

## Review

What makes *Proportional Response* a powerful novel is that it is realistic and convincing. Award-winning author Stefan Vucak, not only knows his subject well, but he also has an effective writing style. As global disaster seems inevitable, it is interesting to note the disparity between American and Chinese cultures, which ultimately directs the actions of the main protagonists in the story. This is a tale of international politics that sadly, seems all too familiar in our world today, except that in this case the reader gets to know what is really going on behind the news headlines. Fast paced and peppered with interesting technical details, *Proportional Response* is a book difficult to put down, especially because the events might well be happening in our midst right now!

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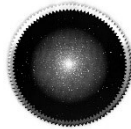
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# PROPORTIONAL RESPONSE

By

**Stefan Vučak**



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## **Dedication**

*To Frank ... seeing through life's veils*

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I gained much understanding about China's culture and politics from Francis Fukuyama's book, *The Origins of Political Order*, Profile Books Ltd, 2012. Excerpts by permission from the author.

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“To see what is right and not do it is want of courage.”

Confucius





## Chapter One

Zhou Yedong smiled broadly, turned slightly, and extended his right arm. Tall, his impeccably tailored dark blue gabardine suit that understated a taste for all things Western, he cut a dominating figure, authority etched on his hard featured face. President Samuel Walters returned the smile and clasped the proffered hand in a firm grip. The two leaders waited as camera flashes from the state-run *Xinhua* and the *People's Daily* tabloids recorded the event for local and international consumption.

Still wearing a friendly grin, Zhou leaned toward Walters, murmured something, and the two men laughed, obviously enjoying each other's company. Observing the proceedings, Keung Yang scowled, absently adjusted his rimless glasses and took a sip of orange-red Fujian rice wine, taking comfort from its delicate flavor. There wasn't much comfort coming from anywhere else. He looked around the opulent Diaoyutai Banquet Hall. Several fellow Standing Committee members, clutching crystal wine goblets, also wore frowns of concern. They had reason to be concerned. Instead of pressing China's economic and financial advantage to humble the Americans, Zhou advocated cooperation and appeasement, mindful of incurring negative world opinion should he tread too hard. It burned Keung to see his country still kowtowing to the West, despite forceful rhetoric to the contrary.

He turned his head, scanned the crowded hall, locked eyes with Chen Teng and gave a small nod. Chen's mouth twitched in return, but it wasn't with humor. They shared a similar outlook and philosophy, explored over numerous lengthy discussions, fortified with liquid lubricants. Keung clenched his teeth in frustration and waited as his friend moved unobtrusively toward him.

A ripple of subdued applause and shuffling of feet followed the two leaders as they made their way toward broad tables arranged on the far side of the hall, where an elaborate dinner would celebrate the meeting of the only two superpowers left. Usually, large state functions were held at the modern complex next to the Fang Fei Yuan villa on the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse grounds, or the Great Hall of the People at Tiananmen Square, but the American delegation was small, only forty State Depart-

ment officials and trade hangers-on. Keung gave a forlorn sigh of resignation and glanced at his stocky friend.

“Damnable, that’s all I’ve got to say,” he growled in Cantonese, his black eyebrows coming together in disapproval, not afraid to voice his disquiet to a trusted comrade. The barbarian Westerners were hardly expected to understand a civilized language, which included some of his provincial colleagues attempting to eavesdrop, most of them knowing only Mandarin. He had to be careful voicing open dissent, even to a friend, and the walls had sharp ears.

Chen shook his head and chuckled. “Zhou’s star burns bright, my indiscreet friend, and the elitist princelings rule—for now. You would be prudent to remember this.”

Keung waved a hand in dismissal. “I haven’t forgotten, but this was an opportunity lost. America is floundering and the venerated dollar isn’t the world’s powerhouse anymore. With our bond holdings we were in a position to dictate terms to the financial markets. Instead, Zhou has caved in to imperialist demands who now dare instruct us how we should run our country after the mess they made of their own, which incidentally plunged us into the Global Financial Crisis. Such gall. It’s intolerable, I tell you.”

Chen ruefully shook his head. “Ah, the pitfalls of free enterprise. Until we can project power with a navy capable of facing the Americans, all we have are our diplomatic and economic weapons.”

“And we’re using them, but it’s not nearly enough.”

“What do you want to do? Granted, we have the means to cripple them, but the resulting world chaos would hurt us just as badly, perhaps more.”

“We’d be in a better position to weather it.”

“Possibly, but at what cost? The diplomatic damage would be considerable, and maybe irretrievable, at least in the medium term. We’d alienate our export markets and seriously harm developing countries we’re trying to bring into our sphere of influence. Without markets to sell our goods, the neon lights proclaiming our prosperity would soon shut down. Another thing; our fiscal position isn’t as strong as we think.”

Keung stared hard at his friend, taking in Chen’s imposing 180-centimeter full frame. Bald, a ragged scar running down his left cheek—a remnant from a near-fatal car accident with a drunken fool—the man’s

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cold black eyes were inscrutable. Depth lay behind that bland face, which many failed to recognize. It could also be fatalistic acceptance of a volatile domestic political climate, or simply a constant need to compromise, thereby avoiding confrontation that might threaten his position. Keung was still to decide.

“Don’t tell me you agree with Zhou’s policies?”

“They’re not his policies. They are collective policies of the Standing Committee, of which you are chairman.”

“That’s sidestepping the issue and you know it. Anyway, I’m chairman only because Zhou’s elitist princeling lackeys don’t dare oust me. I still have power, you know.”

“Fast diminishing. The Tuanpai are on the decline, my rebellious friend. I’d take another count of your alleged supporters and consider curbing those radical revolutionary tendencies of yours. They will land you in trouble one day. You have achieved much in a long career to the State and the Party. Savor the fruits of your labors instead of hatching dissenting plots. We’re both past such foolishness. There are also our families to consider.”

Keung stared at the Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, not believing he heard him right. Had Chen given up the fight to further the Tuanpai populist cause, unwilling to risk the privileges of his position? As a member of the ruling State Council, could his friend be one of those numbers he should be concerned about? No, it wasn’t possible. Still, however unpleasant the thought, it might be worth delving into.

“My career isn’t over yet, and I tell you this. We’re entering a pivotal time for China. Zhou and his *taixidang* clique are squandering it, turning their backs on the people. I cannot allow that to happen.”

Chen rubbed his scar and frowned. “You want to mount a coup? You’d be crushed and I’d lose a skilled mahjong opponent, or worse. They could come after *me* simply for talking to you. Not an optimum outcome for either of us.”

Keung slapped his friend on the shoulder and laughed, which caused some heads to turn toward them. “That would be a shame, wouldn’t it? Relax, I’m not plotting to immolate my career in some grand gesture of misguided ideological patriotism. However, Zhou and his liberal ideas are dangerous for our country, as is the creeping erosion of our social

and moral fabric. We're selling our revolutionary values to Western conglomerates. You know that, don't you?"

"Those Western conglomerates which you so decry gave us the power to confront them using their own tools against them. Boardroom diplomacy and the stock exchanges, these are our battlegrounds now, but enough of such disturbing talk. We better start heading for our table before our absence becomes an unwelcome talking point."

