

## **Review**

This is a must-read novel involving an international trail of investigation, historical cover-ups, some damning evidence about the Catholic Church, and a whole lot of action guaranteed to make readers rethink Dan Brown for gripping drama. The wealth of background research and information certainly adds to a story that spans a few thousand years and draws the reader back into centuries-old theological battles without overwhelming the plot. An interesting, compelling novel, I recommend it highly

Readers' Favorite

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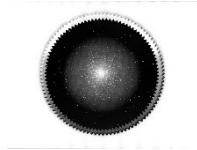
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# **ALL THE EVILS**

By

**Stefan Vučak**



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## **Dedication**

*To Irena ... and a fulfilling journey*

## Acknowledgments

The Vatican's spy service, the Holy Alliance, was formed in 1566 by order of Pope Pius V, renamed The Entity in 1930. The sister counterespionage service, the *Sodalitium Pianum*, was founded in 1913 by Pope Pius X.

Information about The Entity was sourced from the Internet and by permission, *The Entity* by Eric Frattini; published by JR Books, Great Britain, 2009.

Cover art by Laura Shinn.  
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“For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence.”

*Proverbs 4:17*





## Prologue

A hot sun beat down on the small parking lot. Peroni squinted despite his dark shades and glanced at the black Rado on his left wrist: 12:20. Watching people make their way out of the building, he figured it wouldn't be much longer. After observing him for two days, Vanetti's movements were predictable and the reporter should be emerging at any moment. Peroni could have made his move earlier, but he never took unnecessary chances.

Cardinal Belconi did not tell him why he wanted the reporter silenced, and he didn't need to. Peroni knew how to read. The last two issues of *Panorama* were less than flattering to the Institute for Works of Religion, otherwise known as the Vatican Bank, and in particular, it's Vice President, Morgan Farrugi, and his alleged money laundering for the Sicilian Mafia. After the collapse of Banco Ambrosiano in 1982, he thought the Holy See would know that crime does not pay, but apparently not.

Peroni looked around the shimmering parking lot, switched on the engine, and started the air-conditioner. After an initial blast of warm air, a cool breeze played across his face and chest and he sighed. He endured far worse in the parched Iraqi desert, but saw no reason to suffer unnecessarily here. Belconi might not agree with him, having said that suffering was man's divine lot, but seated in his opulent Vatican office, easy for the wily old cardinal to say.

Another hour and he should be able to wrap up the assignment and catch the three o'clock flight to Rome from the Milan Linate airport. Not a bad way to make a hundred thousand dollars, his target not a professional, unlike some he'd tackled. The fact that Vanetti annoyed The Entity to a point where his articles on the Vatican Bank's dealings threatened to spill over into another national scandal didn't worry him. He never worried about the why, only the how and the when. If God was happy to sanction what Belconi did, Peroni felt certain He would forgive him his little trespasses. If not, that's how things went.

The tall, spindly reporter emerged from the *Panorama* headquarters. After a glance at the harsh blue sky, he walked quickly toward a red Fiat. Peroni watched the little car turn right onto Via Mandadori and eased

his BMW rental after it. He smiled when the Fiat turned right onto Via Rivoltana and stopped outside the popular little Thetoria da Carlo restaurant. He slowed as Vanetti got out of his car and disappeared inside. Peroni parked the BMW on the Fiat's driver's side, climbed out, and headed for the café. Cars whispered along the highway behind him.

Being lunchtime, the place full and noisy without being overcrowded. He spotted Vanetti at a table next to the tall plate glass windows and took a seat beside the serving counter. Wearing formal suits, office workers on either side of him hardly gave him a glance.

A vaguely pretty thing dressed in a green blouse and skirt, chewing gum, stood on the other side of the counter and waited, eyebrows raised in expectation. The coffee machine hissed and gurgled and the cash register clanged. Peroni ordered an espresso and slid a five Euro note toward her. She smiled briefly and the note disappeared. By moving his head left a little, he could watch Vanetti without being obvious about it. Moments later, a waitress brought the reporter a plate with a bulging sandwich, french fries, and a can of Coke. After a brief chitchat and a nod, Vanetti dug into his sandwich with gusto. When his coffee arrived, Peroni took his time sipping it.

Seeing the reporter almost finished, Peroni pushed back the small cup and saucer and walked out of the restaurant. When he got to his car, he opened the trunk and pulled a small black leather valise toward him. He unzipped it, took out brown calf leather driving gloves and slipped them on. He grasped the Glock 17, chambered a round and screwed on the silencer. Vanetti appeared beside him, glanced at him and nodded.

*"Buon giorno."*

"Likewise," Peroni said with a smile. "Hot day."

The reporter unlocked the door to his Fiat and shrugged. "They're predicting rain in the afternoon."

Peroni merely shook his head. Vanetti prepared to close his door when Peroni stepped toward him and raised the handgun. The reporter's eyes bulged, but before he could yell, Peroni sent two bullets through his heart, the soft *thuffs* hardly audible. He slammed shut the Fiat's door, leaving the reporter staring vacantly at nothing. He strode toward the BMW's open trunk and shoved the Glock and gloves back into the valise. Closing the trunk, he got into the car, started the engine, reversed,

then slowly drove toward the exit and turned left onto Via Rivoltana. By the time somebody discovered the body, he'd be long gone.

At the airport, he parked the BMW in the Avis parking lot, wiped it down, retrieved the valise, and headed for the terminal. The air smelled of jet fuel and car exhaust. Cars and taxicabs made a steady stream in front of the building. People crowded the sidewalk, dragging luggage or simply hurrying to get away or catch that flight. An Airbus A300 cleared the roofline and lumbered into the sky, its engines warbling.

Peroni paused beside a stormwater drain, bent down, placed the valise next to the open drain and fumbled with the strap on his right shoe. He straightened and gently shoved the bag into the black pit. Satisfied, he strode into the terminal, welcoming its air-conditioned coolness, and headed for one of the fast food restaurants, tables and chairs arrayed in front of them. Hungry, he had plenty of time to eat something before his flight boarded.

Sitting at a small round table waiting for his order to arrive, he pulled his BlackBerry cellphone out of his jacket. Secure behind a blanket of background noise and milling people, he typed in his ten-digit PIN and made a connection to a special number. It only took two rings.

“Cardinal Belconi.”

“It’s Peroni, Your Eminence,” he said coldly, repelled by the cardinal’s heavy voice, keeping his dislike from showing. He didn’t care how the head of The Entity did business as long as he paid promptly. “Target eliminated. I don’t have immediate confirmation, but I imagine the *II Manifesto* and other media will carry the story by day’s end.”

“Excellent! Balance of your fee will be paid upon confirmation. Go with God, my son,” Belconi said and hung up.

Peroni stared at the BlackBerry and smiled. *Somebody* would be walking with God. He simply wasn’t sure it would be him.

The waitress brought his tray and he nodded to her. All in all, not a bad day.

## Chapter One

Garbaldi stepped out on the sidewalk, paused, and automatically squinted. Still early, dark shadows cast sharp outlines across the cobbled street. Where it touched, buttery sunshine warmed his face. Overhead, clear azure skies heralded another fine spring day. Crisp cool air, laden with scents of pollen and flowers, caressed his cheeks and he breathed deeply. Branches and leaves hung limp in the stillness. The street empty and quiet except for the whisper of traffic, an occasional car horn and squeal of tires on the nearby Via Luigi Settembrini, momentarily piercing his bubble of serenity and satisfaction. However, the distraction passed quickly. God smiled on his creation and Garbaldi reveled in a feeling of well-being. Eager and ready to start a new day, he marched purposefully toward the intersection.

Around him, Rome stirred.

A block up, he turned right onto Via Giuseppe Avezzana. Most of the condos along the street had a worn, used look, with tired façades and peeling paint, reflecting the weary tenants inside. Much of the inner city had been like this for as long as he could remember; something stable and comforting to cling to in a world fast changing. Some twenty meters from the corner, he pushed open a creaky door beneath a gaudy neon sign jutting out above a grimy stone entryway, announcing the entrance to Torano's. The place had seen its share of years and some of the paint and décor could do with a facelift, it served excellent food, and stood a prime location.

Several familiar faces, early risers all, looked up as he walked in, briefly interrupting the serious business of eating, and nodded. To an Italian, eating did not merely sustain a necessary bodily function, but provided a cheerful social occasion and a source of intense pleasure to be savored accordingly. Interruptions were not welcome. Breakfast smells hung heavy in the air, coffee and freshly baked bread predominant. The patrons lounged around square, cloth-covered tables, their voices creating a spirited atmosphere. The wide frosty glass doors that

led to the formal dining area were closed. They would open for dinner, and Garbaldi fleetingly contemplated eating there tonight, but probably not. Although the Vatican Secretariat of State subsidized his apartment and paid him a modest salary, the stipend hardly sufficient for him to indulge in dining out. ‘Cast your eyes to heaven with poverty and charity in your heart’, one of his portly seminary professors used to intone ponderously. ‘Material possessions are a road to sin and damnation.’ Judging by his bulging stomach, a source of much earthy amusement among the students, everyone figured the horrible man already well down that road. A mean old bigoted coot, no one missed him when he retired. Unfortunately, it took hard Euros to eat, sin or no sin. Heaven did not provide for him as it did for birds of the air. Garbaldi walked to the checkout counter, waited for a customer to pocket his change, and leaned against the warm, dark wood.

