network was ready to take them back in. At least he hoped that was the case. Le Maran never actually said they’d be assuming their old roles, or what roles they would really have at all. Tough to be an effective operator with the Serrll’s entire security apparatus after you.

Winn rotated the blister as they crossed the terminator. Thick cloudbanks obscured the ground far below. Lightning flashes rippled silently through them, accompanied by brilliant red and blue sprites high in the stratosphere at the edge of space itself.

The blister angled to port and plunged into black cloud. Turbulence shook the little craft and Tanard’s stomach squirmed as the deck suddenly fell away and the restraining field snapped on. A high-pitched shriek of tortured air set his teeth on edge. Then they were through and the ride became smooth. On their starboard side a checkered pattern of lights indicated a large settlement or small city. The blister slowed and steadied in its descent. In the blackness below an occasional solitary light identified a lone residence. The main display plate showed open countryside and planted fields crowding a ragged forest.

The blister descended quickly, paused, then settled with a gentle bump. It was kind of eerie to be on solid ground again.

“Adjust for local gravity,” Tanard rasped.

“We have company.” Winn touched lit pads and nodded at the display plate. A combie was making a direct line for them, its nav lights blinking. It braked hard and dropped beside the blister.

Immortal in Shadow

“At least it’s not an APC,” Railee muttered darkly. An Armored Personnel Carrier would definitely have spoiled what had so far been a great day.

“Crack the hatch, Mr. Winn,” Tanard ordered and stood up. The countryside appeared deserted, but someone was bound to come looking sooner or later and he did not wish to be around when that happened.

The hatch sighed open and warm, sweet air rushed in. It smelled of grass, freshly turned earth and cut timber. It tasted good after days of canned ship’s goo.

“Let’s not admire the scenery!” an impatient voice shouted from the combie.

Tanard jumped out, ran to the combie and scrambled through the open doorway. Winn glanced at Railee and followed. The door snapped shut as Railee squeezed in and the combie immediately surged up. A green safety strip along the bottom of the curved shell offered feeble light in the darkened interior. The combie cleared the timberline and Winn muttered a silent thanks to the survival blister, then turned to study the approaching town with interest. There was little to see in the dark.

Tanard looked curiously at the driver. The Karkan glanced at him and smiled, his pointed tongue flicking briefly.

“Welcome to Feron,” the driver hissed. “Before you start, I cannot tell you anything because I don’t know anything. My job is only to get you out of here. When I set down, I will disappear and you’ll be on your own.” The Karkan gave a guttural hiss, his idea of a chuckle.

“My thanks for picking us up.”

“Save it, Mister. I got paid plenty for picking you up.”

Tanard nodded. To the local AUP chapter it may have been cold and calculating, but it also made very good tactical sense. Things can always go wrong in any operation. Why expose the local setup when you can hire someone else to run all the risks.

The township loomed before them. Surrounded by lesser buildings, three low towers climbed into a black sky, their color-reactive panels glowing pearly yellow. Traffic was thin this time of night. An occasional combie, communal, and private sled-pad crossed the flight lanes. The combie tilted and skirted the local spaceport. Tanard scanned the Field

complex with detached regard. Access tubes tethered two cargo carriers and a bulky liner to the L shaped terminus building. Maintenance hangars and repair facilities, lit by bright floodlights, crowded the terminal. He thought he saw an M-1 scout parked at the edge of the apron. That was not good.

For such a small town this was a pretty large facility. A major agricultural port?

The combie swept past the Field and descend in a leisurely sweep. It sagged and came down vertically behind what looked like a shopping complex. The door opened and the Karkan grinned.

“End of the line.”

They piled out and watched the combie take off, its navigation lights bright. When it vanished, Tanard looked around. Surrounded by buildings the small quadrangle was deep in shadow. A thin breeze stirred invisible rubbish. Two combies lay parked side by side against a towering black wall.

“Mr. Tanard?” a disembodied voice came from the left machine. “No, don’t come any closer. I cannot afford to be seen. When I leave, take the other combie. It’s preset to take you to a local hotel. Suite 16-12. When you get there, do not attempt to use the combie again.” There was a brief hiss as a door slid shut and the combie immediately lifted.

“Oh, that’s terrific!” Railee retorted caustically, his fingers working in agitation. “What happens after we get to suite 16-12? And how are we supposed to get into the damned thing?”

“The lock is probably keyed to one of us,” Winn ventured.

“Hopefully not under our real names,” Railee added dryly.

“There is only one way to find out,” Tanard said and headed for the lone combie.

It was a short flight. He wondered why their Karkan pickup had not taken them directly to the hotel, and then answered his own question. The Karkan was not meant to know, and what he didn’t know, he could not divulge. They came down on one of the landing ramps protruding like a rude tongue from the building’s side. They climbed out and the parking system whisked the combie away. Railee watched it disappear and shrugged.

Past the deserted foyer the corridor walls glowed soft beige, offsetting the pale blue of the ceiling. Tanard had no desire to be seen dressed

in a prison coverall. Their footfalls made hollow echoes in the thick silence. They easily found the large double-door entrance to their apartment. Without hesitating, Tanard pressed his palm against the sensitized plate set waist high beside the door. The lock cycled and the two panels slid into the opposite walls. They entered as the comfortable lounge flooded with light.

An opaque floor-to-ceiling window screen occupied the far wall. The wooden floor was polished to a dull sheen and the narrow boards made a pleasing linear pattern of brown and amber. Two formchairs flanked a low glass-topped table on which lay three pouches and what looked like ID tags. The entire right wall held a full-dimensional communications station. On the left the living area opened into an adequate kitchen.

“I could get used to this.” Railee nodded in appreciation and sprawled into the nearest chair.

The Wall screen brightened.

“Welcome to the Circle Hotel, Mr. Vendam. You have a message. Do you wish to view message?” the housekeeping computer asked pleasantly.

“Display message,” Tanard said.

The Wall cleared. Tanard was not surprised to see Le Maran’s corpulent sleek face. It appeared that life was very comfortable for his old controller. He felt a pang of resentment and jealousy.

“Friend Tanard, I want to welcome you to Feron and congratulate you on your, ah, obviously successful extraction.” Le Maran gave a tight smile, his fingers working themselves into knots. “Although eminently preferable, I regret that circumstances made it impossible for me to see you in person. On the table before you are new identity tags and travel documents. The IDs are genuine with verifiable local legends. Please study them. It was convenient to bring you all here this one time, but for obvious reasons you cannot remain together. As you may have surmised by now, your survival blister’s landing point was not a random event.

“Mr. Railee and Mr. Winn, you have reservations at the local Field’s transit lounge. Change your clothes, then go there immediately and check in for your flight. The liner leaves in the morning. Friend Tanard, your departure is somewhat more involved, for which I apologize in

advance. You need to take a morning shuttle to Kumran, the planet's capital. A booking has already been made and you'll have enough time to make an off-planet connection that leaves in the afternoon. There will be security checks, but your IDs will hold, provided you don't miss your flights. Each of you will receive further instructions when you reach your respective destination. Until then..." The image faded and the Wall pooled into merging, confused patterns of color.

"A flight in the morning?" Winn demanded in outrage. "He's got to be kidding! Who is he, anyway?"

"He was the Committee's mission operations controller," Tanard said, mulling over the message.

There was a lot left unsaid there and a lot to be taken on faith. The elaborate planning and organization behind their escape completely dispelled any thought of betrayal.

"You mean, he's the schmuck who cooked up the Italian deal that got us caught by the Fleet?"

Tanard's grinned briefly. "I received my instructions from him, friend Winn, but I doubt that he planned the operation."

"That's just great! And we're supposed to take his word and stroll to the Field with security crawling all over the place?"

"It's not a bad plan when you think about it," Tanard mused. "Your flight is obviously pre-booked and you'll be expected. That's hardly something a freshly landed prisoner would be able to arrange."

"And if you're wrong?"

"I will apologize."

"Oh, that really helps." Winn snorted and shook his head. "Why should we listen to this guy at all? With new IDs and money we could make our own way—"

"To what?" Railee said and stood up. Tanard lifted his hand to silence him.

"Friend Winn, we discussed this already."

Winn took a deep breath and clasped his hands behind his back to mask his agitation. He hated this confrontation with his commander, but there was too much at stake to take things on the word of a mealy-mouthed bureaucrat. He had sampled one result of bureaucratic incompetence and did not relish being the object of another such event.