Keung watched as Chen hurried after Dzhang Qishan, grabbing the premier of the State Council by his right arm in an intimate gesture. Chatting amiably, confident in their power, the two men walked casually toward elaborately decorated dining tables. In the crowded, noisy room, Keung suddenly felt alone, and the breeze of change whistled hollow through his bones. He gave an involuntary shudder and sighed. His right knee had begun to hurt again and he wanted to sit down and rub it, Chen's words haunting his thoughts.

A fellow populist, he was somewhat taken aback by his friend's casual dismissal of his concerns. Born in Baotou, Chen understood the plight common people labored under in the bleak northern reaches of the country. Inner Mongolia, with its deserts and harsh winters, provided a tough training ground for a rising young Party official and serving Army officer. Recognizing early the value of vast stretches of rare earth metals, almost half of Earth's known reserves, Chen formulated a policy of export quotas that helped propel his career. To grow in the twenty-first century, China needed those reserves for itself rather than squander them to its ideological and commercial competitors.

Had Chen become too comfortable in his position, no longer willing to push the interests of the country and the Tuanpai cause, lest the effort threatened his sunset years in the Party? As a Hun, his friend harbored deep suspicion of all foreigners, swallowing his resentment in pragmatic recognition that China needed Western investment to expand. He accepted the need, but didn't like having to compromise. Did Chen have information that made him acquiesce to Zhou's unrelenting push to turn China into a global economic power, sacrificing the national spirit along the way? Zhou could have it all, including global dominion by manipulation and control of the world's economic and financial levers, but the fool simply didn't get it. Keung hissed in frustration as he watched Zhou and the American president chatting amiably.

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It seemed all so simple back in Hefei, he reflected; first running the prefecture, ending up as the Anhui Provincial Committee Secretary, being noticed by President Jiang Zamin, until he finally obtained a foothold in the Politburo Standing Committee. He longed for the simple, uncomplicated life he had in Hefei, but he knew too much, understood too much, and now he couldn't find peace; all because of one thing...power. He had it, understood its application, and intended to continue using it. Whatever demons now haunted his nights, he wouldn't change a day. Well, one or two, perhaps. If Chen was right and his power base had eroded—something to look into—he would see Zhou and his princeling coalition destroyed before that happened. The Shanghai Gang faction a spent force and not worth worrying about.

Chen's concern about a possible threat to their families unwarranted. The Politburo had moved on since Mao's days and business wasn't done that way anymore. Still...

"I hope I am not intruding, Mr. Chairman," a soft, but strong voice inquired beside him and Keung turned, affixing a political grin suitable for the occasion.

"Not at all, Mr. Secretary." Keung's English perfect, certain he could fence verbally with the American Secretary of State.

Larry Tanner appeared relieved, his icy blue eyes twinkling with amusement. They were eyes that gave nothing away and saw everything. Impeccably dressed as always, thick brown hair neatly combed, the tall foreigner looked imposing. Keung had dealt with the man before and within obvious limits trusted him, forgiving Tanner's barbaric penchant for plain talk so alien to eastern sensibilities, grounded in elaborate protocol, veiled nuances, and double meanings. He knew Tanner, all right, remembering him well as an exasperating and arrogant ambassador to his country in the previous American administration. Both had polished their technique since then. One learned by doing.

Keung found Americans amusing and irritating. They had a driving need to establish who was right in any argument when often there was no outright right or wrong, merely a tapestry of contradictions. They did not necessarily want to understand or appreciate another's point of view, but disprove it, replacing it with their own obdurate position. By comparison, the Chinese psyche did not demand working through apparent contradictions, accepting that reality is multi-layered and unpredictable,

in a constant state of change. A workable compromise would do fine. The Chinese dialectical approach more tolerant and avoided confrontation in most situations, but it also meant that people did not challenge the status quo and tended not to change much over time, which explained their tolerance of the Party's harsh rule and of past tyrannies. Were it not for this almost phlegmatic attitude, the vast masses out there would have swallowed them long ago.

As they walked slowly toward the tables, Tanner cleared his throat. "I couldn't help noticing, sir, your intense conversation with Chen Teng, although jovial at times."

Keung smiled, comfortable dancing around important state matters, which by their very significance could not be broached directly. Behavior he understood and appreciated. Plain speaking had its place, but the subtle maneuvering around a subject exercised his mental flexibility and generated genuine pleasure when a skilled opponent responded in kind.

"Discussing a fruitful agreement between our two countries, Mr. Secretary," he murmured suavely.

"I dare say," Tanner replied dryly, conveying his skepticism in no uncertain terms, and Keung chuckled.

"You don't believe me? Agreeing to float the yuan not an easy decision for us. Despite misinformation from some quarters, we do understand the need to do so and the impact this will have on our mutual trade positions."

"In exchange for an additional seat on the IMF Executive Board. I cannot help wonder who got the better of the bargain."

"As a major global economic power, Mr. Secretary, it's a seat we deserve. Curbing patent and intellectual property violations so dear to your heart also a significant concession."

"Welcomed, certainly, but your expansion into the Pacific is of concern, as is the undermining of some of its island states."

Keung laughed, vastly entertained by the American's parochial black-and-white attitude. He felt mildly peeved at Tanner's assumed air of superiority, demanding deference by his mere presence, which perhaps unconsciously reflected a degree of condescension toward all people not white. Tanner would probably be appalled if this were pointed out to him. A product of what he considered a superior social order, his attitude axiomatic.

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“Hardly accurate, sir. China is merely extending a helping hand to new friends; friends the United States and Europe have neglected. You can hardly blame us if Polynesia and Micronesia are now turning to us to form lasting partnerships.”

“That’s what I was saying,” Tanner murmured.

Keung nodded, allowing himself a small smile. In this case, using their vernacular, America had dropped the ball. The subtlety of the English language and rich American idioms in many respects rivaled Mandarin silkiness.

“I must say, however, your acknowledgment of China’s sovereignty over the Diaoyutai Islands as per the Potsdam Declaration a gratifying shift in your foreign policy, something we appreciated. Japan has no legal claim over those islands, having occupied them during the first Sino-Japanese war in 1894.”

Tanner shrugged. “The President had to overcome Congressional resistance over that decision. He recognized, and something which I support, unless checked, disputes over energy sources are likely to become more common, Mr. Chairman, and that’s what this one is about. Your willingness to jointly exploit gas and oil reserves around the Senkaku Islands was a generous gesture on your behalf. You could have taken a hard line over the issue.”

Keung felt amused at Tanner’s use of Senkaku as the name for the islands. Japan no longer the economic power of old, facing a crippling national debt—more than double its GDP—declining balance of trade, shrinking manufacturing base, and a falling birthrate. Those were all warning indicators of a country in trouble. As an island nation, it could no longer claim unrestricted access to the world’s natural resources to support its security as it did in the past, which explained its alarming diplomatic and military reaction to China’s claim over the Diaoyutai Islands. National pride forbade them bowing to international pressure, but however unwilling, they were forced to do precisely that as the price for being part of the world community. Japanese leaders still clung to the outmoded samurai Bushido code, refusing to acknowledge the impediment this code presented when dealing with international disputes, something the younger generation recognized, but were powerless to change for now in the current domestic political climate.

“It’s a matter of perspective, Mr. Secretary. Tolerating and accepting

a historical difference will benefit Japan as much as us. However, this weighty talk, sir, threatens to spoil what promises to be an auspicious dinner, something disagreeable to my sensitive constitution. Perhaps we can pick this up later over brandy and cigars?”