A young woman, short black hair framing a fresh pretty face, closed the cash register with a clang, looked up and smiled flirtatiously in a promise of love.

“The usual, Father?”

“*Si*, please,” he said absently and bobbed his head.

The way she always looked at him made him wonder if she actually saw his priestly garb. Did she think him forbidden fruit and therefore considered a challenge? He thought he saw a look of resignation before she shrugged and stepped to the coffee machine. When the contraption finished its hissing and gurgling, she fixed a plastic cap on the cup and placed it on the counter.

“One decaf cappuccino. For you, Father, that’ll be one Euro twenty,” she said sweetly and beamed at him, teasing him with a saucy look beneath long eyelashes.

It was one Euro twenty for everybody, Garbaldi mused wryly, returning her smile. Here, no one got a discount, not even a priest. Ignoring her inviting look, he fished coins out of his trouser pocket and placed them into her waiting hand.

“*Grazia*, Filippa. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Any time, Father. Any time. *Ciao!*” she called after him, the cash register clanging.

He knew if he looked back, he would see her watching him like she always did. He grinned to himself and couldn't resist a quick backward glance. She *did* look at him, slowly shaking her head in amusement.

Outside, Garbaldi popped the lid and took a thirsty sip. The rich flavor tasted just right as always and he savored the brew before swallowing. Although he usually made his own coffee with breakfast, it simply wasn't the same thing as a brewed cup. His coffee maker at home never seemed to get it quite right. After two years, buying his morning coffee at Torano's had become something of a ritual, as had Filippa's thinly veiled seduction gambits. He could not afford to think along those lines, no matter how enticing. His heart happened to be already taken. Besides, she was merely a child. His inner voice laughed at him with derision, reminding him that children were not built like that, certain her boyfriend did not think of her as a child. Amused, he pushed the disturbing thoughts away.

Holding the warm cup as he made his way toward Piazza Giuseppe Mazzini, the coffee helped him prepare mentally for the day's work. Glancing at fellow pedestrians equally absorbed with their steaming cups, his was not the only addiction. It wasn't as though he sinned by deriving a modicum of enjoyment from his indulgence. Although some fellow priests knew bemoaned indulgement in all pleasure.

He took a left from the treed square onto Viale Giuseppe Mazzini, enjoying the view of slanting yellow sunbeams where they plunged between tall trees planted along the avenue. It felt good to be alive on a morning like this, enjoying God's handiwork. He picked up his steps. Two more weeks and his current cataloging program would be completed. A welcome milestone in itself, it also heralded the start of a two-month sabbatical. A mixture of rest, research and writing. Off to Cairo's Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, where after months of wrangling, the authorities finally relented and gave him permission to read a number of second century Coptic scrolls and codices.

The Roma Tre University sponsored the visit, which would culminate in a book titled: *An Anthropological View of Early Middle Eastern Christianity*. It should be a page-turner and would no doubt cause a stir among theologians of all persuasions, as had his previous books and papers. He did not seek to deliberately provoke or inflame established doctrine, but fact rarely sat comfortably with accepted 'truth'. The manuscript outline

had already landed him in some trouble with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's censor, but Roma Tre was an independent campus and promised to publish. He respected the Church's position on preventing the release of blatant falsehoods, but he resented its attempts to stifle genuine scientific scholarship, regardless of any inconvenience or irritation it caused. Being a scientist and a priest meant walking a tight-rope of learning that hung over a chasm of dogma—an intellectual and emotional challenge he had yet to resolve and cross.

He turned left when he reached Via Giunio Bazzone and headed for Viale Angelico. The main boulevard busy with traffic going both ways, and the noise here more than a mere background disturbance. At the corner, he turned left again. In the distance, far down the straight avenue, he fancied he could see a segment of the Largo del Colonnato that bordered the round Piazza di San Pietro guarding the entrance to the famed basilica. He could not, of course, but he did see it in his mind. Michelangelo's brown-tinged dome loomed proudly above lesser structures, making them look mundane. Every time he saw that perfect architectural majesty, his heart skipped a beat. He had observed it since childhood, and even as he grew older the feeling of awe, reverence, and the centuries of turbulent history it represented never diminished. To be ordained by Pope Benedict XVI himself beneath that wonderful dome a profoundly humbling and proud moment in his then young life. The awe and reverence still remained, but he was no longer young, or naïve. Then again, everything had to age a bit before displaying its true character, didn't it? That dome may be perfect, but sadly the people who stood beneath it were not.

Crosswinds of change whispered through his soul and he gave an involuntary shiver.

As Rome slowly woke around him, pedestrians hurried toward the Vatican and surrounding office buildings. Cars provided a constant cacophony of background noise. Oblivious to it all, Garbaldi allowed his mind to drift. Thinking about nothing in particular, the fifteen minutes it took him to reach Piazza del Risorgimento passed quickly. The inward sloping wall of the old city along Viale Vaticano, with its large squared blocks, stretched away to his right. History of ages lay written in those gloomy gray stones, if only they could be read. As a scientist, he thirsted for that knowledge. Eager sightseers were already lined up in a long

queue waiting stoically for their turn to enter and marvel at the undisguised opulence of the two Vatican museums open to the public; a small fraction of riches the Church draped itself with, lamenting all the while a shortage of working funds, and pass around the gold plate. It just didn't seem right.

Even though not yet eight o'clock, locals and visitors filled the sidewalks, the park, and surrounding cafes, sitting around tables sipping their latte or espresso before getting down to the day's business. About them, pigeons fluttered underfoot and pecked at scraps. Although a somewhat dubious tourist attraction, they were real pests, but seemingly impossible to remove; a plague like the tourists themselves. Well, they were also God's creatures and deserving of life.

He crossed the plaza and entered the Via di Porta Angelica. Several foreign embassies still lay in dawn's shadow along its length on his left. He stopped at Porta di Sant'Anna and gazed for a moment at the double gray colonnades guarding the entrance on either side of the narrow street. Recognizing him in his civilian attire, the two Swiss guards, dressed in plain royal blue uniforms, came to attention. Garbaldi nodded to them and took the three steps that led into the church of S. Anna dei Palafrenieri. As the Vatican's private chapel, although tourists were allowed in, he always made it a point to stop here on his way in for a quick prayer or two. It became something of a ritual since his appointment to the Archives as a special researcher. That his hurried prayers were now almost rote disturbed him. Was that all his faith meant? Reduced to blindly following ritual and reciting hollow dogma meant for children?

Inside the cool, echoing interior, sunlight streamed in soft shafts through ornately patterned stained glass windows. He slid into one of the back pews and knelt. His eyes fixed on the subdued lavishness of the altar, flanked by two yellow columns that joined the dome, he found himself unable to start his prayers. At the altar, an elderly priest in white garb wearing a red belt just finished Mass. No altar boy stood in attendance. Garbaldi had never seen one here, which typified what was happening to the Church. Staring at the altar, his thoughts wandered.

He remembered fondly his days as an altar boy at another church, the small, but stately Santa Maria in Vallicella, dubbed the Chiesa Nuova by the locals, in the Piazza della Chiesa Nuova, a stone's throw from the Tiber with a grand view of St. Peter's. Hemmed in by other buildings,



the grubby marble façade with its narrow double colonnade entrance did not look like much from the outside, but its magnificently painted arched ceiling and grand altar transported the visitor into another world.

He did not mind attending the morning Mass, even though he had to get up early. In wintertime, it had not always been easy having to contend with icy winds. He particularly loved Mass on the warm, lazy summer evenings when the air had a dreamy, soft quality made living a joy. The church then always full, reverberating to powerful organ music and enchanting, melodious hymns sung with gusto. There used to be keen competition among the boys to serve each Mass. Afterward, they would help with the cleaning up and collect coins left by the parishioners, sometimes helping themselves to a few to buy chewing gum or ice cream. Sadly, that too had now faded and few boys these days thought of serving behind an altar as being cool. PlayStation and other electronic distractions were their gods now.

Since his ordination, he had returned to the old church once and regretted going. Only frail, black-garbed old women, waiting for death and promised salvation, now frequented its cold, echoing interior. Even the wall and ceiling frescos seemed darker as though God had removed the light from his house. He walked away dejected, wondering where all the people had gone, where faith had gone.

He jerked back to reality when he heard discrete coughing and shuffling of restless feet. The priest stood up, crossed himself, and slowly walked down the red carpet laid down the center aisle, his heavy footsteps unnaturally loud in the thick silence. Garbaldi hardly noticed him, his concentration absorbed by the small crucifix on the stone altar. Being in the rear, he could hardly see it, but he didn't have to see it to understand its meaning: suffering, betrayal at many levels, disappointment and hopelessness.