"We discussed it, yes, but as I recall, nothing was decided. I am

grateful to the Committee for getting our butts off that Cantor transport, but after what I've been through, I think this only makes us even. They used us on Lemos, and when Italan failed, they abandoned us. I am not so anxious to trust them again."

Tanard appreciated the courage and strength it took Winn to say that. His first officer had changed, all right.

"I don't have an easy answer for you, friend Winn, and frankly, I'm too tired to give you the longwinded one. Yes, we were used, betrayed and discarded, and we may be discarded again. What we did on Lemos, did it make a difference in the larger scheme of things? Perhaps, but probably not, and I am fatalistic enough to realize it. Italan has always been a mad scheme doomed to failure and we were lucky to walk away from it alive."

"Rotting on Kalakan for two years, some luck."

"You could have been dead."

"I wouldn't have minded," Winn snapped. "If you knew that Italan was doomed, why did we go there?"

"Because it's what we do!" Tanard thundered. "Because those were our orders, and like it or not, we're mercenaries, little better than the raider scum we used on Lemos. Paint it with patriotism, but that's what we were. Every cause demands payment in blood and we certainly paid for ours in full." Tanard glared at them and raised his cyberplast arm.

After failing to take *Zaviar*, his ship crippled, he knew that death would be a preferable release to what the Fleet had in store for him. When Second Scout Terr boarded to take his surrender, he was about to kill the young officer, but fates conspired against him yet again. Instead of killing Terr, he lost his own arm in the ensuing firefight.

"There is very little patriotism in attacking an unarmed merchant," Tanard rasped wearily. "But patriotism or not, if they give me a ship, I am going out there again."

"And walk into another half-baked scheme?" Winn hissed, greatly daring.

"No more wild schemes, friend Winn. This time it will be on my terms."

"Like we have a lot of options," Railee added flatly. "We're marked men and the Fleet won't rest until it has us recaptured. You've got to know that. How far do you think your new ID will take you on your

own?”

“Far enough! I didn’t mind throwing away my career. That was gone when I stepped on Lemos, but it was *my* choice! What I mind is being tossed aside on a crummy deal like Italan for the sake of expediency.”

Tanard sighed and shook his head. Young and idealistic, and now disillusioned, his first officer was finding life’s hard knocks tough to take. It was time for a reality check. He thrust out his jaw and leaned forward.

“What did you think we were doing on Lemos, eh? The AUP Provisional Committee needed killers and we were available. We know how to drive ships and how to kill them. We are good at it and that’s why we got picked. If we manage to get out of here, you’ll be killing more ships.”

“Or get smeared by one more likely.”

“If you want out, you’re free to take your ID and go. I won’t stop you.”

“Not much of a choice, is it?” Winn muttered in resignation.

“You always have a choice,” Tanard said harshly. “The problem is in picking which one to take.”

The room was deathly silent as they stared at each other, knowing that by committing themselves, even Cantor would not be an option anymore.

“Well, I only have my life to lose. How bad can it get?” Winn said with a small grin. He never really had any choice and Tanard probably knew it.

Railee laughed and slapped him on the back.

“That remains to be seen,” Tanard murmured and absently massaged his cyberplast arm.

Next time, friend Terr, I won’t miss.

* * *

Terr pursued the last bit of runny egg with a piece of toast and popped it into his mouth. Chewing, he leaned back and grinned broadly at Dhar, who was frowning suspiciously at a glass of purple juice.

“What’s the matter? Something crawling in there?”

Dhar looked up and his scowl deepened. The vertical red slits of his

large orange eyes squinted in concentration.

“I am not sure I like the taste,” he said seriously.

Dhar’s deep, soft voice reminded Terr of still nights, open sands and dark skies. Momentarily distracted, he took a long pull from his own glass. The heavy juice had a zesty tartness that assaulted the mouth and left a lingering citrus aftertaste. It would never become his favorite, but it was the only palatable stuff the cargo tramp carried. The alternative, which the mostly Palean crew favored, wasn’t worth drinking.

“It hasn’t killed you yet,” he said comfortably.

“It’s a long haul, my brother. Give it time,” Dhar remarked darkly.

“Every morning, you bitch about the damned juice—”

“And you keep riding me about it.”

Terr grinned again and shook his head in resignation. “You’re a sourpuss, you know that? But I’m not going to let your juice problems ruin my day.”

A crewman left the serving counter and made for the exit, his thin hand wrapped around a large sandwich. He nodded to Terr as he strode past. Chairs scraped on the deck and there was a clatter of dishes and utensils as latecomers hurried off for the change of watch. The sounds echoed in the emptying mess. The warmth and intimacy filling the room earlier, the carefree chatter of the crew, it was all gone. Stale smells of cold food and burnt toast lingered in the air; silent ghosts among silent voices.

Behind the counter, the serving order cook stared pointedly at the two lone figures deep in conversation. “You guys about finished?”

Terr looked up and scowled. “Excuse me? We on a timer or something?”

The order cook glanced at the ceiling and sighed. “I keep an open mess and what do I get? Lack of appreciation, that’s what I get. I’ve been in a few clapped-out tramps in my day where they dish you a cold meal pack if you’re lucky. Here, I try to do the right thing by everybody, and what do I get? Lack of appreciation.”

Terr chuckled. “Doesn’t seem right, does it?”

“A wise bird, eh? Well, let me tell you something, sonny. I got work to do. Not like some. You and your pal clear your asses out of here before I take a cleaver to you. Civilians, phaf!” Muttering at the injustice of it all, the cook dumped a load of dishes into the washer.

Dhar gulped down the last of the foul cloying liquid, placed the empty glass on the table with a loud click, and sat back. He folded his arms across his chest and studied his brother's look of sardonic amusement. His mouth lifted when Terr absently touched the scar above his left temple, a characteristic gesture of inner turmoil, he had learned. He knew every crease, every dimple and every mark on Sankri's finely molded, yet firm features. It was a strong face that reflected a resolute character and a sometimes stormy personality.

After their last brutal exchange with Kai Tanard two years ago, which cost the renegade Fleet officer his right arm, then on Anar'on where the Diplomatic Branch Resident made his clumsy attempt to recruit Terr into the Unified Independent Front, Sankri had rebelled. He rebelled against what he had become and what others now expected of him as a result of his transfiguration as a Saddish-aa Wanderer. No, that was not quite true, Dhar reflected with brutal honesty and felt a momentary flush of guilt. The fact that his unselfish act saved Sankri's life was small compensation for the emotional struggle his brother now endured, or had endured. After the battle with Tanard, their ships battered and souls scarred, they were allowed a few days of precious leave on Anar'on. In the village of Dhar's fathers, among the rolling sands of the Saffal, Sankri had made a bargain with the god of Death that appeared to have given him a measure of inner peace. Over the last two years, Dhar had not seen his brother war with the demands of the Discipline or his newly found heritage—until this mission.

Tah, the gods will tell.

"I think we better do a fade," Terr said and pushed back his chair. "Unless, of course, you want another glass of juice," he added with malicious glee.

Dhar glared at him. "You have a cruel streak in you, Sankri, did you know that?"

"Yeah, so I've been told."

They took the cable-tube to the command deck. Its size matched everything else aboard the huge ship. The arrays of forward-sloping consoles were more suited to an M-4 than a bulk carrier. During one long uneventful watch, Terr questioned the watchstander about it. The arrangement was unusual and somewhat dated, he was told, but the ship was old and some of the perishable cargo they normally hauled required

special attention. Besides, the watchstander admitted somewhat sheepishly, it gave the crew something to fiddle with. Listening to sterilized computer reports just wasn't the same thing. Terr sympathized. Ships could be built that were completely automated, but they would lack that necessary human quality, the feel of being in control. Hence, manual over-instrumentation.

Beneath a brooding gray three katalan-wide display plate, the consoles were lined with rows of amber and green touch-sensitive pads. One of the largest navigation bubbles Terr had seen took up most of the curved ceiling. It was transparent. Stars peeked in, white and brittle. Brown gravity waves twisted and coiled about the ship as the bulk carrier tore through subspace.