“A decadent indulgence?” Tanner queried with a raised eyebrow.

“Merely civilized enjoyment,” Keung said with a disarming shrug.

Tanner grinned and nodded in capitulation. “I shall look forward to sampling again your fine brandies.” With a small bow, he strode purposefully after Chen Teng and Dzhang Qishan, leaving Keung bemused. Although a barbarian lacking refinement, Tanner could be wily when he wanted to, and it wouldn’t do to underestimate the man.

Keung negotiated waving hands and closed groups, and strode quickly across the exquisitely laid brown marble floor glittering under four brilliant crystal chandeliers, his Italian leather shoes hardly making a sound. When fully packed, the hall could entertain 200 guests, but this evening there were scarcely over a hundred and fifty. Every visit by the Americans represented an important occasion, but despite the attached trade delegation that provided a public facade, President Walters used this one to hold some very private talks with Zhou Yedong. Dressed in dark suits, trying to appear inconspicuous, special Ministry of Public Security operatives watched for any disturbance; another facade.

Politburo luminaries, most of the Standing Committee members with a sprinkling of Central Military Commission generals and admirals, were slowly taking their seats, the places arranged along strict protocol lines. Seated at the long central table, with Mao’s large portrait hanging prominently on the wall behind them, Zhou Yedong, State Council heavyweights and, of course, President Walters and Secretary Tanner, looked relaxed, relishing the evening. They had cause to be cheerful, Keung reflected morosely.

Soft traditional zither music drifted over the assembly, complementing a wash of voices and occasional hearty laughter. Local red and white wines were already flowing freely. Keung nodded knowingly. When those who overindulged woke tomorrow, they’d be wishing for oblivion. He had seen it all before. Behind their polished veneer, many of his colleagues were really little better than provincial peasants, having risen to power through graft, bribery, kickbacks and backstabbing—sometimes literally.



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Premier Dzhang Qishan looked relaxed as he sat next to Zhou. Indisposed, the State Council President not able to attend this function, and Qishan filled in for him. Han Yunshan, the CMC Chairman, said something to the premier and Dzhang laughed. They were polished operators and their veneer of sophistication very genuine. The three princelings dominated the elitist coalition. They were all Keung's enemies.

He didn't resent their promotion of China's Go Global Strategy *per se*. His country needed modernization to compete in the world marketplace and eventually control it. He understood all that. He detested the radical shifting into unchecked privatization, market liberalization and open foreign investment. Although China had prospered under these policies, first advocated by Deng Xiaoping, along the way the Party had forgotten the Revolution and the need to promote health, social welfare, justice and the rule of law. The growing rift between the wealth of cities and the rural multitude had turned into a festering and growing sore within the Party. Keung found it troubling that no one seemed to mind this destabilizing development, erroneously assuming that wealth would trickle down to the masses. Perhaps he was simply old-fashioned, acknowledging that growing complexity of modern world politics sometimes overwhelmed him. However, his focus to correct what he felt to be a wrong turning for his country clear, his determination remained unwavering.

Didn't Confucius say, *In a country well governed, poverty is something to be ashamed of. In a country badly governed, wealth is something to be ashamed of.* Perhaps the old man had it right.

Sighing, he deposited his goblet on a tray wielded by one of the invisible attendants and walked slowly toward the central table, allowing the media to follow him, but refusing to take questions. Keung seated himself next to Walters as befitted his rank, and nodded to the American.

"Mr. President, a delightful evening."

"A pleasure to have you with us, Mr. Chairman," Walters said, smiling broadly.

"You must forgive Yang's tardiness, sir," Zhou interjected, using the familiar first name, "but he is a rule unto himself."

Tanner chuckled and leaned forward. "I'm the one to blame, gentlemen. The Chairman and I were discussing matters of state."

Walters shook his head in resignation. "Can't you leave your baggage

behind for one night, Larry?”

Zhou laughed with genuine humor. “Once a diplomat, Mr. President, always a manipulator. It comes with the portfolio.”

“I’m afraid you’re right, sir,” Walters agreed regretfully.

Keung nodded politely and raised a glass of Shaoxing pale yellow *Hua Diao* wine in a sign of contrition.

“No more politics. At least not tonight.”

He caught Zhou looking at him thoughtfully. *No, not tonight, my princeling friend, but you can look forward to a reckoning soon.*

Inevitable as their reckoning would be, he recalled another Confucius saying, *Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.* To fulfill a dream, sometimes even death wasn’t too high a price to pay.

“It is regrettable, Mr. President, that your short stay does not permit you to visit some of our more notable attractions,” Zhou said smoothly, and Walters nodded.

“Something I also regret. My chief of staff can run the White House quite efficiently without me, but should I extend my visit, he might want to make my absence permanent.”

“Unfortunately, I know exactly what you mean,” Zhou agreed, glancing pointedly at Keung, who smiled faintly and broke eye contact after a few seconds of clashing wills.

“I sometimes bemoan not having the option of sending a recalcitrant Congressman or two to a correctional farm,” Walters mused. “It would solve a lot of my problems.”

“Your democratic system, Mr. President, lends itself to chaotic behavior,” Zhou remarked suavely.

“Perhaps if we met somewhere halfway...” Walters looked pointedly at Zhou.

They had met halfway, Keung reflected, but the Americans were already standing on the dividing line.

Despite false smiles and some forced laughter, everyone appeared to have a good time. As the evening wore on, the Americans groaning from an endless procession of dishes representing every Chinese province, diplomatic protocol discarded—at least lowered a little—allowing real discourse to develop. These functions also acted as legitimate cultural exchanges, the Americans always walking away actually surprised to discover warm, yet serious personalities in their counterparts who genuinely

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did not seek conflict. Keung wasn't surprised at all, needing to re-educate processions of their officials every time the U.S. administration changed.

By ten, the dinner had run its course and people were starting to fidget, but no one dared walk out until Zhou Yedong officially called it a night. The delicate wine had begun to clog Keung's head. He also wanted to get away, stroll around the Zhonghai—the Central Sea—shore and take in some crisp air. Not much fresh air in Beijing these days, the city usually covered by an impenetrable blanket of gray smog. When the Communist Party of China president stood up and finally announced an end to the evening's activities, he was greeted with enthusiastic applause. Everyone still faced a full day of talks likely to be intense before the American diplomatic delegation took their leave. Keung desperately wanted to know what Zhou and Walters had to say to each other, but planting bugs in their private meeting room would be foolish in the extreme. Given the security measures in force, including the sweeps by the White House Secret Service, the gambit wasn't workable anyway. Had he been tempted, he would have needlessly alerted prowling Ministry of State Security agents and the exterminators would have been called in.

Shen Lei followed him a few paces behind as Keung made his way out of the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse. Shen a bit old for his duties as a front line bodyguard, but Keung never dreamed of replacing his formidable taciturn friend, and he did consider him a friend despite the enormous social divide between them. They'd been together for fifteen years now, since Keung's appointment as the Anhui Provincial Committee Secretary. Shen had stood by his side, a bodyguard and sometimes trusted confidant, while Keung maneuvered his career up the promotional ladder through the Central Military Commission, and finally into the Standing Committee. He knew Shen to be a Ministry of State Security agent tasked to keep an eye on his activities, but Keung never doubted Shen's loyalty to him.