Faithful to St. Paul's version of faith, Church dogma said that Christ died for the remission of man's sins, Jew and gentile alike. For the flock, it brought comfort, a release from the hardship of living, and hope of an eternal afterlife of bliss and ease in the sight of God. If only it were true. As a scientist, Garbaldi appreciated the depth of gulf that lay between truth and fact. No matter how much he tried to deny it to himself, the inescapable reality he faced, he doubted the truth of his faith. Too much undeniable concrete evidence refuted gospel history as written by early

Christian fathers long after Jesus' death. As a priest, it caused him much soul searching; definitely something to be discussed with his confessor. Then again, perhaps not. Unfortunately, nothing was sacred anymore, not even a confessional. The realization did little to dispel the shadows of doubt or ease the burden on his soul. Anyway, he didn't need a confessional to make peace with God. He only needed a place where he could bare his soul and pray for guidance. He prayed, but God had not listened, or perhaps he already knew the answer to his dilemma and afraid to admit it.

His eyes strayed from the altar, taking in the beautifully painted frescos and decorations, and marveled at the product of man's genius. He couldn't help wonder how many artisans and craftsmen had slaved with hardly any pay or reward to produce them, while the Church profited by selling red hats to the vain rich and sin Indulgences to the gullible poor in the forlorn belief that the piece of paper would bring them closer to heaven. There had to be something wrong with that picture.

*I weep for thee, my Church.*

He gave a weary sigh, crossed himself, and stood up. With a last glance around empty pews, empty church, he hurried out, hoping that work would distract him from dwelling on questions to which he already knew the answers and give him a measure of inner peace. He was hiding and knew it, not quite ready to face the harsh consequences his answers demanded.

At the end of the short street, he turned right at Cortile del Belvedere, past the Hall of Bramante, and walked quickly into the yellow three-story building that housed one of the Vatican Secret Archives complexes. Not bothering with the elevator, he took the white marble stairs to the second floor directly beneath the Leo XIII Hall reading room. His footsteps echoing on the hard floor, he walked to the third door on the left, slid a large old-fashioned key into the keyhole, and turned it. When the lock clicked, he pushed open the heavy door and walked into the cramped workroom.

As he stepped in, he reached with his right hand and flipped on a light switch. Four bright fluorescent strips fixed to the high ceiling flickered and flooded the windowless room with harsh light. Tall oak bookshelves lined three of the walls, most filled with cardboard boxes, old codices of various sizes, their faded spines cracked and gapping, and

bound manuscripts. The air smelled slightly musty, a characteristic of libraries everywhere. Something new stood in the room, a small plain table on which stood two standard 500mm by 750mm removals cartons. Those were not there yesterday and he frowned.

Absently, he removed his brown corduroy jacket and hung it on a wall hook mounted beside the door. He glanced at the cartons again and closed the door with a backward push of his foot. Obviously, after he left yesterday, someone had brought the stuff, and that implied more work for him. If this meant delaying the start of his sabbatical, he wouldn't do it! There were limits. He looked away, shook his head and sighed. Whatever secrets the cartons held, first things first.

He pulled back his cloth-covered ergonomic chair, leaned across the wide desk tucked hard against the corner and pulled a little cord that hung beneath the green glass reading lamp. Still leaning over the desk, he switched on his laptop. He dragged a keyring out of his trouser pocket and unlocked the cabinet under the desk. Opening the middle drawer, he lifted out a blue hardcover A4 book. Actually an old diary he never got around to using, but more than adequate as a pad for his working notes. He slid the diary on the desk and turned to the wide 49cm LED screen connected to the laptop. The brown round *Archivum Secretum Apostolicum Vaticanum* logo stared at him. Using a keyboard and remote optical mouse—he hated the laptop's touchpad—he quickly logged on and swiveled the chair, looking thoughtfully at the two cartons.

Well, it wouldn't hurt to take a *little* peek. The emails could wait a few moments.

He stood, walked to the table, and fingered the packing. Each box had the Archives seal stamped on its side, but that meant nothing. None of them were taped, implying the contents were repacked. He pushed open the flaps of the closest and peered inside, already knowing what he would see—more old codices, dusty papers and files. Instead, he saw three white cardboard packages laid vertically side-by-side. His breath caught. These were not standard commercial packs, but carefully prepared containers used to transport old manuscripts, every one being of different thickness. He reached for the middle pack and began to pull it out when a knock on the door stayed his hand. Still frowning at the carton, he took two steps and opened the door.

The tall, gaunt figure dressed in a plain black cassock with a broad red belt, smiled urbanely and nodded pleasantly. Bald, except for a ring of white hair around the sides and back. The face long and narrow, the dark yellow skin marked by thousands of little wrinkles. Not a kind face, time having worked on it, but it wasn't severe either, just old.

"*Buon giorno*, Father Garbaldi. May I come in?" the figure asked smoothly, his voice soft and ingratiating, hiding the steel beneath.

Garbaldi extended his arm and automatically stepped to one side. "Of course, Your Excellency. You're always welcome here."

"Thank you, thank you. I won't keep you long." The Most Reverend, Monsignor Giovanni Giacomo, the library Prefect, smiled again and slowly walked in. He glanced at the packed shelving and gently shook his head. "So much knowledge hidden in those volumes. Dangerous knowledge."

"For mankind, Your Excellency?" Garbaldi ventured as he closed the door, aware of Giacomo's extreme conservative views. Everybody knew, had he the power, the Vatican Secret Archives would be permanently closed to all outside scholars and its eighty-four kilometers of corridors and shelving sealed. Also known, and Giacomo probably appreciated the irony, he would never be the Supreme Pontiff, giving him the ability to implement his obsessive views. From what Garbaldi understood, the realization had not embittered the man. On the other hand, it did not stop him from pouring sand into the Vatican's political machinery either. Progress had always been forced on the Church and never embraced willingly. God's will or man's machinations? What a contrast between the goings on within the gilded St. Peter's and a humble parish church. Which of them more truly represented the Christian faith? Two sides of the same coin? Garbaldi not entirely sure.

"For the Church, my son, the Church!" Giacomo retorted sharply, emphasizing the point with a raised bony finger. "You couldn't have forgotten that our work is the preservation of dogma among the flock, not the evangelical dissemination of faith as is commonly assumed."

"I understood, Your Excellency, that saving souls was our work."

Garbaldi enjoyed sparring with the monsignor, always pushing the limits of discourse and, of course, the unspoken boundaries of Church tolerance. Rather than rebuke his moments of verbal rebellion, the old priest tolerated his outbursts and seemed to find the exchanges amusing.

More than once, he startled the Prefect with some of his ideas, who even expressed admiration for his original thinking.

Giacomo's tolerance, however, came with a warning. Garbaldi knew that his propensity to cut straight to the issue would need to be curbed if he were to rise in the Vatican's faction-ridden cauldron. Unfortunately, just because something was right and should be done, did not mean it would be done. Giacomo might tolerate his honesty, but that also did not mean others would be as forgiving. Young and idealistic, he realized he lacked sophistication and had still to learn guile. The Church had enormous historical inertia, not counting vested personal interests, which required massive effort or a pivotal event to shift. What he came to learn, the Church abhorred change, seeing it as a malignancy to be excised. If only they could return to the halcyon days of the Dark Ages.

Giacomo chuckled. "It is, it is, but we have to have priorities, my son."

Garbaldi didn't say anything, but his face creased in disapproval. He extended an arm toward his chair. "Would you care to sit down?"

"Kind of you, but no. I just came to explain that," Giacomo said firmly in a voice weighed down with years of authority, and waved a hand at the two cartons. "I see your curiosity has already been at work."

Garbaldi smiled. "A temptation I couldn't resist."

"Understandable. Everything is in a lengthy email, when you get around to reading it, but under the circumstances, I thought I'd give you a personal explanation. You have done exemplary work sorting through your portion of the Diplomatic Archives. The cataloging, indexing and cross-referencing is necessary and invaluable in deciding what can be released for external scholarly examination and what should be withheld."

"I am pleased to hear it, Your Excellency."

"Like I said, dangerous knowledge, my son, and the Church must always be on guard against blasphemous writing. Your doctorates in Middle Eastern languages and early Common Era anthropology made you ideal for the task, although it did take you away from your posting at the Section for General Affairs."

"I serve the Church, Your Excellency."

Garbaldi did serve the Church, but when he released his *Ancient Eastern Religions and their Influence on Early Christianity*, he could not help feeling that his Church had exacted vengeance by sending him back to the Secret

Archives as an ordinary researcher. They dressed it up as a special assignment, but the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith left him in no doubt of their feelings when they expressed deep displeasure at his work and conclusions, stating that it endangered the faith, which the Congregation had the task of promoting and safeguarding. They also chose to leave a black mark on his record for his trouble. The Church tolerated freethinking, even encouraged it, they said, but it must be tempered with their version of wisdom and prudence. Giacomo had reminded him more than once that he should have sought guidance from Church authority before rashly allowing the book to be published. His period of penance lasted two years, but if the Curia anticipated that working in the Archives would in any way change him or temper his writing, they would be disappointed.

“And because you do it so well, you’re being punished,” Giacomo added and gave a barking laugh, looking amused at Garbaldi’s puzzled expression.

“Punished? I don’t understand.”

“Exemplary work is always rewarded with more work, my son, and these boxes are your reward. You’re aware that the Archives General Secretariat has a program to secure material from all dioceses around the world, at least as much as they are willing to part with. And you don’t have to tell me the headache we have storing all that extra material. That is not your concern. Sometimes we receive works from other Catholic churches, as is the case here. Your task is to examine the contents of these boxes, catalog them, determine each category, or *Fondo*, where they should be stored, and make a recommendation on what can be safely released to outside scholars. This will take priority over your existing work.”