Three contoured formchairs faced the display plate and the console repeaters. Two were occupied. As the cable-tube hatch hissed shut, the center chair swiveled. The elderly Karkan Master Pilot frowned and his slightly flattened head tilted. His neck was long and slender, making the movement very graceful. Broad scales covered the pale green head. They glistened and changed color as he moved. Beneath a thin ridge of darker scales, fishy black eyes stared from horizontal slits. A thin pointed tongue flicked briefly from a flat mouth.

Thoran had spaced since he was fourteen years old and seen many things in that time, not all of them pleasant. He saw service in the Fleet Marines before the glamour wore off and life became merely dull ship-board drudgery and mindless drill. He left the Fleet and joined the merchant service—and found his place in life. Herding cargo ships lacked some of the excitement and intensity that being a marine sometimes had, but what it did provide was security and predictability. Studying his two visitors, he had his doubts that they were merely civilian engineers. They carried themselves with a distinctive and all too evident military bearing, no matter how much they tried to disguise it by what they thought was ordinary dirt hugger behavior. Even now, standing there relaxed, the young Kaplan wore his command presence like a cloak, one the pilot recognized immediately. He doubted that any of the crew noticed, and accepted the fact phlegmatically. He didn't know what the two of them were doing aboard his ship and moreover, he didn't particularly care. As long as they stayed out of his way, he was happy to keep his nose out of their business.

Thoran gave a low hiss and cleared his throat. “Gentlemen...The mess hall a bit dull, is it?”

Terr’s mouth lifted and he nodded to the other watchstander. “Just stretching our legs, sir,” he said.

“Cookie wasn’t about to let you have it, was he?” Thoran mused, his eyes sparkling.

“He was a contributing reason,” Terr said with a straight face and Thoran chuckled.

“If you’re after some exercise, you should try a hike along the central spine. That’ll give your legs a good stretching.”

Terr winced and the memory made his legs ache. The VLBC was over thirteen hundred katalans long and he counted that walk as a unique experience, but it had not been *that* enthralling to make him want to repeat it.

“I shall keep it in mind, thanks,” he said dryly.

The proximity warning beeped and Thoran glanced at the nav plate. When he looked up, his eyes were dark with concern, the smile gone.

“We were tracking an anomalous contact for the past two hours or so and I suspect a raider. The damned thing is now on a direct intercept course. At our present closure rate, he’ll be on us in fifty minutes. The scum are everywhere. Can’t make a lift these days and they’re on you. What good is having the Fleet if they can’t protect us, eh?”

Terr sympathized. “IFF?” he asked and the watchstander shook his head. That ruled out a Fleet vessel.

“Nine months ago, I was jumped by one of those heathen,” Thoran complained bitterly. “I was lucky and managed to get away. This son of a canal worm is making the same type of approach and I’m not hanging around to find out if he *is* a raider. I’d be obliged if you two would clear my command deck. I’ve got a ship to con,” he snapped and glared at the watchstander. “Send the bastard a nav interrogative ping.”

A few seconds later the watchstander looked up from his board.

“Bulk carrier *Virana* on a high-speed run to Rumini 3C, and he apologizes if he made us nervous.”

Thoran’s tongue flicked in a blur. “Apologizes for making us nervous? Son of a cow! Tell him to keep his distance,” he snarled and swiveled in his seat. “You two still here?”

For a moment, Terr thought they were actually under attack, which

would have made him very happy. An actual attack might cost the lives of the carrier's crew, but he could not afford to think about that. There was too much at stake. What was the worth of a life? His conscience gave a protesting stir, which he quickly killed. He had no time for that either.

Six days out of Naurun, he was impatient for something to happen, yet hoping it wouldn't, for there would surely be death in it for someone. The irony wasn't lost on him. He had a mission to capture one of a swarm of raiders who took to plundering Kaleen shipping of late. Raiders were one of society's less savory byproducts, but with fewer practical uses. If he believed the indignation of local politicians, the situation around Kaleen had become so desperate and the loss of cargo so severe that planetary economies were being affected. If the nonsense was allowed to continue, it could potentially threaten the trading infrastructure and stability of Kaleen's eight systems.

Histrionics aside, everyone conceded that things were really not so bad, but it could become so if nothing was done to curb the raider threat. The similarity with raids on Pizgor's commerce two years ago was too striking to be merely coincidence. Discovery and subsequent destruction of the raider base on Lemos had solved Pizgor's immediate problem, but had it really resolved anything in the long run? Unable to eliminate Pizgor's carriers, it appeared that Sargon, and probably the Paleans as well, were out to strangle Pizgor's commerce by routing their ships away from its main shipping corridors. Had Sargon learned subtlety and were raids against Kaleen patterned along the same mold? First the club, then the gloved hand, was that it? Anabb seemed to think so and was the reason for Terr being out here, to get proof.

He and Dhar were posing as engineers shepherding two step-down fusion reactors to be installed on a Palean frontier world that skirted the Kaleen border. As far as the Very Large Bulk Carrier crew knew, they carried two civilian deadheads. The merchant service was understandably stuffy about getting itself involved in any Fleet skullduggery. The Master Pilot had nothing to grumble about, though. Passage was paid for the two of them and no amount of checking by anyone could prove that he and Dhar were anything else but Simplon engineers. The Diplomatic Branch was thorough about such small things. It was also a very good cover, which they had now used three times already, always

on a carrier sub-contracted to Naurun or Omiron; both Kaleen frontier worlds whose shipping was at the moment enjoying concentrated raider attention, if that was the right word.

“Just leaving,” Terr said and turned to the cable-tube hatch.

“Aw, stay if you like,” Thoran growled, “but keep out of my way.”

“Sir!” The watchstander gulped and went pale. “We have another contact and he is closing.”

“Range?” Thoran barked, his eyes scanning the nav repeater plot.

“He’s right on us, less than a light-minute below our port side...and *Virana* is also closing.”

“Raiders!” Thoran snarled. “I knew it!”

Terr had to admire the raider tactics. The second ship must have been powered down, lying in wait in the shipping corridor for its prey to stumble on it. *Virana* was clearly a distraction, one that was now coming in for its share of the kill.

Just then the comms console flickered and a sharp, guttural voice blared from the speakers.

“Bulk carrier, bulk carrier. You are about to be boarded. Drop normal and take to your survival blisters immediately. If you attempt to launch an emergency beacon or activate your transponders, I will destroy you in place. You have fifteen seconds before I fire on you.”

“Be damned!” Thoran jumped out of his seat and thrust his jaw at the watchstander. “Set the transponder and dump the beacons.”

“I wouldn’t do that, Pilot,” Terr said with quiet force and Thoran glared at him. The watchstander’s finger was poised above the beacon ejection pad.

“And why the hell not? Once we’re in our survival blisters, they’ll cream us. Raiders don’t like leaving any witnesses, Mister!”

“And if you piss them off, they will cream you for sure,” Terr said and waited as Thoran struggled between his desire to defy the raider and duty to his nineteen-man crew. It wasn’t much of a decision. The pilot’s chest deflated with a long hiss and his shoulders sagged as he looked at the watchstander.

“Drop normal and order Engineering to secure the primary drive reactor,” Thoran said and slumped into the command couch. “Enable blister ejection sequence and alert everyone to stand by abandon ship routine.” He shook his head and chuckled. “Twice in nine months.

Would you believe it? I've had this ship for two years and now I'm going to lose her. Pits!"

The VLBC's nav shield changed polarity and the distortion field precursor discharged. The carrier dropped into normal space in a cascade of yellow and orange light from the collapsing drive field. Dead in space the carrier waited as the raider dropped normal less than eighty thousand talans ahead of them. It immediately boosted to close the gap.

Thorán slapped the armrests and stood up. "I'll let the owners worry about the hull and cargo. Right now, we better be leaving." He gave Terr a sidewise glance. "I'll be very disappointed in you, Mister, if that raider decides to come after my crew."

"I'll apologize," Terr said with a grin.

Thorán snorted and jerked his head at the watchstander. "Give the abandon ship order, son, and your job is done. You two..." He pointed at Terr and Dhar. "You take a blister from the main loading dock with the others. I'll take one from here."

"Good luck, sir," Terr said and automatically stood to, realizing immediately that he had given himself away, but Thorán merely nodded, ignoring or choosing not to notice the gesture.

The cable hatch hissed open and Dhar stepped in. Without a backward glance, Terr turned and joined him.