A luxury black, specially modified, armored BMW 7 pulled up beside the curb and his shadow quickly opened the rear door. Uniformed police had the road blocked, keeping the curious out of the way. Keung glanced at his colleagues waiting for their transports and eased himself into the back seat, the fine beige calf leather squeaking under his bulk. Shen got into the front seat and the car eased onto Fucheng Road. The Americans

didn't have to go anywhere, occupying the entire State Guesthouse hotel for the duration of their visit.

Despite the relentless traffic, it didn't take long to reach the western gate of the Zhongnanhai compound nestled against the Forbidden City's western wall. Once through the security check, the guards standing stiffly at attention, the car entered what Keung called his sanctuary, an oasis of sanity in a city that knew no peace.

Built as an imperial retreat by Jin and Yuan emperors, the compound now served as headquarters for the Communist Party and State Council administrative arm. It also provided residences for high-ranking Party officials. Surrounded by immaculate lawns and groves, Qing Dynasty palaces and drab gray brick office buildings from Mao's time lay scattered around two lakes—the South and Central Sea. Inaccessible to tourists and the general public, the compound exuded tranquility by its very presence, engendering contemplation and reflection.

The BMW neared a complex of residential buildings, brightly lit from discreetly placed lampposts, capped by traditional curved red-tiled roofs, and elaborate carvings painted in prominent colors. Keung needed reflection. He wondered how Confucius would regard China's headlong rush to embrace all things material, stripping the soul bare.

Some of his *taijidang* opponents called Confucianism an intensely backward-looking philosophy, emphasizing family and kinship over loyalty to the State, which now meant loyalty to the dollar. During the heady days of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Tse-tung and his elitists sought to eradicate such counterrevolutionary thinking, but his efforts were given lip service by the population at large, determined to guard their independence against political authority. Kinship networks were a direct hindrance to accumulation of political power, but Mao's efforts to implement policies that tied individuals directly to the State was nothing more than Legalism practiced since the Zhou Dynasty—never entirely successful, and largely explained why China had always been ruled by an iron hand.

Someone had to provide leadership and vision, Keung mused, or nothing would ever get done. Local parochial interests would otherwise paralyze the country as cities and provinces sought to manipulate the state's bureaucratic machinery to further their own ends. What Westerners regarded as nepotism, graft and corruption was in reality filial and

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village loyalty expressed writ large. Keung knew he painted with a broad brush here, as genuine corruption existed, but it helped unravel the underpinning machinations. The plain fact, Westerners simply did not understand China and its people, automatically assuming that their version of uncoordinated democracy and dubious morality represented the ultimate social model for all mankind. Such arrogance made him snort with derision. The one exception was Tanner. Despite obvious character flaws, he understood the Chinese psyche all too well. Keung wondered if President Walters shared that understanding.

Slowing, the car pulled up to his two-story residence and stopped. Shen immediately leaped out and opened the rear door. Keung nodded to him and walked toward the broad entrance, two stylized lion statues guarding the path. The heavy lacquered wooden door opened as he stepped under the elaborately carved portico and a slim figure emerged. Lian bowed, her patterned blue silk gown shimmering under subdued lighting.

“I trust you had a successful evening, sir?” she said softly, closing the door after him.

Graceful and willowy, long hair cascading down her back, her smoky black eyes regarded him frankly. Lian ran his household with unobtrusive efficiency, a product of her People’s Liberation Army training, no doubt. Security supposedly impenetrable within Zhongnanhai, but Keung knew, as did the State Council and Standing Committee members, absolute security did not exist. He didn’t resent this level of intrusion into his personal life, careful not to reveal his inner thoughts to Lian and others of his household staff. They were undoubtedly all Ministry of State Security operatives. Trust was a coin he spent frugally.

“I did, but these functions are always unsettling, and this one was no exception.”

“Do you want me to get you something?”

“Tea. Have someone bring it upstairs. I’ll be retiring immediately.”

“A pleasant night, sir.”

He slowly mounted the curved staircase, lightly holding onto the balustrade, favoring his right leg. Feet sinking into thick maroon carpet, he opened the last door at the end of a short corridor. Entering the brightly lit lounge room, he closed the door with a backward shove of his hand. He pulled at his tie and strode to an antique coffee table, picked up the

remote and switched on the large LED TV mounted into a ceiling-high bookcase. Glancing at rows of bound volumes, tempted to pull one out to read in bed, he decided he'd had enough of heavy thinking for the day.

About to change channels, the unfolding image of an enormous wave rolling toward a line of skyscrapers froze him. The column of green water crashed against the shore, smashing buildings, drowning everything in its path, sending people scurrying in panicked frenzy trying to escape the surging wall bearing down on them.

The special effects and computer animation were superb, and Keung shook his head at the wonders delivered by the inexorable march of technology. In a fade, the image merged into a map of the Pacific showing expanding rings originating from the western side of the big island of Hawaii. He turned up the volume and groped for his pipe and tin of delicately blended rum-flavored tobacco.

*“—is only an estimate should the 4,000 cubic miles of the Hilina Slump, part of the Kilauea protrusion, break away from the main island, but extensive computer modeling supports what you just saw. All Pacific rim landmasses would face extensive inundation and infrastructure damage, not only from the resulting tsunami, but from a possible magnitude nine quake generated by the slide.”*

The suave presenter looked concerned. *“Professor Degard, how likely is this scenario?”*

The middle-aged scientist sat back in his chair, brushed back a lock of white hair above his right ear, and smiled. *“Your viewers have no need to be alarmed. Such a catastrophic event isn't expected to occur for hundreds of thousands of years.”*

*“But isn't it true, Professor, that in 1975 a 37-mile-wide section of the Hilina Slump suddenly dropped eleven-and-a-half feet and slid seaward twenty-six feet, generating a 7.2 magnitude quake and a 48-foot-high tsunami?”*

*“Which demonstrates that the Kilauea eastern slope has a tendency to relieve internal stresses through periodic slumps rather than a single catastrophic slide such as happened some 115 thousand years ago with the Alike debris avalanche. All volcanic islands are prone to periodic slumps and landslides, but in human lifetimes, these are extremely rare events.”*

*“Tell me. What part of the world is most vulnerable right now?”*

*“Well...without being alarmist, the collapse of the Cumbre Vieja Volcano's western flank in the Canary Islands off Morocco represents a genuine and immediate*

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*threat, counted in hundreds of years. The entire region is particularly unstable and a displacement slide of 100 to 400 cubic miles is theoretically possible. Such an event would cause cataclysmic damage along the entire North Atlantic basin, including the United States' eastern seaboard.*"

"Damage from tsunami waves?"

*"That's right. Portugal and the western African coastlines would suffer the greatest impact, but a tsunami front with peaks of up to sixty feet or more would devastate everything from Florida to New York."*

Staring directly at the camera, the presenter looked suitably grave. "We'll take a short break before resuming—"

Keung exhaled and clicked off the TV. He didn't need to watch disasters likely to come in some unknown future. There were enough man-made ones happening right now to worry about. He filled the pipe, lit it and sighed as aromatic smoke leaked through his nostrils.

A knock on the door made him turn, the image of a giant wave toppling skyscrapers fresh in his mind.

"Yes?"

"Your tea, sir," one of the servants announced.

"Very well."