Garbaldi could not hide his dismay. “Your Excellency, this could take a week! My secondment—”

“Will be extended,” Giacomo said with finality, ending the discussion. Seeing Garbaldi’s alarm, he relented. “My son, this work has been approved by the Substitute for General Affairs, Cardinal Enrico Fontini himself. Your position at the Secretariat of State will not be jeopardized, nor will any plans you may have for your sabbatical. This work is important, more important than you realize. Consider it a minor extension of your current assignment.”

Garbaldi bit his lower lip in an attempt to mask his frustration. Minor extension? He spent two long years sifting through dusty volumes and brittle manuscripts, and jumped at the chance for a change when a posting became available in the Section for General Affairs at the Secretariat of State. He needed to get the stale smell of old books out of his system, if only for a while. Not entirely the whole truth, of course. He was weary of eternal bickering over what material could be released, and what should be locked away forever, being deemed too damaging or embarrassing to the Church. Nonetheless, the Church held invaluable historical texts that cast a vastly different light on its early history than was commonly known or believed by the masses, although much was lost or never returned when, in 1810, Napoleon removed a great deal of material from the Archives to Paris. The Vatican still negotiated with France for the return of that material.

His own research into books on what used to be the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* had led him to question the Church and some of its motives to maintain secrecy. Not exactly the kind of reading the Curia expected when they sent him to the Archives. He wanted to do genuine anthropological research, hence a trip to Cairo and his new book. Garbaldi pondered again his commitment to the Church and his choice of vocation. Perhaps his calling did have more to do with family expectations and neighborhood dynamics than a genuine voice from God to serve. He had still to resolve that one, for it would force him to review his deepest motives, something he did not care to do right now, although he knew he would have to confront them sometime, and probably soon.

As he found early, having faith and following dogma not enough if one wanted to survive and thrive in the Vatican machine. Even being an ordinary parish priest no longer an option, although superficially attractive. He stood contaminated, cursed with too much knowledge to be content in a simple pastoral setting, not that there were many of those anyway. There was always missionary work, but that had never been a passion tugging at his soul, however commendable the vocation.

Well, if Cardinal Fontini himself approved the assignment, it looked like he would simply have to endure. Resigning himself to the inevitable, he inclined his head at the table.

“What are they?”

“Manuscripts from the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria,” Giacomo said simply.

For a second, Garbaldi simply gaped. To lay his hands on texts not previously seen by anyone! It would complement perfectly his own research. Was this reward for the hard work he had already done? It didn't matter. Despite his initial misgivings the scientist in him yearned to know more.

“The Coptic Catholic Church?”

Giacomo smiled knowingly. “I see the prospect is not without some attraction.”

“I cannot deny it, Your Excellency. I know the 2003 International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches have achieved some success in bridging gaps with the Holy See, but I did not know it extended to an exchange of material.”

“A dribble admittedly, and union with the Coptic Church will not come about in our lifetime, if at all, but progress is being made to improve communication and reconcile important theological differences. In time, the Patriarchate will see the error of their ways.”

Garbaldi wondered how much of that was true, or merely propaganda for his benefit. As far as he knew, the fundamental theological schisms were as deep today as they were when it all began. Before the Rome faction gained ascendancy, the Christian movement was a fragmented affair with much squabbling among largely independent bishops over theology and emerging dogma. Dredging his memory, Rome and Egypt became divided through a culmination of internal political infighting, punctuated by three principal events.

In 318 CE, Arius, an Alexandrian presbyter, maintained that Jesus was not coeternal with God the Father, and before begotten, did not exist. Understandably, the emerging mainstream Church was not happy with that interpretation. In 325, to resolve the dispute, Emperor Constantine held the Ecumenical Council of Nicea, which produced the Nicene Creed, declaring Jesus a god. The declaration not entirely made on pious grounds or accepted by everyone. A clever move by Constantine to quell growing unrest and make the new Christian religion more palatable to ordinary Roman citizens by incorporating Jesus into the existing pantheon of gods.



A modification by the First Council of Constantinople in 381, attested that Jesus was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary. In 428, Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople, rejected the addition, preaching that the Virgin Mary was Mother of Jesus, not Mother of God. It led to Pope Cyril I of Alexandria to issue the famous Twelve Anathemas, excommunicating anyone who followed the teachings of Nestorius. In 451 the Council of Chalcedon repudiated the idea that Jesus had only one nature as maintained by the Egyptian Church, and stated that he had two natures in one person. The Egyptian Church, which later became the Coptic Orthodox Church, rejected the Council canons and remained split with what eventually became the Roman Catholic Church.

Garbaldi was not about to get involved in a sensitive theological debate, not with Giacomo. "Then these cannot be the original packing cartons?" he ventured, pointing at the seals.

"Hardly. The contents were repacked after clearing the da Vinci airport. Despite letters of approval, Immigration and Customs insisted on confiscating the originals, afraid of biological contamination or some such nonsense. If I hadn't been there personally, those clowns would still be fumigating and stamping forms."

Garbaldi had to smile, being all too familiar with Italian quarantine obstacles and petty officials. "Your Excellency, I would love to get on this right away, but Father Zamatini is expecting a preliminary catalog from me by end of the month," he lamented and swept a hand at the surrounding shelves.

"There is no need for concern. I already discussed the matter with him and the necessary change in your priority. Send him what you have."

"As you wish."

"Good. In that case, I shall leave you to it. *A piu tardi.*"

Garbaldi opened the door for the older man and nodded. "*ArrivederLa*, Your Excellency."

"To work, my son. To work!" Giacomo announced briskly and, without a backward glance, ambled down the empty corridor.

Garbaldi closed the door, leaned against it and chuckled. Easy for the Prefect to say, he would not be the one doing it.

\* \* \*

Garbaldi leaned against the chair, rubbed his eyes and gave a long sigh. He rolled his head to get the kinks out and stretched his arms. After four solid hours behind the screen, his eyes were burning and he needed to loosen up. Right then, he really wanted a caffeine fix. With priceless manuscripts all around him, that was of course, impossible. The thought of spilled coffee over one of them made him shudder. Better to be excommunicated! Besides, a brisk walk down the street to Piazza del Risorgimento would do him good and there were plenty of cafes there to indulge his craving.

At least the spreadsheet entries for the two cartons were done. Three days, that's how long it took him to unpack everything, give each item a quick peruse, properly number and label the volumes, catalog every piece into its appropriate category and shelve the folios. A different color sticker identified each *Fondo* where the codices would be eventually stored. Somewhat tricky as some volumes could easily be cataloged in several different *Fondos*, hence the reason for the cross-referencing spreadsheet entries. Without meticulous referencing, the material could be, and was undoubtedly lost in the dark corridors of the Archives. That constituted part of his current job, physically examining the Diplomatic Archives and laboriously checking every item against old card indexes. At least with the Coptic material, it helped that whoever packed the manuscripts knew what he was doing, and properly labeled the contents. Everything still needed close examination and reading, but at least he knew roughly what he faced.

What astonished him when unpacking the second box, and he immediately wanted to look more closely at the collection, he found a complete copy of the four gospels in Sahidic script. Clearly not an original, although written on papyrus, if authentic, it would make an astonishing addition to the Vatican Archives, and an important comparison baseline for study of the New Testament. He knew that fragments of Fayumic and Sahidic versions were today held in private hands and public institutions such as the British Museum, Berlin Library, Bibliotheque Nationale of Paris, and the Imperial Library of Vienna. How the Coptic Church managed to preserve an apparently intact set, and willing to part with it, was beyond incredible.

As an anthropologist, a copy of the Gnostic Gospel of Judas captured his attention. One version of the text, discovered in the 1970s near

Beni Masah in Egypt, dated to the late second century. Only bits and pieces remained today due to poor handling and storage, the surviving material now held by the Maecenas Foundation. Why the great museums failed to bid for the papyrus when it came on the market was unfathomable. Garbaldi also knew the Vatican owned a complete copy from a different source, but the tractate was never released to outside scholars. Given the controversial nature of the material, he wasn't altogether surprised. Could he get his hands on the thing for comparison? He would have to talk to Giacomo about it.

Why the Patriarch of Alexandria would send the Vatican a copy of Zoroastrian sacred texts, the *Zend-Avesta*, a diverting curiosity. A sense of oblique humor? His Holiness Pope Shenouda III did include for the Holy Father five personally signed books on theology out of the one hundred or so he had written. Something for the Holy Father to ponder during winter evenings? The remaining material, the Rite of Constantinople, the *Agpeya*—Book of the Hours, and several liturgies were known texts, but would nonetheless make interesting additions to the Archives.

Blue skies greeted him when he stepped out. An occasional gentle warm breeze ruffled his shirt. Far too pleasant to be wearing a coat and he had left his inside. Past noon, the sun cast dark shadows, islands of refuge from the heat. Via di Porta Angelica was noisy, busy with traffic, hurrying locals doing odd chores over their lunch break, and gawking tourists sporting digital cameras, camcorders and bulging money belts, to the delight of prowling pickpockets. The sounds and background noise a familiar protective cocoon, something part of Garbaldi's nature. They washed over him and he hardly noticed them. Children ran carefree in the Piazza del Risorgimento, absorbed in their games. He bought coffee and a salad roll from one of the stalls and sought an empty bench. This time of day, with the plaza full, an empty spot would be hard to come by. Just as he prepared to make himself comfortable on the lawn, a mother and a little girl got up from a bench and strolled off. He didn't dally claiming the spot.