"Main deck, Bay Three," Dhar growled as the hatch closed. A faint whine accompanied the falling car. There was a barely discernable ripple of shifting gravity as polarity changed and the hatch slid open.

Kalnár's cavernous loading bay was empty, the crew not anxious to chat with the coming visitors. This was only one of six bays on this level, designed to move cargo containers through the holds using enormous overhead cranes that hung suspended from massive H rails running along the ship's spine. The carrier had four such levels. Two M-1s could have easily slipped side by side through the equally immense hatchway. It took a lot of power to move the fifteen million mikans fully loaded hull, and even more to keep it moving through subspace.

The VLBCs were valuable beyond price. If a raider was lucky enough to capture one that carried the right cargo and managed to sell it, its crew could live like potentates for ten lifetimes. Of course, a carrier's cargo was rarely that attractive, usually a mixed bag of commodities. Even when it was loaded with lucrative cargo the raider was by

necessity forced to offload it at far below its actual commercial value, legitimate brokers shying away from such deals. That was what kept a raider running, unless he raided for reasons other than economic. There were plenty of religious and political zealots who saw destruction of an enemy's ability to trade and thereby sustain its economy, a perfectly legitimate tactic if it brought an enemy to his knees.

It was a nasty way to do business.

It was also the kind of war that seemed to be waged right now against Naurun and Omiron. A large part of Terr's current job was to find out who was orchestrating it, which was the reason why he wanted to capture a raider intact. Getting hold of intact computer records would be a prize worth the lives of a carrier's crew. Wouldn't it? The Fleet had captured raiders before, but invariably the effort yielded them very little or nothing. The raider would trash the ship's computer before the marines could board and stop them. Modern methods of interrogation were only partially successful at best. What worked for the interrogators also worked for the raiders.

Sophisticated conditioning made it possible for a raider pilot or nav officer to forget everything of consequence by merely using a set of code words. It was frustrating. Of course, that same sophistication allowed an interrogator to break through the conditioning, but the process tended to be somewhat harsh and the subject was not much good for anything else afterward. It was a practice frowned upon by the authorities and forbidden by Fleet regulations. Despite the fact that raiders were merely pirates, the law entitled them to due process, otherwise the Captal government would be no better than the raiders themselves. Once correct and moral behavior was sidestepped for the sake of expediency or some seemingly higher lofty goal, anarchy and dictatorship were not far behind.

It was sometimes inconvenient being the good guy.

But Terr was not a Fleet officer anymore, not technically, and he was under cover. It made the game a bit more even as far as he was concerned, although he knew Dhar held severe misgivings about the method he intended using to achieve his end.

Well, rit! A good guy was allowed to have a bit of fun now and then, no?

He gathered Dhar with his eyes and nodded at the docking console.

“Let’s see what our raider friend is up to.”

On the command deck the pilot watched as the cable-tube hatch closed behind the two odd individuals. He gave a low hiss, his tongue flicking rapidly from his mouth, and turned. With a last glance at the consoles, he jerked his head toward the two blister hatches pulsing soft amber. A solid yellow ring circled each hatch.

“Time that we were going, son,” he said and the grateful watchstander got up and hurried toward the nearest hatch. He pressed a yellow pad set waist high and the hatch slid into the bulkhead with a raspy whisper. Without looking back, he scrambled inside. Thoran followed in a more dignified fashion. When he reached the blister, he paused and his eyes swept around the command deck one last time at a ship he had grown to love. He set his jaw and climbed into the blister.

He blinked in the gloomy interior and took the right seat. Without a word, he stabbed the yellow purge pad. The hatch clanged shut and the survival blister surged down the launch tube. He grunted as the restraining field held him in place. Then they were clear, the solid bulk of the carrier rotated above them from the blister’s spin.

“Open a local comms link,” Thoran said and the watchstander tapped pads on the simple console. The blister arrested its spin and boosted away from the carrier. Thoran thought he saw a long boxy shape close with his ship before darkness swallowed everything.

“Comms open,” the watchstander said, somewhat intimidated by the pilot’s close presence. Standing watch with his commanding officer was one thing, but having the pilot in his lap, so to speak, was unnerving.

“Everybody check in,” Thoran ordered.

Three blisters reported in, accounting for his remaining eighteen crewmen. His two passengers were not on board any of the blisters. He was about to broadcast again, asking them to report in, then stopped himself. The raider could be monitoring this channel. If they realized that two of the carrier’s crew might still be on board, they could possibly take action—against him. It could also conceivably compromise whatever those two individuals were up to. It wasn’t his problem, he decided, and he never did figure the two for civilians. He ordered the blisters to form up on him and the little craft sped toward the stars.

The raider ship retracted its weapons projector dome and closed

with the carrier. It slowed and crept toward the central port loading hatch, the vast hull of the VLBC dwarfing it even though the raider itself was not a small ship. The raider could not hope to take on board more than a fraction of the carrier's cargo, but with *Virana*, they could at least offload the more marketable items. If a patrolling Fleet picket happened to show up, the raid would still clear an operating profit. If there was time the hull would be taken to a remote system where it would be stripped and gutted.

The raider edged gingerly to fifteen katalans off the VLBC's sheer side, stopped and extended a forty katalan-wide loading tube. The armored tube mated against the hatch bearing with a silent clang of locking clamps. Once the carrier was secured and its cargo analyzed, they would then extend additional loading tubes.

Standing before the docking console, Terr watched with keen interest as the raider first matched speed with the carrier, then slowly, but purposefully, drew closer. The image in the display plate grew until it swamped the stars. A moment later the loading tube connected and the snap of clamps echoed hollow through the hold.

"Time we made ourselves scarce," Dhar said gravely and turned. Terr grabbed his arm. Dhar stopped, but did not look back.

"Nightwings, I intend to disable, not kill."

Dhar slowly turned his head and looked down at his brother. His eyes burned with the fires of accusation and disapproval.

"It is not *right*, Sankri," he protested in righteous indignation.

For long seconds, Terr stared at his brother and felt keen disappointment. This was the first time Dhar had so openly disagreed with his decision on a course of action and he felt uneasy at the chasm of ideology that had opened between them. Out of necessity they came on board unarmed. If they were to face off with the raiders, there was only one way to do it—with Death in their hands.

"I don't have time to debate this," he said stiffly. "Will you support me or not?" He regretted the words even as he said them.

Dhar's features twisted with genuine pain. "Sankri, my brother, if you need to ask—"

"Nightwings..." Terr sighed and shook his head. Of all the times for this to come up! "Let's get into our hiding hole before we have every raider in that ship arguing with us."

Immortal in Shadow

Even as they hurried toward what looked like haphazardly stacked containers, Terr was desperately unhappy at what he was about to do. The words from the *Saftara* and the teachings of the Discipline didn't help him here, for the men he was about to face didn't live by a code of honor, or any code, for that matter. Did that justify *his* action, or merely excused it? Wryly, he reflected not for the first time the dichotomy of the Wanderer Discipline, born among the sands of the Saffal, nurtured by the collective wisdom of the Rahtir to meet the needs of the Wanderers and the brutal demands of chaos permeating the Serril. It was a seemingly irreconcilable clash between order and upheaval. Though he walked in the shadow of the god of Death, he stood helpless in that chaos, unless he turned it against itself.

Two years ago, he stood on the warm sands of the Saffal with brittle stars hung in a sweeping tapestry above him and the lightnings of anguish coiled in his hands. When he loosed the lightnings, even the desert cried out at his pain. He did not want to be a child of Death, or carry the burden that exercising such power exacted. He didn't want to be a god, but that power also made his blood sing and he walked immortal beneath its cloak. In a flash of brutal honesty, he knew himself unworthy of such a gift. The temptations for abuse were many. That night, among the shifting sands, he made a bargain with his god.

He would use the power the god had chosen to bestow on him and test the limits of the *Saftara* and its writings. To do otherwise would surely drive him to madness.

Why couldn't Nightwings understand that? Couldn't his brother see that if he could not play the immortal, the lightnings would consume him? He was not abandoning the Discipline or its teachings, but he had to live them on his terms in an environment that was as alien as he was.

Dhar reached the containers, slipped into a gap and was gone. Terr paused. Behind him the ponderous bay hatch groaned and slid into the hull frame. He crouched into the opening between two containers and waited. Dhar's warm breath was comforting on the back of his neck and he made a decision. Torn with inner turmoil, he stilled his breathing and turned to face the tall, shadowy figure hunched before him. He reached with his right hand and placed his palm against Dhar's chest.