He left his glasses on the coffee table, walked into the bedroom, and began to undress. The outer door closed and the pervading scent of rose-hip tea filled the room, making his mouth water. Barefooted, he padded into the lounge room, poured tea into a genuine jade cup, added honey and a squirt of lemon juice. He took a thirsty sip and nodded with satisfaction. The *Hua Diao* wine excellent, but he shouldn't have had that last glass. He picked up the pipe, took a couple of puffs and placed it in the tray.

After a shower, he finished his toilet and slipped under navy blue silk covers of his king-size bed. He pressed the master switch on the night table console beside him, which plunged the apartment into darkness. No one to share his bed these days, Juan having died two years ago from a liver infection that even Western medicine failed to overcome. Although he prided himself for having a strong libido, he did not use the services of readily available women provided by the state, wary of honey traps and emotional entanglements. After Juan, love like hers would never be his again, and he had little interest in mere diversions of the flesh.

The only family he had was a son, a Navy commander with his own *Jiangwei II*-class frigate attached to the North Sea Fleet. The Qingdao naval base a long way from Beijing, but his son could call sometimes. That he didn't, said something about their relationship. Having a powerful parent couldn't have been easy for the boy keen to make it without his father's shadow hanging over him. Admirable, but naïve. Keung had power and used it to advance his son's career, which generated the ensuing rift between them. He consoled himself with the thought that with maturity and greater understanding how the system worked, his son might see fit to pick up a phone one day. Beset with introspection, which happened occasionally, Keung wondered why he didn't pick up that phone himself. A question he could not bring himself to answer.

With no one to share his bed, share his confidences, aspirations and frustrations, all he had to fill his days now was his work. Sometimes even that wasn't enough.

The day's events crowding his mind, he drifted into sleep.

\* \* \*

Keung woke in the depths of night, images of giant waves wreaking destruction had haunted his dreams. With sleep deserting him, he lay with hands clasped behind his head, gazing at the impenetrable blackness of the ceiling. A chill spring breeze stirred the gauzy curtain, making the hairs on his arms twitch. April should normally be warmer. He fancied he could hear the incessant rumble of traffic from a city that never slept, but it was only his imagination working in overdrive. Inured against the outside world, protected by high stone walls, the grounds were silent.

Were the scenes racing through his mind an omen, a portent of things to come? He considered himself sophisticated, above influence from something crass like old wives' superstitions, but he never ignored such warnings. Zhou Yedong and his starched business suit cronies were steering China over hazardous ground toward a questionable objective, turning people into faceless Western-type consumers, and in the process, creating serious social tension between the emerging corporate elite and the vast peasantry. Of course, that same peasantry also wanted their cut of wealth represented by ultramodern skyscrapers, dazzling neon dis-



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plays, shops crammed with goods beyond reach even ten years ago, resulting in an unstoppable migration into cities already groaning under the strain to provide basic services and support infrastructure. This in turn had led to a measurable reduction in agricultural production, a disturbing threat to national food supplies should the trend continue. Foreign assets were procured to counter the threat, not enough to guarantee food and resources security, and governments around the world were increasingly blocking such acquisitions, mindful of their own strategic needs.

Keung sighed. A merely a manifestation of human nature, he decided. Like people everywhere, the Chinese were good small business operators who sought to maximize their fortunes, which only exacerbated the problem. Fortunes these days were made in cities and corporate boardrooms. However good they might be at running small enterprises, his people were terrible at managing conglomerates, something the Westerners excelled at. The explanation was simple. Multinational corporations were too complex to be run as an autocratic family fiefdom. Authority had to be delegated, behavior that ran contrary to the Chinese psyche firmly rooted in Confucian loyalty to the family and its internal hierarchy.

The mold was nevertheless slowly being broken as wealthy families sent their sons to American universities where they learned to adopt the corporate mindset, which over the last twenty years had transformed the Chinese economic landscape from a primary producer to a global manufacturing and financial powerhouse. Instead of using this strength to exert influence on the world's economic and political stage, Zhou had squandered China's competitive advantage by bowing to the West, especially the Americans. An intolerable state of affairs.

Keung clearly understood the strategy and tactics behind Zhou's rationale and of his elitist supporters: buy up Western resource-producing assets, infiltrate and eventually control their financial institutions, modernize the military to project power, and in time, China would chart the world's course. Laudable goals which he supported, but he wondered if Zhou realized that by achieving his objective, China would be transformed into a model of Western imperialism, governed by an unfeeling corporate conscience. A conscience that would subvert the government

apparatus itself, bending it into just another tool in the service of generating profits, as already happened in the West, the Global Financial Crisis being a textbook case.

Keung did not want such a future for China.

Soulless corporations must be tempered with responsible socio-economic policies as advocated by Hu Jintao. If the Party became a commercial machine, everything Keung had fought for, everything the Tunpai movement and Jiang Zamin fought for, would be swept away, replaced by the credit card. Greed and self-interest would conquer his vast country where emperors over millennia had failed.

His mind churning, he slowly closed his eyes.

He woke with a start and blinked at bright sunshine streaming through the windows. Amazed to see blue sky not shrouded by its usual blanket of smog, he shook his head. Energized, he sprang out of bed and did his usual seventy pushups, sit-ups and tai chi moves. He might be pushing the end run of sixty-three, but his body was still that of a forty-year-old and he intended it to remain that way. He hated the idea of turning into a portly, waddling parasite that unfortunately many of his colleagues had become. Giving his right knee a vigorous massage, it worked out some of the stiffness.

After a simple breakfast of ci fan tuan, baozi—the roasted pork in the steamed buns particularly tasty—topped off with a soup of fried tofu and noodles with assorted vegetables, he walked out, Shen Lei already standing beside the BMW, the rear door open. Glancing up at the clear sky, Keung took a deep breath and exhaled with satisfaction.

“Great day, Lei.”

“Yes, sir,” Shen replied gravely, his damaged throat making his voice rough, causing Keung to sigh. He couldn’t remember ever seeing Shen smile. Then again, his job did not give him much to smile about.

“The Guesthouse, sir?”

“No. Take me to the office.”

Keung settled into the luxurious leather and sat back as the car pulled away. Having Party and government complexes inside Zhognanhai had invaluable advantages, sparing him the daily commuter crush he would otherwise have to endure on the open road, not to mention the resulting security problems guaranteed to make his paranoid guard detail go pale. Situated near the Hall of Longevity on the western side of the South Sea,

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the plain gray brick six-story building housing the State Council headquarters appeared among tall oak, birch and pine, surrounded by flawlessly kept lawns and flowerbeds.

As Keung walked up the white marble steps, the two guards standing watch at the entrance snapped to attention, their AK-47 rifles held before them in salute. Shen opened the heavy wooden door and Keung strode through. After taking the elevator to the fourth floor, he quickly looked around. Most of his staff were already at their desks, careful to look busy. He ignored them as he walked briskly toward his office, which occupied a substantial part of the entire floor. Inside the reception antechamber, his personal aide looked up from his computer screen and jumped up.

“Good morning, sir! Tea?”

“With a dash of lime,” Keung growled, waited for Shen to unlock the door to his private office and walked in.

Shen produced what looked like a black smartphone from his pocket and spent several minutes slowly moving around the room. As Keung waited for him run the bug sweep, he bit his lower lip and absently glanced about. The polished parquet floor glittered in the morning light, turning the sliding glass bookshelf panels into mirrors. He glanced at Mao’s portrait hanging prominently above the desk and frowned. Even though the old leader’s policies were now thoroughly discredited, like favorite socks, the Party couldn’t bring itself to discard him completely. It still harbored nostalgic sentiment for revolutionary days that swept Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists off the mainland, heralding a period of unprecedented brutality and destruction of priceless cultural treasures. Those were dark days from which his country was still slowly recovering.