Enjoying a shell of privacy, he munched his roll, only absently aware of the people around him. Across the way, the queue to the museums looked as long as it had in the morning and he felt mildly sorry for those

patiently waiting, having to endure a two or three-hour crawl before being able to get in. A tour leader, holding high a yellow umbrella, led a large group straight for the entrance, to the ill-concealed stares of annoyance and hostility from those in the queue.

He finished his meal and sat back, perfectly relaxed, and allowed the city to cradle him. A world he knew and understood, uncomplicated and superficially simple. As he studied the passersby, he wondered if they were enjoying the pleasure of being alive as much as he enjoyed it, or whether some cloud of worry shadowed their day. He longed to linger, but like Giacomo said, there was work to be done. He stood up, brushed crumbs off his trousers, and walked slowly toward Porta di Sant'Anna. The break just what he needed to lift his steps.

Once again in his workroom, despite the bright lighting, it felt gloomy and austere after the dazzling sunshine outside. There were no decorations, plants or paintings to lighten the atmosphere, only shelving and smelly old manuscripts. This is what he did, but as he walked toward the far shelf, he wondered if this would still be him in the years to come if he didn't toe the line. Absently, he reached for the bound volume of Coptic gospels and pulled it out with one hand. Even as the heavy codex slid out, Garbaldi realized his mistake. He would never be able to hold it with one hand. He lunged with his left arm, but the volume was already slipping from his grasp. It landed on the dark polished oak floor with a jarring thud and his heart skipped a beat. Luckily, it only fell a meter, but still an unforgivable blunder on his part. He knelt beside the codex and lovingly cradled it in his lap. After a quick scrutiny, he felt satisfied that he had been lucky and muttered a silent thanks. What if the thing was damaged? God! His skin crawled at the awful possibility.

He carried the book to his desk and opened the front cover. He then noticed a loose page, a small corner that protruded from the rest. Had the binding been torn after all? Hardly daring to breathe, he opened the book at the spot...and stared as a hot flush diffused through him. The deep yellow papyrus page had ragged edges, revealing typical cross-grained strands of its manufacture. Clearly not one of the book's original bound pages. At first glance, the faded brown text looked like old Sahidic, some of the lettering barely legible. Without touching it, the anthropologist in him recognized the extreme age of the tractate. If genu-

ine, the thing was priceless. What was it doing in a copy of Coptic gospels? While the codex itself might not be third or fourth century, still obviously old, perhaps a twelfth century copy, and valuable nonetheless. And the papyrus? The possibilities were endless and the simplest explanation probably true. Centuries ago, someone put it there temporarily and the thing forgotten. The Alexandria librarian had not known it was there. Or perhaps planted deliberately just to see the Vatican run around in circles. Oddly enough, he prepared to believe that of the Church, but not the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate. So much for faith in human nature.

Still studying the papyrus, he opened the top drawer and absently dragged out a large magnifying glass. He positioned the page under the reading lamp, set the magnifying glass and peered closely at the text. The odd mixture of Roman and Greek characters were instantly familiar. He didn't have to compare the writing with authenticated texts to realize what he had was genuine. After a moment, he straightened and frowned.

What now? Advise Giacomo and have the thing returned? It would not only be the honorable and correct thing to do, the gesture would also go some way toward fostering a warmer relationship with the Coptic Church. If he suspected the Coptic Church of planting the papyrus, wouldn't they suspect the same thing of Rome? After all, they didn't know the tractate existed in the first place. He was realistic enough to appreciate the potential for a rise in political tension between the two churches instead of the reverse by having the papyrus revealed. This needed to be handled very carefully. Thoughts racing, his eyes naturally began to follow the text since he already had the thing in front of him. It bore no title, a fragment of a larger work perhaps?

*And it came to pass when John baptized, preaching repentance and deliverance of the tribes by him who was to come after him. Rejoice, for a new kingdom is at hand. Prepare you for the way of the new king and make his path straight.*

*He is said to be from the tribe of Levi, son of Zachariah the priest and Elizabeth. He preached, healed the sick and performed mighty deeds.*

*They sent to him from the land of Judea, even the Pharisees and the Sadducees, all of Jerusalem, and were baptized. He wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather girdle about his loins. And his meat was wild honey, which tasted like manna, and locusts formed into cakes with oil.*

*And he told them: 'And now will also an axe be laid against those who bring evil, and will be hewn down, and cast into the fire. Repent and you shall be saved.' Priests and Levites came from Jerusalem to ask him: 'Who are you?' And John replied: 'I am the voice crying in the wilderness, making the way for the one who will speak for the people. There will come one mightier than I after me and I am not worthy to stoop down to his shoes. He shall liberate you and rule a new kingdom in the sight of God.'*

*Then they asked: 'Are you Elias?' And he answered: 'I am he who was foretold by the prophet Esaias.'*

*And they said to him: 'Why do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elias?' John replied: 'I prepare the way of the spirit for all, and baptize with water, but there stands one among you who you know not, who shall prepare the way of deliverance with the sword from the oppressors.'*

*The people having been baptized, it came to pass that Jesus, with his followers, also came from Galilee to Jordan to seek his blessing.*

*The next day, John saw Jesus coming to him, and after lifting his arms, cried: 'This is he of whom I spoke, that he should be made manifest to Israel and lead you to salvation.'*

*Seeing the anointed one, Jesus cried: 'Master, for what I am to do, I have need to be baptized by you.' And John replied: 'Follow in the way against our enemies and I shall suffer you.' And so it came to pass that John baptized him, proclaiming: 'The spirit is with you and you shall establish a new kingdom for all Israel, for you are beloved of God.'*

Staggered, Garbaldi felt his whole body turn to stone as the enormity of the text's meaning sank in. Jesus was John's disciple and *John* the anointed one, the Messiah! He might doubt the Church and its practices, past and present, but he *believed* in Jesus the Lord. The essence of the gospels *had* to be true. Shaken, head spinning, he groped for the chair and sat down heavily. Everything he knew, everything he believed in, might all be fabrication and a lie. Didn't he suspect that all along? Weary and disillusioned, he buried his face between his hands as the comfortable, predictable world he knew crumbled around him. His breath came in ragged gulps and his stomach knotted. After a while, he slowly lifted his head and gazed at the small wooden crucifix fixed to the wall above the desk. St. Matthew's words burned bright in his mind.

*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*

He didn't know how long he stared at the simple crucifix. Time had no meaning and he a hollow shell waiting to be filled and renewed. Out of momentary despair and darkness, a light of reason slowly dispelled the questioning demons. The figure on the cross seemed to nod at him and he felt warmth steel through his body, a warmth of comforting realization and hope. He had taken on a calling to serve God, not the Church, and it looked very much like he might be guilty of misguided loyalties. Given his scientific training, he easily saw how he strayed. Perhaps his seminary friend, Carlo Noris, had it right when he said that he would also face his test of faith. Was this his moment of liberation, his real calling, to bring truth to the faithful?

After another moment, he pursed his lips. Very well. If it be God's will.

He would seek out the truth, and if it contradicted the Church's version, so be it. Living a convenient lie to maintain a comfortable existence would be a real road to damnation. Could this innocent piece of papyrus be truth? What was truth, someone once asked, and he asked it now. Before doing anything, he needed to find out, not only for himself, but every Christian in the world. And if the tractate *was* truth? The Church held awesome secular power, and the millions of believers represented an enormous social and political force. It would not be easy to sway them, no matter the validity of evidence. Most would continue to believe. Perhaps, but that did not invalidate the reason for revealing evidence. As a scientist, he should approach the problem with all the tools science made available.

Somewhat relieved, he sat up straighter and looked closely at the faded papyrus sheet. The text bore close resemblance to the Gospel of St. Matthew with a mixture of St. Mark, the earliest narrative gospel written as a cohesive whole. The other gospel writers all used his material and added their own interpretations and embellishments. There was indisputable proof the author of St. Mark's gospel himself had access to earlier versions, collectively known as the Q or *Quelle* document, meaning the 'source', now lost, with hints of its presence buried in the synoptic gospels. As a scholar, he discounted St. John, the gospel being a political document to appease the Romans, shifting the blame for Jesus' death on the Jews. Could the papyrus be one of the pieces of Q text from which the synoptic gospels were written? That would immediately

date the scroll to before 70 CE and subsequent destruction of Jerusalem by Rome. If in fact it was that old. Given how it had been handled, it had survived remarkably intact.

As a scientist, he knew that little remained of early Christian writing that might differ from the canonical gospels. The Church always maintained that its creed was a unique, miraculous and supreme revelation without predecessors or outside contributors. The early fathers could not accept that their movement comprised of disparate doctrines, teachings and ideologies, borrowed from Buddhism, the Egyptians, Babylonians, and the Assyrians. He should know, he researched it in depth.