"Nightwings, we are brothers and I only wish to be at peace in your shadow," he whispered with fierce intensity, willing his eyes to reach

across the gloom that separated them, to bridge the gap of understanding that had opened between them.

Dhar drew in his breath with a sharp hiss. This was not the time for Sankri to doubt himself because he disapproved of his ethics. Later, he would need to heal the wound in both of them, but not now. Sankri was right. They were one and that was all that mattered, that always would matter. Everything else was pettiness. He placed his own hand against Terr's chest.

"Then be at peace, my brother, for I shall always be with you," he said, his voice hoarse as it trembled deep within his chest.

Something flowed between them and Terr felt a stirring of power as Death touched him. The strength of Dhar's presence soothed and comforted him. Everything was all right and he was a fool to have doubted his brother.

With the shadow of Death on him, he silently mouthed the words from the *Saftara*.

"I shall walk in the shadow of Death. And it shall be with me all the days of my life. With shadow shall I smite my enemies and with thunder shall I purge their land." His hackles rose and he had an urge to raise his arms. Small blue lightnings slithered across his hands. "And all those who stand with me in the shadow of Death shall know my power and be comforted. With shadow and thunder shall I walk their land."

Death held ready in his hands and Dhar's comforting presence beside him, Terr was reassured. His brother had misgivings; unfounded, that was all. Who was to say Dhar wasn't right? Besides, a good stiff quarrel was a healthy thing and blew away the cobwebs of complacency. Didn't it? Unfortunately, he knew that this particular squabble was not over yet. No matter. Differences aside, Dhar was with him now and the differences would be sorted out later.

He heard loud, high-pitched voices as the raiders boarded, Paleans, by the sound of them. A moment later one of the overhead cranes gave a low groan and there was a long hiss as it began to move. He heard cargo hatches open and the voices faded. He edged toward the opening and cautiously peered out. There was no one in sight, the raiders presumably busy checking out the cargo. The brightly lit loading tube beckoned and Terr sprinted across the ninety odd katalans of open deck, his ship's boots soundless. He did not pause when he reached the tube, but

quickly closed the short distance to the raider's cavernous hold. His nose wrinkled at the sharp acid smell of the air as he searched for the cable-tube hatch. Every ship carried its own peculiar ambient odor, one that was oblivious to its crew, of course. The bulk carrier's atmosphere had a soft, sweetish smell, reminding him of finely ground sugar and freshly baked buns.

"Here," Dhar whispered beside him and pointed at a hatch on the other side of the opening. Another short sprint, chests heaving from the exertion, they waited for the tube to open. Each second dragged on interminably and seemed to last an hour, increasing their chance of discovery and inevitable death.

"Come on!" Terr hissed with frustrated intensity and Dhar grinned, his eyes bright with excitement, the right or the wrong of it the least of his worries right now.

The tube hatch suddenly opened and Terr stood face to face with a tall, scruffy Palean. The Palean's enormous black eyes grew even larger and his small mouth opened in astonishment. But he was quick. Even as he reached for the powerful looking needler stuck in his waistband, Terr shot out his arm.

"Naughty, naughty."

Small blue sparks jumped from his hand and struck the Palean's chest, defusing as they spread. The raider gasped in shocked agony and collapsed to the floor like a soggy rag.

Terr grimaced as he stared at the body. "Scum! Should have burned him."

"Sankri!"

"Never mind. Wishful thinking. Good thing he was alone."

"No matter," Dhar said beside him and Terr looked up. Dhar's wiry two-point-three katalan frame was relaxed, but he looked ready for anything. Little blue sparks slithered along his arms. The vertical red slits of his orange eyes betrayed nothing. The thin membranes, designed to protect the eyes from fine sand, were retracted. His yellow skin looked dry, drawn tight over the bony ridges of his long face. His nose, broad and flat with flared nostrils, added to his skeletal appearance. No one could mistake him for anything but a creature of the desert. Terr had no trouble imagining him standing tall and aloof on a wind-swept dune, cape flying behind him, his eyes lost in the shimmering heat haze where

an amber sky met the flowing sands.

He nodded once and they stepped into the tube. “Command deck,” he snapped and the hatch slid shut. “If we’re lucky the place will be deserted,” he added musingly, not really believing it. They could expect at least two watchstanders on station, ready to maneuver the ship in case of an emergency.

“Mmm,” was Dhar’s skeptical comment.

“You take the left one and I’ll take the right one,” Terr said. “If there are more of them, just let them have it. They won’t be armed and won’t expect anything.”

Dhar nodded meaningfully at the needler stuck in Terr’s waist.

Terr sighed in exasperation, shook his head and crouched, his arm held level and ready. Nightwings was being a pain again. The hatch opened and he instantly loosed the lightnings. Bright arcs of blue lanced at the right command couch. The luckless watchstander hardly had time to swivel around as he was enveloped in a soft radiance that slithered and danced over his body. The Palean gave a choked gurgle, jerked uncontrollably and fell to the deck. His arms trembled as blue coils drained from his body. Terr glanced at the left couch, but it was all over. The second watchstander was slumped back, his eyes staring vacantly at the transparent nav bubble, mouth slack in contorted anguish.

Terr craned his neck and peered quickly around the deck. There was no one else about. He grabbed the Palean in the cable-tube by his left arm and dragged him part way out. The head gave a hollow thump as it bumped against the hatch slides. He stepped across the opening, leaned toward the small control panel set waist high and tapped an orange contact pad. The pad turned green and locked the hatch open, preventing anyone else from getting to the command deck. The body blocking the hatch slides would also stop the tube being reactivated from Engineering.

He glanced at Dhar and noticed the tension in his face. Dhar slowly turned his head and their eyes locked.

“It is better to give than to receive, eh?” Terr said with an amused smile.

“A dangerous thing we are playing with here, Sankri,” Dhar said, looking grave. He pursed his lips and strode toward the three couches. His brother was right. The tingle of power still coursing through his

body, the flash of joy and terrible certainty when he poured forth the wrath of Death, made him feel invulnerable before the puny creatures who dared stand before him. Sankri's irreverent remark rang too true for comfort.

An untidy heap in the left couch, the Palean's body looked crumpled and used. Small black burns charred the tunic around his chest. Dhar easily lifted the slight form with one arm and dropped it against the console. The Palean wasn't a consideration anymore. He would remain unconscious for several hours yet, although when he wakes, he would probably wish that he were really dead. Dhar had experienced Death's touch and knew. The agony of returning life was seemingly an eternity of electric pins and needles eating at the whole body as feeling returned. He wiped his hand against his trousers in an absent gesture and leaned over the nav plot display plate.

Virana was still heading for them, but it would take her a bit longer now that the bulk carrier was dead in space and no longer under boost.

"The other raider is now one hour forty-nine minutes from intercept," he said.

Terr gave a small shrug. "You cannot have everything." *Virana* was an unpleasant complication, but not a fatal one. Unless, of course, his planned help took its time getting here. He pulled the heaped body away from the right couch, stepped to the comms panel and tapped in a pre-set frequency.

"Computer, issue an all ships signify on the set channel," he ordered and reached for the ID tag in his trouser pocket. Satisfied, he settled himself into the couch.

"All ships signify transmitted," the computer answered in a strong, but soft voice. It did not take long. "Incoming transmission. Do you wish to respond?"

"Open channel," Terr said and looked at the main display plate as it cleared. A Palean First Scout stared at him with undisguised curiosity.

"Bulk carrier, you are transmitting on a restricted channel—"

"First Scout," Terr cut him off. "Designate your ship and distance."

The Palean arched his eyebrows. "SSF M-2 *Tabal*, four-point—"

"Please close on my position at maximum boost and stand by for further instructions." It would take the M-2 over three hours to reach the bulk carrier, but the patrol ship could ferry prisoners, which would

be useful. The First Scout would not be too happy, but Terr had no time right now for bruised egos. He inserted his ID card into a slot above the comms pads array. “My authentication and clearance codes are coming through now.”

The Palean looked understandably annoyed until he saw the Diplomatic Branch authorization codes in his display plate. His eyes widened and he stood straighter.

“Codes received and verified, sir. Closing at maximum boost,” he piped and the display plate cleared.