As he stood there waiting for Shen to finish the sweep, Keung suddenly felt cold and his skin prickled, finally understanding the meaning of his dream. He dug out his pipe and stoked it to life, clutching the warm bowl.

Shen pocketed the detector and nodded. “All clear, sir.”

“What? Oh, right. Lei, I have a job for you,” he said quietly, astonished at the audacity of his idea. Could he pursue it seriously?

On top of a flagging economy saddled with burgeoning debt, a seemingly natural disaster would cripple America, leaving China to pick over the remains at its leisure. The human cost? The tens of thousands who

might be lost hardly bothered him. It was obliteration of vital infrastructure and possible breakdown of local civilian authority that mattered here. Besides, the vast masses everywhere were merely ants in the service of the state. However, ants or not, they still had to be kept happy and productive.

The idea he harbored bordered on sheer lunacy, but what if it could be made to work? Lunacy or not, he saw no harm in finding out more. It could also serve as a trigger to remove Zhou, a most satisfactory outcome. That angle though, would need careful handling. The president was a wily political mechanic, and not to be underestimated. Titillated by the prospect, he needed to confirm its feasibility. A puff of white smoke drifted above his head as he tugged at his glasses.

“Yes, sir?”

“I need to talk to a geophysicist, one of the top men we have, but not the top. Check with Peking University. Once you find him, bring him somewhere discreet where we can talk.”

Shen’s forehead creased in thought. “My apartment is totally secure, sir.”

Keung shook his head. “No. It might be watched. I got it. Book a room at the Grand Hyatt and bring him there at twelve.”

“Presumably, you’ll be having lunch at Da Giorgio’s?”

“I have got a sudden craving for Italian food if anyone cares to ask,” Keung said dryly, his eyes cold. “While you’re at the university, stop by their library and copy whatever technical articles you can dig up on the Cumbre Vieja Volcano. Don’t use their computer or the Internet, and no paper request slips.”

“Understood. After you finish with the professor...”

“I’ll let you know.”

What he contemplated doing could never surface, even if the concept turned impossible to implement. Shen’s subtle hint to silence the academic not only wise, but necessary. There must not be any evidence trail back to him. He pushed aside images of a wife and child who might never see its father again, but the high stakes he played for would demand more than one sacrifice before this was done.

Shen didn’t say anything, nodding in understanding. “Very good, sir.”

“Pick me up at eleven-thirty.”

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Keung waited as Shen softly closed the carved wooden door after him, then sat down behind his spacious matte black desk. His eyes strayed to the blue-green jade figurine of the Buddha holding down a stack of loose papers, and pulled at his chin. Sometimes, to get things done required an unorthodox approach. However, what he contemplated went way beyond the unorthodox.

He logged onto his computer and quickly checked the email Inbox, but his mind wasn't on work. He could have Googled all the information he needed, the Internet not restricted to high Party officials and ranking military officers, but that would have been foolish in the extreme. Although assured that surveillance protocols didn't apply to him, the Ministry of State Security reported to the premier of the State Council, which meant the president, and Zhou Yedong hadn't climbed to his present position by trusting his adversaries...or friends. At the level Keung operated, they all had acquaintances of opportunity, nothing more. A fellow Standing Committee member was a competitor and potential enemy, and he wasn't about to give them any ammunition.

A hell of a way to run a country, wondering how the Westerners did it. From what he knew of the American NSA, they did it very well indeed. Were *his* communications monitored by that ELINT monster? Probably, but they wouldn't get much change from the random key encryption codes the Chinese government and military organs employed. China hadn't sent some of its brightest talent to MIT and Caltech for nothing; the MSS and the CMC General Staff Department becoming very good at all forms of espionage and network hacking as a result of that foresight. China needed Western intellectual input, its philosophical outlook not suited to application of the scientific method, but they were learning. His country owed a lot to those faceless men for its economic might.

\* \* \*

The driver brought the BMW to a stop under the hotel's portico and Shen Lei immediately scrambled out. He held the rear door open and waited as Keung heaved himself out with a grunt, the traffic noises suddenly loud. His nose wrinkled at the sharp stink of raw pollution as he

absently cast his eyes over cars streaming along Chang An Avenue. Noting the official vehicle, the concierge tugged at his navy blue jacket and hurried toward them, but Shen waved him away, slamming the door shut. The BMW instantly pulled away.

Keung had dined at the Hyatt a number of times and liked the variety of its restaurants, especially relishing its exotic Italian food, a welcome change from his regular domestic fare. A favorite for a number of his colleagues. As he passed through the glass revolving door, the foyer blocked out external noises, its subdued atmosphere filled with soft instrumental Western music. Pink marble glittered beneath an enormous chandelier. A transparent column touching the fifteen-meter ceiling was alive with exotically colored fish. Keung ignored the crowded registration desk, Westerners and wealthy locals rolling suitcases and extension handle carryon bags, and followed Shen toward an alcove of elevators. With a soft *ting*, the center elevator doors opened and an impatient group surged in. Keung waited as another elevator came down and he walked in. Shen pressed the eleventh floor button and stood protectively in front of him, his eyes staring pointedly at four business suits talking animatedly. A pleasant female voice announced the sixth floor in Mandarin and English, and the four got out.

“I have the material you requested, sir,” Shen said when the door panels closed.

“Excellent. Any trouble?”

“No trouble. How was the meeting with Secretary Tanner, if I may ask?”

Keung rarely shared confidences with anyone, but Shen wasn't just anybody, and he needed to vent his frustrations to someone. A good listener, Shen sometimes came up with surprisingly astute observations and comments. Anyway, revealing what he discussed with Tanner wasn't going to betray a state secret.

“Unexpectedly productive. The United States is getting tired of its Taiwan policy and President Walters wouldn't mind if the whole problem simply went away. Tanner didn't say it outright, but it appears they won't stand in our way if we absorbed that haven of Nationalist subversives, provided we don't do it militarily.”

“Isn't that what we've been doing already?”

“To an extent. However, this shift in American policy will enable us

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to formalize and accelerate the process.”

“And what did the Secretary want in return?”

The lush voice announced the eleventh floor and the doors hissed open.

Keung glanced at his friend. “That we lift export quotas off our rare earths.” Seeing Shen’s raised eyebrows, he nodded. “Not a small ask, as it impacts a range of vital modern manufacturing processes, ours as well as theirs.”

Always a professional, Shen peered out and walked briskly along the brightly lit corridor, his feet sinking into rich light brown pile. When they reached room 1123, he dug out a keycard and inserted it into a slot. When the lock clicked, he opened the door and waited for Keung to walk in. A slender balding man sporting heavy black-rimmed glasses, stood up. He might have been in his late thirties, but it was hard to say. All the Chinese looked young until they were suddenly old.

“Professor Chuan Jianbo from the School of Earth and Space Sciences, Peking University,” Shen announced gravely. “I’ll be outside, sir,” he said, and softly closed the door after him.

Studying the man, Keung could tell Chuan was curious about this strange meeting, knowing he faced an important official, but didn’t seem at all intimidated. Although unimportant, the professor did not appear to recognize him.