Shortly after the Council of Nicea, the bishops embarked on a program of total destruction of all texts that contradicted the Church's version of the New Testament as literal history. They declared Jesus a god and couldn't afford to have it otherwise. The burning of the Library of Alexandria in 391, the sum accumulation of man's knowledge at the time, a hideous culmination of that program. In 642, the Muslims finally sacked what remained of the Royal Library and the Daughter Library at the Serapeum. Some historians claimed that the centuries of Dark Ages that followed were directly attributed to the Church attempting to keep the minds of the faithful in servitude and ignorance, obedient to its will. Wearing his secular hat, Garbaldi tended to agree. They hadn't managed to destroy everything.

In 1945, peasants unearthed papyrus scrolls in sealed jars at Nag Hammadi, discovering what was at best only a tantalizing fragment of early Christian writing. The Church fought long and hard to suppress the material, but no longer the Church of old, couldn't keep the scrolls from being published. The release caused a flurry of consternation among the learned, but the finding hardly generated a ripple elsewhere. The faithful were simply not interested.

In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd boy, wandering the barren cliffs of Qumran, found broken jars that contained rolled leather scrolls, which with later finds from a total of eleven caves became collectively known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The tortured release process of the scrolls and cries of a Church conspiracy still held a morbid fascination with the public at large, but little else. Again, few bothered to really study the material and understand the implication it held for the Church. A lifetime of indoctrination and blind obedience represented a potent force that only a



shattering revelation could sway. Except for the monks tending them, who knows what lay undiscovered in far away monasteries where time did not march and foreigners were discouraged? But should anything ever rear its head, the exterminators would be alerted.

How could he reconcile what the Coptic papyrus sheet said from what the seminary lecturers taught and what he learned from personal research? If Jesus was John's disciple, it pointed to the existence of two Messiahs. Not exactly news, as Zechariah and the gospels of Matthew and John hinted as much. There were certainly no doubts in the minds of the Dead Sea Scrolls writers. They clearly told of two Messiahs, a priest and the warrior. The Messianic Rule and the Manual of Discipline scrolls stated plainly that the priestly Messiah would be born into the tribe of Levi, as John the Baptist indeed was. The second Messiah would be born in the house of David, overthrow the Romans and rule over the lost tribes of Israel. Jesus' genealogy a torturous concoction of two versions, and his stated claim to the house of David dubious at best.

They put Father Roland de Vaux, a Dominican monk, in charge of the international team responsible for translation and publication of the Scrolls when they were stored in the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. Controversy still raged as to whether he in fact took a number of scrolls from Cave Four the Church deemed contradicted its version of history, and later transferred them to the Vatican Secret Archives. As part of his first doctoral thesis research, Garbaldi sought access to the Archives of that period, repeatedly denied. He still wondered what those dusty shelves contained to be so dangerous to the Church.

The cold truth was, far from being divinely inspired, the gospels were written by men to lay a common foundation for an emerging religion under a single established authority. Material that didn't conform, ruthlessly purged. Over the centuries, even the accepted writings were subject to ongoing changes and 'corrections'. The most profound change took place with the translation into English by John Wycliffe in 1384, followed by William Tundale's version in 1524, which formed the basis of the King James Bible, issued in 1611. The Council of Trent in 1545 decreed that no further changes or additions were to be made, but by then the damage was already done. Garbaldi had a copy of the Vatican's *Codex Vaticanus* dating from the mid-fourth century. Together with the British Museum's *Codex Sinaiticus*, they constituted the oldest complete

manuscripts of the New Testament. Comparing the *Vaticanus* with today's versions, he easily identified doctored changes and twisted meanings to fit the gospels within Church dogma. He could only shake his head at the human misery and warped mindsets heaped on the West by incorrect translation and liberal interpretation in the English version.

Still deeply disturbed, beset with questions and doubts, Garbaldi nonetheless felt better. He may be in a crisis of faith, but God created man with the ability to solve problems using reason and logic. Very well, he would treat the find like any other, applying reason and scientific methodology against a hypothesis. Before he could consider reporting the find to the Prefect, he needed to formally authenticate the papyrus and ink used. If this was an elaborate fraud perpetrated by the Coptic Church, he didn't intend falling for the gag or embroil the Vatican in a controversy because he got swept away with emotional fervor. Fortunately, his training put him on solid ground here. He conducted dating of old manuscripts before and knew exactly how to go about it.

Papyrus tractates had always been a pain to authenticate. First, the papyrus itself had to be reliably dated. In the old days, one would snip off a sample, to the painful howl of the archeologist or anthropologist concerned, send the thing to a recognized laboratory and have it carbon-14 tested. The results were usually reliable to between plus or minus twenty to fifty years. Even if his papyrus turned out to be from the late first or early second century, that would not validate the text itself. Using correct ink and an appropriate period writing style, someone who knew what they were doing could have written the thing yesterday. No need to forge and age a papyrus sheet when getting hold of an authentic first century sample did not pose an insurmountable obstacle. Museums and libraries around the world held countless scrolls gathering dust in basement annexes that would never see the light of public display. Most of those had leading or trailing blank sections. Given the right connections, appropriating one or two sheets would be childishly simple.

These days, getting the ink right presented a more challenging difficulty for any forger. As early as 2500 BCE, eastern civilizations uniformly used carbon inks. These were made by burning oil or tar to produce soot, which was mixed with water and gum in a suspension. The problem with carbon ink, it smudged and deteriorated over time. The difficulty was solved, when in the first century the preferred method used iron-gall ink.

They mixed Gallic acid with water and vitriol, to which was added gum from acacia trees to act as a suspension agent. Depending on the exact ingredients, the ink ended up as either ferric gallic acid complexes or iron pyrogallol, which over time faded from its original red to a durable dull brown. Iron-gall was perfect, as it did not rub off documents. The major downside, if the ink became too acidic, it tended to react with collagen in parchment or cellulose in papyrus. He had seen documents with holes where the ink had eaten right through the material.

He looked more closely at the innocuous piece of papyrus on his desk. There existed clear evidence of some acid penetration, but the text looked quite intact, although some of the words and lettering were badly faded. By using x-ray fluorescence, or better still, proton induced x-ray emission analysis, he could test the thing without having to remove a sample. Unless a forger had a bottle of ink from the first century stashed somewhere, he was out of luck.

But whom could he trust to do the testing? The Laboratory for Cultural Goods (LABEC) in Florence, part of the National Institute of Nuclear Physics, did excellent carbon-14 accelerator mass spectroscopy analysis. He had worked with them before. There was also the ENEA Bologna Research Center, but they both required a sample. More troublesome, they would want paperwork, letters of introduction, questions, queries to the Prefect, which would all result in premature disclosure. He needed an independent facility where analysis could not be traced to him or the Vatican. It had been a while, but he knew the person to call.

In his last year at the seminary, already planning to take postgraduate courses at the Pontifical Lateran University, his closest friend and confidant had suddenly dropped out, disillusioned, his trust in the infallible Church shattered. They used to devour old philosophers like Spinoza, Percy Shelley, George Eliot, Immanuel Kant and others; hotly debating morality, ethics, the evolution and purpose of religion and man's place in it, especially in the current Western version of pluralism, while decrying the stupidity of politicians, bureaucrats and dogmatic clergy everywhere.

Officially, Carlo Noris left voluntarily to pursue secular studies, but later, Carlo told Garbaldi they kicked him out for holding views and philosophies inconsistent with Church doctrine. Garbaldi had found that difficult to comprehend or believe. His friend was pious, a respected

scholar, widely read and an expert on early Church history. No one was more devoted to the calling. Between playing pranks on the faculty, something they all indulged in, Carlo sometimes irritated his lecturers, launching questions and making observations not entirely consistent with the serious pursuit of priesthood, but everyone did that from time to time. The students were learned men, not impressionable teenagers, and their minds roamed, straining against the fettered views of their lecturers. His friend merely laughed at Garbaldi's confusion and naiveté.

Taking him by the arm, Carlo led him to a café on campus grounds and offered a dose of reality into seminary life, the Noris version.

“You know what they did? They sent stooges from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to test our beliefs. Not our beliefs in the faith, but Church canons. They had seminary staff make reports on everyone to determine our suitability for priesthood and be obedient little lambs. They issued a questionnaire with sixty-four points, and each dealt only with dogma. Nothing about the faith, the Savior, or the New Testament. Students were graded on how they answered.”

“How do you know that?” Garbaldi demanded, hardly able to believe as he never saw such a document, but Carlo's sincerity had the ring of truth. He knew the Congregation was nothing more than the old Inquisition under another name. It could no longer compel secular authority to torture or burn people at the stake, but its charter still demanded pursuit and elimination of all those who opposed or questioned the Church and its authority. If what Carlo said was true, seminaries now pursued elimination from within, a sobering and disturbing thought.

“Because, my simple deluded friend, I saw the records. I had access to Admin files, don't ask me how, but I saw them. Don't think they're doing it because this is Rome and the Vatican rules. It's being done at every seminary around the world. You needn't worry. You're just the trusting, wide-eyed type they're looking for. I know that your reading and anthropology studies have raised doubts in your mind, questions you don't really want answered. Your lecturers are not entirely pleased at the direction of your secular pursuits. When they approach you, under whatever pretext, hide your thoughts well, my friend, or you'll end up like me, disillusioned and broken—and perhaps freed,” he added bleakly, then lifted his espresso in a salute. “Don't be concerned about me. It isn't the end of the world. On the contrary, I have seen the true light and I am

now liberated. That's my version anyway. My parents will be distraught for a time, given how they slaved and scraped to put me here, but I was never truly cut out to wear black, too morbid, my friend. I suppose they'll get over it. They'll have to. In time, Paulini, you too will face a stark choice, walk in darkness or open a door to enlightenment. I don't envy you that moment of soul wrenching."