“You have another message,” the computer announced. “Do you wish—”

“Open channel,” Terr ordered.

A crusty old Karkan Master Scout stared coldly from the plate, his pointed tongue flicking from his mouth. Terr almost grinned at what he imagined would be the senior officer’s reaction to his request.

“What in the pits is this, Mister?” the Master Scout demanded. “Do you realize—”

“Master Scout, please designate your ship and distance and stand by for my authentication codes,” Terr said calmly and pressed a touch-sensitive pad. The Karkan’s fishy eyes bulged when he received the transmission.

“Of all the asinine...” The Karkan spluttered and hissed, but he had very little choice and Terr knew it. “SSF M-4 *Turin*, two-point-three—”

Terr was very relieved. At one-point-six lights an hour, it would take the M-4 one hour and thirty minutes to get to him, and an M-4 was a very handy force multiplier to have around.

“Please close on my position at maximum boost.”

“Close on your position? What’s going on, Mister?”

“Just a moment, sir,” Terr said and tapped a pad, leaving the Karkan glaring at him. “Computer, cancel the all ships signify.” He tapped the pad again. “My associate and I have boarded a raider and we’re in control of the command deck.”

“Hah!”

“The raider crew are busy checking over the VLBC in which we were recently passengers. They don’t know I have their command deck—yet.”

“Hah!”

“There is an additional complication. Another raider vessel is closing on my position.”

“I have him on my nav plot,” the Karkan hissed. “You’ve got yourself a predicament, haven’t you, Mister?”

“Master Scout! You will not intercept the target. You are authorized to call on any support to pursue it, but I need you here. You also have *Tabal*, an M-2, closing on me. I want him to carry any prisoners to Kalkan.”

The Karkan was clearly not used to being ordered around like this, but then there was Terr’s authority.

“Very well. There is more to this than meets the eye, I am sure, but we’ll cover that later. Your authentication codes check out and I have no option but to comply. Closing on you at max boost,” the Karkan said and the display plate turned pale gray.

Terr leaned back into the couch and allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. He stretched his arms and grunted as the joints creaked.

“This time, my brother, we may have actually gotten away with it.”

Dhar frowned and pointed at one of the display plates. “Perhaps not. According to these, there are two maintenance crawlways that lead to this deck and both are manually operated.”

“You were studying the ship’s schematics?”

“It seemed the thing to do.”

“Okay, show me.”

Dhar walked across the deck toward the cable-tube. Outlined on the right side of the hatch was a green door. He tugged it back and it slid into the bulkhead. On the floor was a thick panel that covered a square manhole.

Terr pulled the needler from his waist, made an adjustment and fired at the clamp securing the panel. White smoke spurted from the panel and the clamp glowed dull red, then turned white. Molten metal flowed to the floor as acrid smoke filled the cubicle. He stopped firing, waved his hand through the smoke and looked brightly at Dhar.

Dhar studied the ruined panel. The lump of metal that was the clamp had already cooled. A thin wisp of white smoke struggled to rise. This would not hold back a determined assault from the crew armed with cutting equipment, but it was a satisfactory, if unorthodox solution

to the immediate problem. Once the raider crew realized that they were boarded and they could not reach the command deck, it would take them some time to get around to try the crawlway. Hopefully, by that time the M-4 would have reached them.

Dhar pointed at a square panel directly under the nav bubble, set flush with the deck. Terr ran the needler beam around the edge of the panel, fusing it to the rest of the deck.

“Any other problems?”

“Command deck!” the inter-deck comms suddenly blared. “You clowns asleep up there? Where in the bloody hell are my position checks?” demanded a harsh, guttural voice, which gave the impression of a large, angry predator.

Terr and Dhar exchanged glances.

“I would say that this could be a problem,” Dhar said dryly.

“Rit!” Terr swore, disgusted with himself. *Of course* the raider commander would be on alert for prowling Fleet ships, ready to disengage from the bulk carrier and dash for a quick getaway. It was always the little things...

“Ren Lee?” the voice was softer now, clearly suspicious.

“When you were snooping around those schematics, did you happen to see if this tub has an auxiliary control room?” Terr asked, his forehead creased in concentration.

“There isn’t one, but the ship can be maneuvered from Engineering,” Dhar said.

“Maybe they can get this thing moving, but they cannot navigate.” Terr nodded with satisfaction.

“Do you want to contact *Turin*?”

“And tell them what? This won’t make her come faster. No, we’ll sit tight and see what happens.”

“Lee? If this is—” The harsh voice suddenly cut off.

“I think their curiosity is aroused, my brother,” Dhar drawled and Terr smiled.

A moment later the green cable-tube control pad flickered and turned brown. The hatch jolted, but remained open, the body across the slides prevented it from closing. Terr was glad to see that his first line of defense was holding.

“I think we can expect visitors any time now,” he said and waited.

After three minutes, dull clangs came from under the deck hatch and the maintenance alcove. The raiders were probably using personal communicators to have timed it so close. It was then that Terr sensed rather than saw a panel slide open on the left side of the cable-tube hatch. He automatically turned and raised his needler.

“Drop it!” the familiar guttural voice snarled from the gloomy alcove. Terr didn’t hesitate and opened his hand. The weapon made a loud thud as it struck the deck. Death stirred within him and his shoulders twitched.

A tall imposing figure stepped out of the alcove, dressed in a black zip-jacket and gray pants. His round head was perfectly bald and he had thick, purple lips, now pressed tight beneath a broad nose and small pinpoint red eyes. His skin was midnight black with a faint oily sheen. The ugly snub-nosed needler was almost swallowed in his bulky hand.

The raider gave a mirthless smile and jerked back his head.

“I found this little access hideaway useful more than once.”

“Yeah. I can see how it can be handy,” Terr said, watching the other’s eyes. A very tough customer, he decided. An immediate chemical hate passed between them and the raider pursed his lips.

“I don’t know who you two birds are,” the raider hissed, full of menace, “but I promise you’ll sing to me before I kill you.”

“Kadatar...” a muffled voice came from within the alcove’s crawlway. The raider’s eyes barely flickered, but that moment of distraction was enough.

Dhar did not move his arm to warn the raider. He merely lifted his left palm and there was a sharp crack as a bolt of blue light struck the raider on the chest. The raider screwed his eyes at the pain shooting through him and doubled up. He gave a strangled gasp, tried to bring up the needler and slowly toppled to the deck. His shoulders convulsed and he was still.

Dhar glanced at Terr and strode to the body. He went down on one knee, touched the raider’s neck and looked up.

“He’ll live,” he said indifferently and looked into the alcove. It was the same setup as with the maintenance one. He picked up the raider’s ugly needler and walked into the alcove. He touched a pad on the bulkhead beside the opening and watched as the inspection panel silently closed and sealed. He aimed the needler and traced the fine white beam

around the seal. The acrid smoke irritated his throat and he coughed to clear it. When the job was done, he stared at the cooling metal for one long second, contemplating what he had done, and stepped out.

“You up there!” a high-pitched Palean voice came from the inter-deck comms. “What do you want? A cut of the action? We can talk.”

“We’ll talk when *Turin* gets here, you son of a canal worm,” Terr muttered as he bent over Kadatar.

“I don’t know what you clowns have in mind,” the comms voice piped, “but this is what’s going down. If you don’t release the cable-tube, we’re gonna turn off your air. You won’t last an hour. Hear me?”

Terr swept his eyes around the deck, judging its size and snorted. They could easily last twice that long. Besides, if things got really desperate, there was always the command deck survival blister. He glanced at Dhar.

“Check the nav plot,” he said and started searching through the raider’s pockets. Nothing, not even a tissue. How then did the Palean know there were two of them? A personal communicator? He turned the body over and there it was, on the deck next to the outstretched left hand. Terr grinned, but it wasn’t with humor as he reached for the little pebble device. He checked the setting, switched it off and waved the thing before his face.

Dhar nodded. “One hour, sixteen minutes before the M-4 closes,” he said.

Around them the touch-sensitive pads blinked occasionally as the machines whispered among themselves. For the moment they were safe and he felt Death drain from him, leaving him with an emptiness that was disturbing. What concerned him more was the keen sense of regret that he no longer felt immortal, above the mere doings of foolish creatures. Was that the trap; the craving to loose the lightnings, followed by intoxication of wielding absolute power, and finally the addiction? If he, a native Saddish-aa Wanderer, was tempted, what must Sankri feel? The insight sobered him and he looked at his brother with new understanding.