Well appointed with two double beds, a computer, flat TV screen, and a writing desk, the room otherwise unspectacular. Keung could have been in any hotel in the world. Without offering to shake hands, he strode to the desk, pulled back a padded chair and sat down. Glancing up, he swept a hand at an empty chair.

“Make yourself comfortable, Professor.”

Chuan unbuttoned his jacket, sat down and crossed his legs. “An unusual meeting, Mr...”

“Keung Yang.”

The professor’s eyes widened and some color drained from his fleshy face. Clearing his throat, a faint smile played at the corner of his mouth.

“Everything is clear to me now, Mr. Chairman.”

“Does anyone know that you are here?”

“No, sir. Mr. Shen Lei called me on my cellphone and asked me to meet him at the parking lot, a matter of state security, he said.”

“And it is.”

“He drove me here from the campus, told me to wait and not make any calls.”

“Did you make any calls?” Keung asked softly, fiddling with his pipe. “We can check, you know.”

“I called our departmental secretary on my cell, telling her I’d be away for a couple of hours. I didn’t tell her where I was.”

Keung nodded. He believed the man, but Shen would still check the hotel’s phone records and Chuan’s cellphone.

“Professor, this conversation is very much a matter of state security, and you will not divulge or refer to it in any way, written or verbal, to anyone. Is that clear?” He puffed out a cloud of white aromatic smoke. He had no need to elaborate. Chuan knew what would happen to him and his family if he said anything.

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Are you married? Children?”

“I have a wife and a twelve-year-old daughter. She wants to be an astronaut,” Chuan added proudly.

Keung pondered whether to continue with this, but somewhat late for second thoughts. Perhaps something could be done for the daughter—if he survived. He tapped the desk with his fingers, exhaled and sat back, deciding to push this to its limit, but indirectly.

“Last night, I saw part of a documentary on the Discovery channel about a tsunami and how they’re generated. It disturbed me and I couldn’t sleep afterward.”

Chuan grinned broadly. “I also saw that program, but if you’re worried about a likely threat to China in the event of a Kilauea flank collapse, sir, there is no reason for concern. Such an event is not likely to happen for hundreds of thousands of years. Not likely.”

Keung puffed and nodded. “That’s what the narrator said. Are there other vulnerable zones capable of triggering a massive tsunami?”

Chuan looked thoughtful. “Collapse events could and have occurred in the Caribbean Volcanic Island Arc. It’s a very active tectonic region, a result of the Caribbean Plate moving in relation to the North and South American plates. As stratovolcanoes, they’re prone to slope failure as an ejecta layer built from successive eruptions fails. These islands are more or less conical, although you often cannot tell by simply looking at above



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surface features. Gravity invariably weakens any fault line paralleling the rift zone, causing either a slump along the boundary or a total structural collapse. Both generate a quake and a tsunami, but of different magnitudes. Definitely different. The Montserrat Soufriere Hills and St. Vincent volcanoes pose a significant future threat. However, a tsunami event there would not be a threat to China. Tongatapu is quite active, but its effects are localized. It poses no danger, none.”

“Last night’s program mentioned another type of volcano.”

“Yes, sir, shield volcanoes. The Hawaiian chain is an excellent example of the type, formed entirely by periodic lava flooding, the mounds resembling a warrior’s upraised shield. Curious reference, don’t you think? It’s also a very unusual chain, created by a giant magma plume, which accounts for their enormous size, rising as they do from the ocean floor. Fascinating geology, that. Fascinating. No one understands how that plume functions or why it lasted several million years.”

Keung regarded the scientist with interest. Undoubtedly, he was dealing with a character here. “Just for my information, how vulnerable is Cumbre Vieja?”

“To a slump?” Chuan pulled at his chin, his eyes vacant as he ordered his thoughts. “In geological timescales, very. The island of La Palma is one of the most unstable formations on Earth, and experiences regular earthquakes almost on a daily basis. A large part of the western flank is constructed from the scar of a previous collapse, which today forms the Caldera de Taburiente mountain, and sits on an unstable debris layer deposited by that collapse. I wouldn’t want to live there. It is speculated that even a small eruption along the Cumbre Vieja ridge could trigger a collapse of the entire western flank ranging from 150 to 500 cubic kilometers.”

“Cubic *kilometers*?” Keung stared at the scientist in disbelief.

Chuan smiled. “We’re dealing with enormous forces here, sir. Enormous. However, slope failures generally occur in phases and not necessarily as a single large-scale massive collapse. Lucky for us. The Kilauea flank failure in 1975 is a typical example, displacing less than three cubic kilometers, resulting in moderate near-field destruction, with insignificant far field effects. Quite insignificant.”

“What would be the effect of a large Cumbre Vieja collapse?”

“A large collapse? You have to think big here. A slide block of 500

cubic kilometers might be some twenty-two kilometers long, fifteen wide and up to one and a half deep, moving at 100 meters per second. Such a mass might displace a water dome 900 meters high, inundating the Canary Islands to a hundred meters or more. Within one hour, stacked short frequency waves of up to ten meters would sweep across the African coastline. Europe could have seven meter waves, and South America would be swept with twenty meter waves. Along the shallow continental shelf of eastern North America, twenty to twenty-five meter waves might hit after seven hours. The effects would be similar to the 2011 Tohoku tsunami off Japan. Very similar.

“Of course, this is a worst-case scenario. The most likely event would probably displace less than 200 cubic kilometers. Although only forty percent the size, the resulting tsunami would still be enormously destructive, on the order of the 2010 Sumatra earthquake. On the La Palma island itself, all towns on the western flank would be destroyed: Puntagorda, Tijarafe and La Punta, to name a few. On the eastern flank, Santa Cruz de la Palma, Los Caucos and others would probably be inundated. The entire population of some 90,000 might be lost. When nature speaks, it is always on a grand scale, Mr. Chairman. Grand scale.”

“You paint a terrible scenario, Professor,” Keung murmured, clearly visualizing the destruction, and took a puff.

“It’s not that bad really. Since the establishment of the North Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Connected Seas Tsunami Warning System—NEAMTWS—in 2005, everybody is keeping a close eye on Cumbre Vieja, including Mount Etna and Vesuvius, a very underrated volcano. Very. Those sites are littered with remote sensing instruments, which should provide ample warning of any upcoming event, allowing time for evacuation. Naples is extremely vulnerable as people don’t appreciate the danger Vesuvius represents. We generally refuse to learn from history, sir.”

“This is truly fascinating, Professor. I don’t envy our children their future. Tell me. Could a landslide be triggered artificially?”

Chuan opened his mouth, then closed it with a snap. He cleared his throat and uncrossed his legs. He bit his lower lip and stared at Keung.

“The forces involved—”

“Is it possible?”

“Well, a multi-megaton underwater detonation positioned at the base

of a fault line could theoretically trigger a slump. I couldn't tell you the required energy release or the size of the resulting displacement mass without doing some detailed THETIS-FUNWAVE modeling, the solution dependent on specific site parameters. But the idea..."

Undecided, Keung weighed the risks involved. Chuan would probably keep his mouth shut, fear would make sure of that, but using university computer facilities would leave an evidence trail, which someone could later pick up. Still, records can be wiped, and he needed accurate data to determine the feasibility of his scheme.

"How long would it take to model a number of scenarios?"