Garbaldi never forgot the incident and the event had forever scarred him, casting a shadow over his once flawless Church. They had to give Noris his master's in Middle Eastern Anthropology, but not his licentiate degree. He went on to the University of Rome at La Sapienza for his PhD, while Garbaldi did postgraduate work at Tre, to the thinly veiled dismay of his Lateran professors. They wanted his studies to have a theological bent, not trusting the impartiality of a freethinking secular institution. At the time Garbaldi failed to see any conflict, pointing out that Lateran didn't offer the subjects of his interest, only later coming to realize the reason for their concern, why they wanted him isolated and controlled. Perhaps he was innocent and naïve as Carlo hinted. For truly, shape the mind of a child and he will forever be yours.

Afterward, they still kept in touch and shared an occasional espresso, but his friend became a changed man. A man who had lost his faith, searching for something else to believe in, and someone in danger of losing his soul. Three years later, Carlo went to America to take on a posting as an assistant professor at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, a prestigious appointment, and keeping in touch became harder. Now an associate professor, published and widely respected, and Garbaldi was glad. They still exchanged emails and an occasional phone call, but both knew they lived in different worlds now. There is something sad when friends part, for whatever reason.

Wearing a mischievous smile, he glanced at the watch on his right wrist and nodded. Two-thirty here would make it nine-thirty in the morning Massachusetts time. He reached for the phone and stopped. Did he truly want to do it? Did he want to bring this into an arena where an inevitable accounting would have to be made? Why set into motion something which could potentially have profound repercussions not only for the Church, but the upheaval of the Western civilization as a whole? Who was he to set himself up as an arbiter and judge of what was right? Would it be such a bad thing to continue living a lie for the greater

good of all? How many lives would be affected and perhaps destroyed by his revelation? And whom would it serve if truth were revealed, if it was truth? Could this be merely hubris on his part, a desire for personal revenge, or an act of rebellion? Holding his hand on the phone, Garbaldi warred with his beliefs, his teaching and what the Church represented and meant, not only to him, but to the faithful everywhere. As a priest, he was beset by doubt, but as a scientist, he knew without reservation what needed to be done.

He picked up the receiver and began punching in numbers. He could condone what the early Church fathers did. Although misguided, that's how they did business in those days, and maybe even today. What he found difficult to accept was the hypocritical duality the Church maintained merely to perpetuate its position and power. Clearly, the commandments were only meant for the masses, not the Vatican Curia. He thought the one about not bearing false witness particularly apt.

Before getting the connection, something else occurred to him and he replaced the receiver. He took the papyrus sheet and put it into the photocopier, cum printer/scanner capable of taking A3 sheets. On the touch screen, he selected Scanner. The screen changed to show a settings menu. He selected 1200 dpi and pressed the Enter key. The machine then prompted him for his email address. He typed it in and waited. The blue-green light slowly ran the length of the scan surface and the machine returned to the menu. He touched the Cancel button to erase the image from the buffer and took out the confirmation sheet from the printer tray. The still warm paper had date/time stamp statistics, his email address, and the reduced image of the tractate. After staring at it for a second, he slipped the sheet into his diary. It wouldn't do to leave the thing lying around. He removed the papyrus sheet and put it on the desk.

It only took a moment to log onto his personal email service provider's website and check his inbox. He smiled when he saw the message from the scanner and opened the file. He positioned the cursor on the Forward icon and pressed the Enter key. He quickly typed in a new email address and subject message on the new screen and erased the scanner details. His own message a single brief sentence, but Carlo was worldly, experienced and would know what to do. Reassured, he pressed the Send icon and redialed the phone number.

It took three rings before the familiar nasal voice answered.

“Dr. Noris.”

“*Come sta*, my heretical friend,” Garbaldi replied with a grin, feeling a rush of nostalgic warmth and closeness to Carlo he had not felt for some time.

“Ah, if it isn’t Cardinal Garbaldi!” Noris replied with a chuckle in Italian. “They still have you digging through the Archives?”

“Better than spreading blasphemy to innocent undergrads.”

“Not blasphemy, my misguided padre, but truth!”

“Truth according to Dr. Noris, no doubt.”

“What other is there?”

A game they played, although lighthearted, it did reflect their personalities and respective convictions, but perhaps no longer. For Garbaldi, the trip had simply taken a little more time, but nonetheless still wrenching.

“Truth, a fickle mistress, my rebellious buddy,” he mused. He could still put the phone down and walk away. Could he walk away from his image in the mirror every morning? “How have you been? We haven’t spoken since—”

“I know. It’s been some time,” Noris finished soberly. “The spring semester is finally finished and so am I. It will be good getting back to some solid research without being bothered by classes. I tell you, Paulini, I don’t know how some of those kids graduate. Not an original thinker in the lot. They don’t know anything except how to regurgitate text.”

Garbaldi reflected on his own experiences and gave a short laugh. “It’s the weight of the dissertation that counts, not the scholarship in it. Original thought and clear thinking just get in the way. I thought you knew that one by now.”

“It doesn’t count with me, as many a hopeful have already found to their dismay.” Noris paused, then sighed. “I know, I’m only venting spleen. Enough of that. How are things with you?”

“Enjoying an early summer—”

“I know. I’ve seen the weather reports. And your latest book? Also hot?”

“It will be, once I get the material I need from Cairo.”

“You’re going over there next month, right?”

“I’m already packing, but...”

“I detect a fly in your cheer somewhere.”

Garbaldi took a deep breath. “Carlo, I don’t want to burden you with my problem, but I’m in serious trouble and I need your help.”

“What can I do?” Noris said without hesitation, his voice somber.

In a few short sentences, Garbaldi told him, comforted by his friend’s immediate readiness to help. Regardless of any differences regarding their beliefs, a characteristic that always endeared him to Carlo. “I need the papyrus sheet and ink reliably dated. I don’t want it done here. Too many questions.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“I need to know what to do. It’s tearing me apart and I’m deeply troubled.”

For a moment, Noris didn’t say anything. Then, “My friend, I’m sorry this had to happen to you and I know what you must be going through. Believe me, I do, because I went through the same thing myself. I always knew that sooner or later you would face your own trial of faith.”

“I cannot deny it will take some hard thinking on my part, and I thank you for your words, but before I despair completely, I need hard facts.”

“Paulini, even if the papyrus is authentic, it may not mean anything. Hundreds of scrolls were written in that period and all of them probably wildly contradictory. You could be working yourself into a state for nothing.”

“You’re right, but we both know one other thing. Many of those scrolls, and the people who wrote them, were hunted down and destroyed if they didn’t conform to official dogma.”

Noris gave a long sigh. “I can’t argue with you there. Like you said, the first thing to do is get the thing dated. Some universities here do good work, but it’s mostly AMS spectroscopy. What you want here is PIXE analysis.”

“I know. Do you have a place that could do it without asking too many questions?”

“Our Physics Department has a nice lab where we could do the test. I have done business with them before and I know the director in charge.”

“It means bringing the papyrus to America.”



“That would be the general idea, yes. Unless you want to mail it to me,” Noris quipped.

“Your famed wit is operating at half strength, my friend,” Garbaldi drawled dryly and Noris laughed.

“And you don’t have any sense of humor. When can you come over?”

“I wish I could do it today, but this will have to wait until my sabbatical. I’ll be finished on July 13 and flying home from Cairo the next day. I can be in Boston on Saturday the 16th.”

“Sounds good, but July 16 is a long way off. I’ll be gnawing my fingers to the bone until then. You wouldn’t care to give me a peek at the thing in the meantime?”

“Check your email,” Garbaldi said smugly, pleased at having pulled a fast one on his friend.

“Using your Vatican service? Tell me you didn’t!”

“Take it easy, Carlo. I may not be worldly-wise like you, but I’m not completely stupid. I used my personal email address.”

“Well, thank heaven for small miracles. Sorry for snapping at you, but you must know that what you have is explosive. Watch your step here, my boy. You could get yourself into a lot of trouble if they ever got wind of what you’re doing. Serious trouble.”

“You mean Archives Security?”

“Them too, but I meant the counterintelligence service.”

“The *Sodalitium Pianum*? Why would they be interested in me?”

“You can’t be that dense. Wouldn’t you want to suppress a document that could undermine everything the Church stands for?”

Garbaldi didn’t know much about the Vatican’s intelligence service, the Holy Alliance, commonly known as The Entity, or its sister counterintelligence service, nobody did. Officially, they weren’t even supposed to exist anymore, but Carlo could be right. He *was* being dense. What he contemplated wasn’t simple theft to be dealt with by Archives Security, but a threat against the Church body itself. Like any living organism when stung, the Church would retaliate. He disagreed with Carlo’s insinuation at the gravity of that retaliation.

“I hear what you’re saying, but I don’t see how they could know what I’m doing.”

“Keep it that way, okay? I don’t want to be reading your obituary or contemplating mine.”