“You okay?” Terr asked, noting Dhar’s preoccupation.

The corner of Dhar’s mouth turned up in a stillborn smile.

“I was reminded that standing beneath the hand of Death, its shadow can also a prison make.”

“But who walks free, my brother? The person standing in shadow or the one who casts it?”

This time Dhar’s smile was broad and genuine. “Ah, something for the Rahtir to contemplate,” he said and sprawled his length into the leftmost couch. Without hesitating, he lifted his long legs and planted them with a thump on the console frame. Terr raised an eyebrow. Normally, Dhar shunned all forms of flippancy and this display was most irregular and out of character.

“Why don’t you relax,” he offered quizzically.

Dhar sighed, leaned back and locked his hands behind his head. “I believe I will.”

Terr shook his head and took the right seat.

Aware of his brother beside him, reassured by his presence, Terr closed his eyes. There was little they could do except wait. For him, waiting sometimes came hard, but he was learning patience. The influence of the Discipline was difficult to shake. He didn’t really want to, but following it meant walking a rigid straight line, and he itched at such confinement. He preferred a degree of looseness. Having to be morally correct all the time had always been a tight fit for him.

There were no more messages from the inter-deck comms and he wondered what the raiders were up to. Whatever they were planning, it wouldn’t do them much good.

A sharp beep from the console caused his eyes to snap open.

“Warning!” the computer blared. “Survival blister hatches locked and ejection sequence disabled.”

Terr glanced at Dhar. “Someone down there is thinking and I don’t like that kind of thinking.”

Dhar dropped his legs to the deck and looked up at the transparent nav bubble. “Coming at us from the outside?”

“Let’s not wait to find out,” Terr said as he scanned the weapons console. “Computer, report any object approaching the command level.”

“Sled-pad with one occupant now at two hundred and forty katalans. Closure rate is six katalans per second.”

“Distance above the hull?”

“Thirty-five katalans.”

“Raise the primary shield grid and hold at thirty katalans.” The

shield was designed to extend several talans, not to hug the ship. Would the screen lines form? Terr was about to find out.

“Primary shield grid raised,” the computer announced dispassionately.

It worked!

Dhar looked at his brother in open admiration.

“That was quick thinking, Sankri.”

“The guy out there is in for a nasty surprise when he tries to close,” Terr said with a grim smile. “Computer, status of approaching sled-pad?”

“Sled-pad in uncoordinated flight mode after contact with the shield grid.”

Probably had every circuit fused as it’s own nav screen reacted with the ship’s grid, Terr thought with satisfaction. He looked out the nav bubble, but there was nothing to see except stars and the sheer side of the VLBC beside them.

“I think it might be time we contacted *Turin*, Sankri,” Dhar said gravely and Terr nodded. His maneuver bought them time, but how much and would it be enough?

“Warning, primary shield grid deactivated from Engineering.”

Terr smiled and nodded.

“That was a cute trick,” the Palean’s thin voice came from the comms. “It cost me a crewman, but it won’t work again. You guys got eleven minutes before we burn our way in. By the way, if you were planning to call someone, I wouldn’t bother. Your comms are down.”

“He is right,” Dhar said. “All long range comms are offline.”

“Including emergency bands?”

“Everything. We’ve only got close range ship-to-ship left.”

“Great! And *Turin*?”

“Still thirty-two minutes away.”

“Rit!” It wasn’t meant to be *this* hard! “They may get us, but they obviously don’t care for their pals up here.”

“More shares for the others,” Dhar said equitably.

“Hah! Computer, activate the emergency transponder, now! Hold for five seconds and discontinue,” Terr growled, his face bleak. “That should get *Turin*’s attention.”

“Emergency transponder activated...Discontinued,” the computer

said.

“Computer,” Dhar prompted immediately. “Begin core dump sequence, hard copy.”

“Core dump sequence enabled. Awaiting final authorization code group.”

“Remote download from ID tag,” Dhar ordered and waited. Would the computer accept the Fleet override codes? It felt like an eternity before the computer responded.

“Authorization accepted. Core dump in progress. Duration, four minutes.”

“Good man,” Terr said warmly and yanked his tag out of the comms slot. “Now for the hard part.” He looked at the cable-tube and pursed his lips. “Let’s test your theory about the shares.” He swiveled his seat, got up and walked to Kadatar. Bending down, he grabbed the outstretched left arm and unceremoniously dragged the limp body into the tube. He was annoyed with himself. Dhar was right on the ball to initiate the core dump. After all, that’s what they were here for. Instead of feeling smug and complacent, contemplating the meaning of life, he should have initiated the dump the minute they disposed of Kadatar. That oversight might cost them the whole mission.

A blue and white color-coded transparent prism rose from the comms panel.

“Core dump sequence completed,” the computer announced.

Dhar stood up and reached for the precious thing. Pocketing the crystal wafer, he strode into the tube. He was about to push the crewman’s prone body away from the hatch when Terr pulled him back.

“Not yet. Let’s see if they really mean to burn their way in. Every minute that we delay—”

“Gives *Turin* more time to get here,” Dhar added.

“Right.”

They waited in silence. What was there to say? As the minutes dragged, Terr kept glancing at the nav bubble. There was nothing out there, but that didn’t mean much. The bubble had a limited field of view and anyone could sneak up on them without being seen. He figured the Palean raider was a tad optimistic about his eleven minutes.

“Time’s up,” the Palean’s voice announced suddenly.

Speaking of the devil...

“You guys release the cable-tube and you’ll die easy. Don’t let the fact that Kadatar is up there with you make you think we won’t do what I say. He’s got a tough break, that’s all. What’ll it be? You’ve got—”

“Raider vessel. This is SSF *Turin*. Report your condition.”

Terr looked at Dhar and grinned. “In comms range! The gods have not abandoned us yet,” he said and hurried toward the comms console.

“They must have gone to emergency boost when we set off the transponder,” Dhar said after him.

Terr pulled out his ID tag and slipped it into the comms slot.

“SSF *Turin*, stand by for my authentication codes,” he said and pressed a pad. The comms plate cleared and the Karkan Master Scout scowled at him.

“I figured something was wrong when I couldn’t raise you.”

“Please close and board. Have your assault marines ready for some close quarter action,” Terr said.

“Things getting a bit warm, eh, Mister?” the Karkan hissed good-naturedly and his tongue flicked.

“Let’s not ruin what’s been a fun day so far, Master Scout,” Terr said dryly and the Karkan chuckled.

“Very well. Can you hold out for six minutes?”

“I’ll have to, won’t I?”

The screen cleared and Terr let out a long breath.

“Look.” Dhar pointed at the nav bubble.

A sled-pad drifted down and stopped. A pressure-suited figure fiddled with something behind him and raised what looked like a modified riot gun.

“I know you guys can see the sled-pad,” the Palean raider announced. “You think you’ve got us boxed in with that M-4 out there? That might be, but you won’t be around to enjoy it.”

A searing blue-white beam lanced from the suited figure outside and the nav bubble immediately polarized to cut the glare. Terr plucked out his tag and sprinted for the cable-tube. They watched as the transparent hull material began to glow bright red. The center turned white. There was a bright shower of sparks and the hole immediately self-sealed, frustrating the raider’s attempt to cut his way through. Sooner or later, though, the self-sealing mechanism would overload and fail.

Dhar was about to push the body blocking the hatch out of the way

when an intense pulse of yellow light suddenly lit the deck. There was an immediate and strong smell of ozone as the air ionized. Small blue sparks slithered across exposed surfaces, crackling eerily as they jumped from console to console. The cable-tube interior glowed as though cloaked in Death's shadow. Sparks arced from the walls and struck exposed hands and faces in an exquisite dance of tiny insect bites. Just as suddenly the effect stopped.

When the M-4 fired, Terr caught a glimpse of the suited figure outside, bathed in the deadly glow. The figure dropped the cutting rod and raised both arms to protect his face. The sled pad's nav screen field lines flared in yellow and green discharges and failed. The vehicle lost attitude, slammed into the nav dome and caromed into space.

The main comms plate cleared.

"Raider vessel, sorry about that, but you looked like you could use some help," the Karkan said, not looking at all sorry.

Terr snorted, glanced at Dhar and shook his head, still smarting from the little burns on his skin. He walked to the comms console and tapped a pad.

"We did need your help, *Turin*," he said. "A somewhat extreme example, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps, but it was effective. Preparing to dock with you now," the Karkan said and cut contact.

Twenty minutes later it was all over. Terr was told that after the marines boarded, there was some spirited, but sporadic fighting. Four raiders were killed and five injured to rifle and needler fire. The rest surrendered. The marines were still rounding up raiders in the VLBC, but no one was about to deny them a bit of fun.

While the marines were enjoying themselves, Terr and Dhar waited on the command deck. When the marines finally came up, Kadatar and the two unconscious watchstanders were unceremoniously dragged off, none too gently. The Karkan Master Scout himself came up then, accompanied by a very young and nervous Second Scout. Standing in front of the open tube, he looked around quickly, then fixed his fishy eyes on Terr.

"Well, young man?"

"There are three or four survival blisters out there," Terr said.

"The VLBC crew? We'll get them," the Karkan hissed and snapped

quick instructions to the hapless Second Scout. On receiving his orders the young officer stood to and was about to leave when Terr raised his hand.

“Wait! The VLBC crew will be returned to their ship and the bulk carrier allowed to proceed on its way.”

The Karkan frowned. “Procedure calls for—”

“For whatever I say...sir,” Terr said mildly and the Second Scout gaped at him. He was obviously not used to seeing his commander contradicted like this.

The Karkan glanced at the young man and jerked his head at the cable-tube. Grateful, the officer fled. Alone, the Karkan glared and stepped to Terr.

“I am not accustomed to being ordered about like this, Mister! Especially not by some civilian flunkey!” Hiss.

“I regret if I caused you any embarrassment, sir,” Terr said, not really giving a damn. He was tired and reaction was setting in. What he needed right now was a long shower and time to write a report to Anabb—a major downside working for the Diplomatic Branch.

“Hah! You take a lot on yourself, Mister. If that’s all then—”

“I’m afraid not. Please assign a skeleton crew and have this ship taken to Kalakan. You can transfer the prisoners to *Tabal* and use it as escort.”

“And you two?”

“We are going with *Tabal*. If you could arrange to have power restored to the long range comms, I would be grateful. I need to contact Taltair.”

The Karkan gave a soft hiss of displeasure, his tongue getting a workout. Finally, he dragged out his communicator and issued more orders. When he finished, he sighed and shook his head.

“If you were under my command...I have an M-3 closing on *Virana*. They sheered off as soon as I came into range, but that won’t help them. We’ve got them. Happy?” he snarled and stomped into the cable-tube. The hatch closed behind his back.

“A proud man, Sankri,” Dhar murmured. Terr looked at him.

“And I could have been more diplomatic, is that it?”

Dhar arched an eyebrow. “Far be it for me to question the wisdom of my superior officer, sir.”

“Asshole!” Terr laughed and punched him on the shoulder.

The *Turin* crew didn’t waste any time, and moments later the comms console pads lit up and flickered in a self-test. Terr nodded in appreciation.

“We’re in business again,” he said with satisfaction. “Computer, open a channel to Taltair, Diplomatic Branch, personal for Anabb Karr.” Terr remained standing as he waited for the main display plate to clear. He was not sure what time it was back there and he could be coming in for a withering blast. He gave a mental shrug. A moment later the plate cleared and he was looking at Anabb’s personal aide.

Ariane had delicate high cheekbones, full lips and a long neck. Her head was narrow, oval, with no hair. Her large dark eyes had captivated more than one of Anabb’s operatives, including him. She was simply gorgeous and he couldn’t figure out how she put up with Anabb’s rude and crusty behavior. Outlined against the transparent window-screen, Terr could see the Center’s towers lit in evening light.

“Mr. Terrlls-rr, the Director will be with you shortly,” she husked and batted long eyelashes. It was too bad, really...

“And how is he today, Ariane?” Terr always asked and she always gave the same answer.

“The Director is well, thank you.” Ariane never discussed their boss or engaged in office politics. A formidable young lady in every respect. “Putting you through now.”

Prima Scout Anabb Karr was bulky and of average height, but his presence dominated the office. That came from a lifetime in the Fleet. His olive skin was wrinkled and dry, etched with deep lines. The chiseled narrow face was stamped into a permanent scowl of disapproval. A ragged blue-veined burn from a phase rifle creased his left cheek. With modern genotherapy techniques the disfigurement was easily treatable, but Terr figured that Anabb kept it as an intimidation tool. He knew from personal and very uncomfortable experience, the scar tended to turn a mottled red when Anabb got angry.

The former Fleet flag officer’s presence was commanding and all that force was channeled through his eyes. Close-set ovals, they were brown pools smeared with flecks of amber. Hidden beneath ridges of narrow white eyebrows, they cut where they stared. Terr had never been intimidated by those eyes, even during their very first meeting.

Six years ago, a young and raw Second Scout, Anabb sent him on a mission to the Four Suns as a military aide to a General Assembly Envoy. His job was to ferret out evidence of alleged slavery and use that evidence to compromise Kapel Pen, the Four Suns Controller. What he found was much more sinister. Kapel Pen and the ruling Family were planning to cede the Four Suns to the Karkan Federation in a bold attempt to win a Commissioner post on Captal for Kapel. The fact that the move could have plunged the Serrll Combine into political and economic turmoil did not bother Kapel at all.

While inspecting the mining world Anulus, rogue M-3s attacked his M-1 and he was forced to flee. They caught up with him over Anar'on, the fabled and secretive world of the Wanderers. Shot up, his blister crashed in the deep desert. Searching for water, slowly going mad with thirst, the Wanderers found him and brought him back to Dhar's village. He was told later that Dhar entered his mind to bring him back from whatever madness he escaped to. Terr was wrenched from the brink of insanity, but in the process, Dhar also left the seed of Death in him. To be fully restored, Terr was forced to walk in the escarpment of Athal Than where the god of Death claimed him, leaving him with a terrible power, one which even now, he struggled to fully come to terms with.

Then two years ago, having unmasked a Palean sponsored raider base on Lemos, decorated and promoted, Terr was feeling good about himself and life in general. That was when Anabb pounced, talking Terr and Dhar into joining the Diplomatic Branch—a dirty, low trick if ever there was one to pull on two innocents. Terr's first mission, of course, was to track down a second Palean base from which Anabb suspected the Paleans were launching raids against Kaleen shipping. What Terr found was not a base, but a mauling encounter with Kai Tanard.

Anabb cleared his throat and glared.

"You have some good news, I hope?" he growled, his voice low and gravelly.

Terr sighed. There was no way of getting around it. Anabb was simply a pain.

"Yes, sir. We boarded a raider—"

"The computer core dump? You've got it?"

"We have it."

Anabb allowed himself a small smile, which probably hurt his face. “Well done, my boy.”

“The M-4 *Turin* was most helpful in securing the raider and its crew,” Terr said. “We also have their pilot.”

“Excellent! I was beginning to feel you were wasting your time with that cover of yours.”

Terr blinked. Evil old fart...

“Where are you now?” Anabb demanded.

“On board the raider, sir, waiting for an escorting M-2 before proceeding to Kalakan.”

“Negative! Take *Turin* and the raider pilot and make for Kalakan at max boost. Your M-1 is being ferried there right now. When you land, hold the pilot and make your way to Taltair.”

Return to Taltair just when the operation started to pay off? Something else occurred to Terr. He would have to spend several days staring at *Turin* commander’s reptilian sour features. Well, it was his own fault really.

“What’s the rush?”

“Kai Tanard has escaped,” Anabb said in utter disgust.

About the author

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

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

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Shadow Gods books by Stefan Vučak

In the Shadow of Death

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

Against the Gods of Shadow

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

A Whisper from Shadow

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

Shadow Masters

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

Immortal in Shadow

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

With Shadow and Thunder

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

Through the Valley of Shadow

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

Guardians of Shadow

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

Other books by Stefan Vučak

Cry of Eagles

2011 Reader's Favorite silver medal winner

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

All the Evils

2013 Eric Hoffer finalist

2013 Readers' Favorite silver medal winner

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

Towers of Darkness

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

Strike for Honor

2013 Readers' Favorite gold medal winner

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

Proportional Response

2015 Readers' Favorite finalist

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

Legitimate Power

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

Lifeliners

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