Something he hadn’t thought possible and the implication chilled Garbaldi. “They wouldn’t—”

“They would and they already have,” Noris told him bluntly. “Take it from me. These people play for keeps. The Curia may not soil their hands, but they would nevertheless make sure the job was done while clutching crucifixes and praying for absolution. By the way, are you calling from your office?”

“Yes. Why?”

Noris gave a low hiss. “Probably nothing, but from now on, use your cellphone and do it from outside. Walls have long ears, my friend.”

Garbaldi thought it over and didn’t like any of it. This shadowy side of the Church not something he ever contemplated, or thought existed. What was he getting himself into?

“Under different circumstances, Carlo, I would dismiss your natural cynicism as paranoia, but I’ll be careful.”

“You always did have your head up in the clouds,” Noris complained with a trace of bitterness. “But we shouldn’t talk on this line. Call me if anything changes. In the meantime, I’ll look at your email and get things organized at my end. Man, are we going to have fun. You’ll enjoy Boston.”

“As much as I’d love to see the sights, it will be a working visit only, I’m afraid. I can’t stay long.”

“Why the rush?”

“I have a deadline to finish the book, and Roma Tre is already on my back about it.”

“Ah, you’re a spoilsport, but I understand. A rain check, then.” There came a short pause. “Tell me, what will you do if the papyrus turns out to be genuine?”

It was Garbaldi’s turn to pause. “I don’t know. I’ll have to think about that one.”

“We’ll discuss it when you come over. Paulini, I’m glad you thought you could call me. It was good to hear from you again.” A click and the line went dead.

Garbaldi gently replaced the receiver and stared vacantly at the PC screen. His friend’s words about The Entity had disturbed him more

than he cared to admit. Would they in fact go after him, or worse? The more he reflected on what he planned to do, the less certain he was of the righteousness of his cause. Skulking around, secret rendezvous, trench coats and black hats just wasn't him. He was a priest and a scholar, not some undercover gumshoe. His inner voice sneered at him. Easy to be morally outraged when nothing was at stake, eh? But when he had to follow through on his convictions, his indignation turned out to be hollow bluster—another pontificating armchair hero.

Somewhat chastened, he logged off and looked at the tractate.

Sandwiched inside the codex, the sheet had withstood the centuries remarkably well. Ordinarily, the Archives' Conservation Laboratory would handle such a manuscript where it would be treated and preserved, something like laminating an ordinary piece of paper. In this case, definitely not an option. He could imagine the look on Father Reoni's face if he saw the papyrus. On the other hand, he couldn't simply stick the thing into his diary and walk out. Or could he? The walking out part would not be a problem. He had taken work home before and the guards never bothered him. Before he did smuggle it, the manuscript had to be protected from accidental damage.

He bent down and opened the bottom desk drawer. From the mess of odd stationery, he pulled out two pieces of beige A4 cardboard and an ordinary transparent plastic bag. He also took out a thin pair of cotton gloves and pulled them on. Working quickly, he sandwiched the papyrus between the cardboard sheets and slipped the whole thing into the bag. He patted it down to squeeze out the air and slid back the sealing tab. Relaxing, he admired his handiwork. It would do until he got the thing home where he would do a better job, something that would withstand rough handling and aircraft travel. After this discovery, returning to a semblance of normalcy would be a letdown.

Removing the tractate from the building somewhat an anticlimax, much to his intense relief. His imagined heart attack mostly self-induced, as were images of a heavy hand on his shoulder and an authoritative voice requesting he accompany the waiting men. Phantom shadows followed him to Porta di Sant'Anna. He had willfully stolen something and broken one of the commandments. Getting caught would be a relief, a release from damnation. Didn't Proverbs 28:1 say that the wicked flee where no man pursueth? He knew exactly what that meant. Holding the

high moral ground, truth did not necessarily a shield make against the forces of evil. The closer he came to the two Swiss guards standing on either side of the gate, the more terrified he became, but they merely nodded as he paused beside the church of S. Anna dei Palafrenieri. After a moment of uncertainty, he strode up the steps and walked into the church through the open doors.

Inside, it was cool, almost chilly. Tourists wandered about, cameras and recorders going, talking despite clear signs for silence. Many of the forward pews were occupied and someone was saying Mass. He took a seat next to the right side chapel alcove and composed himself. Hands clasped in his lap, he groped for the right words.

*Father...give me strength for what I am about to do and don't let me falter. Your glory is for all time, but it should not be tarnished by man's wickedness. If what I do is wrong, tell me, before I stray from your path. Bless me Father and forgive me my trespasses.*

A load seemed to lift off his shoulders and he breathed easier. When a group of tourists walked by along the central aisle, he got up and followed them out. No phantoms haunted his footsteps.

This time of day, pedestrians packed the sidewalks, anxious to get home, and Viale Angelico carried its usual rush hour load of noisy, smelly traffic. Garbaldi was used to it and hardly paid any attention, absorbed in thought. Walking on automatic, head full of the day's events, he was surprised when he found himself at Via Luigi Settembrini. Taking a corner, the gray three-story apartment building loomed on his left, the street already deep in shadow. As usual, he climbed the stairs to his second floor condominium. One of his third floor neighbors leaned over the railing and waved at him. Garbaldi waved back and hurried down the tiled corridor. Once inside his apartment, he laid the diary on the dining table, walked to a large west facing window, and pulled open the drapes. Low sunlight streamed into the stuffy room. He extracted the long piece of dowel blocking the slide and opened the window. A refreshing breeze came through and he took a satisfied breath. City noises came flooding in, but he didn't mind the intrusion. A comforting familiarity. He stood there for a while watching the sun, then turned toward the small kitchen to make dinner.

As he waited for the spaghetti to cook *el dente*, he quickly prepared a simple sauce: fried onions, diced bacon, a can of chopped tomatoes and

spices. He drained the spaghetti and mixed in the sauce. A glass of chilled red Chianti completed the preparation. Table set, he gave thanks and turned on the 108cm Samsung LED television in time to catch the evening news.

Garbaldi twirled the spaghetti around his fork and sighed at the misery man insisted on inflicting on himself. Always the same: senseless road deaths, involving the young mostly, murders, political scandals at home and abroad, and gutter journalism about celebrities of all types.

He noted with interest that President Walters still held firm on his commitment to complete the Afghanistan pullout by end of the year. NATO countries were no longer so willing, and America became tired wasting lives and pouring billions down that bottomless hole when faced with trillions of domestic debt and blatant Afghan corruption.

Another clip on the worsening currency wars between America, China and Europe made Garbaldi groan. Hadn't the near collapse of the world's financial system in 2008 sobered everybody?

The most depressing were scenes from the West Bank where the Israeli army were forcibly removing illegal settlers. Families fought for their homes, women screamed invectives at stone-faced soldiers while children stood by helplessly, not understanding what was going on, simply crying. In the background, tanks and armored personnel carriers brooked no interference as families were herded into buses and trucks, dragging suitcases and meager possessions. A house stood by the roadside engulfed in flames, the owner preferring its destruction rather than have it fall into Palestinian hands.

God should not allow such misery, he thought. Of course, God had nothing to do with it. Man had free will. No use lamenting to Him for the evils of man's own making.

At least Israel had followed through on its commitment, made on the floor of the United Nations. Not exactly an expression of Israeli altruism, but pragmatism. After Mossad sabotaged an oil refinery in Galveston, making it appear an act of Iranian terrorism, the United States exacted a heavy toll. Israel could either tackle the Palestinian problem seriously or become an international pariah, ostracized from American support.

Garbaldi tried to recall the two people responsible for uncovering the plot, and then he had it, an article in the *Il Manifesto*: Thomas Meecham from the FBI and Mark Price from the Department of Homeland Security.

He finished his meal and washed up. Glass in hand, he stood by the window and watched as dusk fell and night slowly blurred everything.

Later that night, with the city quiet and subdued, hands clasped behind his head, it took Garbaldi a while to fall asleep.

## About the author

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

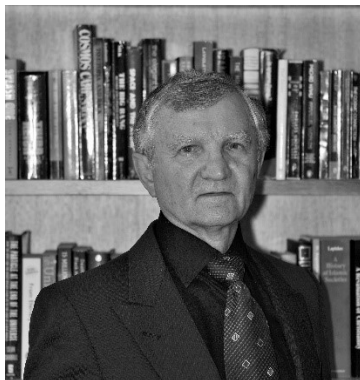
Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cellphone systems. He applied his IT discipline to create realistic storylines for his books. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends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

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## **Shadow Gods books by Stefan Vučak**

### **In the Shadow of Death**

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

### **Against the Gods of Shadow**

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

### **A Whisper from Shadow**

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

### **Shadow Masters**

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

### **Immortal in Shadow**

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



### **With Shadow and Thunder**

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

### **Through the Valley of Shadow**

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

### **Guardians of Shadow**

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

## **Other books by Stefan Vučak**

### **Cry of Eagles**

2011 Reader's Favorite silver medal winner

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

### **All the Evils**

2013 Eric Hoffer finalist

2013 Readers' Favorite silver medal winner

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

### **Towers of Darkness**

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

## **Strike for Honor**

2013 Readers' Favorite gold medal winner

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

## **Proportional Response**

2015 Readers' Favorite finalist

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