"Not long. The basic data on every active volcano is readily available from ongoing studies, and Cumbre Vieja was modeled exhaustively. I've done some work on it myself for my graduate students. The unknown parameter is the effect of energy transfer to the slope from a transverse shock caused by a specific detonation, and whether such a shockwave would be powerful enough to trigger a slump. That's the unknown."

"Can you give me a guess?"

Chuan pulled at his chin and shook his head. "Not without detailed modeling, sir, but a five megaton blast could probably trigger a moderate slide. Although such an event is theoretically feasible, a thermonuclear detonation would leave incriminating radiation."

Keung puffed, sighed and nodded. "You're right." He tapped the pipe against the ashtray and pocketed it. "When can you start?"

"Well...I can run several scenarios this afternoon." Chuan shifted in his seat, clearly uncomfortable. "Mr. Chairman...you are not seriously considering—"

"Setting off a tsunami?" Keung laughed at the man's goggling expression. "Hardly, but the Party must be vigilant and explore all possibilities. China is a growing power and the West is jealous of our prosperity and economic might. There is no telling what someone in Washington might come up with, blaming the event on us. We must be prepared."

Relieved, Chuan smiled. "Yes, I understand, but no one could contemplate doing such a monstrous thing. The appalling loss of life and damage to infrastructure—"

"You're correct, of course. But as I said, we must be prepared."

"Definitely, and you have given me an idea for a paper I'm preparing.

A great idea.”

“What paper, Professor?”

“I’m invited to attend a symposium of volcanologists and geophysicists at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, next month. Induced slope slumps would make an interesting discussion topic. Yes, very interesting.”

Keung stood up and stared hard at the academic. Whatever misgivings he might have had about getting rid of him, Chuan’s rash remark removed them. The man might be brilliant in his field, but he had no concept of security. His bad luck that he lived in an innocent academic world. Bad luck or simply the first collateral casualty of a fantastic scheme? It didn’t matter really.

“Our discussion must remain strictly confidential, for reasons I am sure you can appreciate. I cannot stress this too highly, Professor.”

Chuan cleared his throat and nodded once as he rose. “Only a thought, sir. Of course, I would never—”

“Shen Lei will take you back to the university. It will not be necessary for me to see you again. Once you finish your modeling runs, please summarize your findings to him and give him all printouts. And, Professor? No record of your work in any form must exist anywhere.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Thank you for your time. It was most instructive.”

“Ah, glad to help the State, sir,” Chuan said weakly.

Keung walked to the door and opened it. Shen immediately stepped in.

“The professor has some work to do for me.” He stared at Shen and gave a single small nod. After a moment, Shen returned it.

“Very good, sir.”

Without looking back, Keung strode briskly toward the elevators, his head buzzing with images his audacious plan would wreak on the imperialists. Totally crazy, he knew it, and the risks frightfully real, as were the technical challenges, but if he could pull it off even partially, the results would vindicate him. A crippled America would be far too busy dealing with internal problems to be concerned with China’s economic and geopolitical expansion, opening a door to turn around Zhou Yedong’s appeasement policies, getting rid of him at the same time.

More likely, Keung figured, he would end up assassinated if this ever

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leaked. As the operation grew, the likelihood of betrayal would increase exponentially. Somehow, that risk needed to be mitigated and all activities compartmentalized. No one individual could have sufficient information to link all the pieces together. Sun Tzu was right when he said all war was based on deception. Subdue an enemy without fighting the ultimate offensive strategy, something the Americans found difficult to grasp, demonstrated so vividly by dismal failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. They needed to cultivate diplomacy instead of relying on technology and raw might to solve everything.

As the elevator doors opened, he wondered if he could actually execute his plan.

The plump girl at the booking desk flashed him a polite smile as he walked into Da Giorgio's. Enticing smells of cooking and good food made his mouth water. She bowed slightly and ushered him past noisy patrons toward a corner table next to floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the green-tiled rooftops of an old royal residence. Knowing that important Party and government officials frequented the restaurant, the manager wisely held one or two tables always available. Over a weekend though, even the premier would need to make a courtesy reservation, not that Keung expected Dzhang Qishan to be dining here. It was beneath him to be seen slumming with commoners.

"Garlic bread and a glass of chianti, sir?"

Keung seated himself and nodded. "Make sure the wine is chilled," he growled, casting his eyes over the crowded tables and harried waiters. The atmosphere noisy, but he didn't mind.

"Of course," she said, handing him a leather-bound menu. He waved it aside.

"Pork ravioli and gnocchi with your special veal and mushroom sauce."

"Excellent choice, sir. I shall only be a moment."

He watched her walk away, the tight skirt clinging to her curves. Not beautiful in the traditional sense, the handsome girl had character. Most young women had it these days. Discovering that they were in demand, the shortage resulting from a failed, although well intentioned one child policy, girls became independent and choosy, something boys found intimidating, reared in a culture where women were expected to defer to

men. He swept his eyes around the subdued yet elegant décor. Embroidered cloth covered comfortably large tables laid with classy cutlery and accessories, reflecting the quality of women patronizing the establishment. No doubting that here, men deferred to women, and by the satisfied looks on their faces the women liked it that way. Without a car, a good job and an apartment, a young man had little hope of attracting a bride or keeping one.

His bread and wine came and he munched with relish, allowing his mind to drift. As he dipped the strong garlic bread into a bowl of olive oil and balsamic vinegar, he wondered why Tanner chose to announce a shift in the U.S. administration's Taiwan policy to him. Surely, someone addressed this during one of the more formal talks between Walters and Zhou Yedong. Not only that, he found it difficult to accept that America would make such a radical policy shift merely to secure a supply of rare earth metals, especially when they were bringing more of their own mines back into production and securing imports from the likes of Australia. He would need to raise this with Jie Lao, the wily Commerce minister and a neutral friend; neutral in the sense that Jie wasn't an opponent. Perhaps Walters *had* hashed this with Zhou, and Tanner may be giving him a heads-up. If true, it exhibited a level of subtlety he did not normally associate with the American. Why did Tanner feel that he had a need-to-know? Whether he wanted to or not, a session with Zhou was in order. After all, as a loyal Party member, he could rise above parochial factional interests for the good of the people.

The thought made him chuckle.

His steaming plate of ravioli and gnocchi arrived, brought by the manager himself, and he dug in with undisguised gusto. Freshly made, the gnocchi were slightly chewy, just the way he liked it. When he finished the meal, he was tempted to lick the plate clean like he used to as a small boy. With two brothers and a sister sharing the table, they never enough to go around. Life in Hefei was nonetheless comfortable, if not prosperous. The Anhui province had always been a poor relation to the eastern lands, something he helped turn around with the establishment of technological and industrial development zones. They had a texture and density in their lives, an element lacking in today's rush into materialism, displacing the soul-filling teachings of the Buddha. Then again, the vast majority of his people had little else to cling to as they eked out

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a meager living from a harsh land.

Sipping fragrant tea, pipe clamped comfortably between his teeth, Keung declined a second glass of wine. Making a decision, he dug out his cellphone. In his position, he could not afford introspection and overt sentimentality.

“How are you doing, my friend?” Chen Teng responded after two rings on his secure cell.

“Just finished lunch at Hyatt’s Da Giorgio’s. You should try it sometimes.” Keung laughed when he heard Chen’s sigh, unable to resist the small barb.

“We’re still wading through ours. After last night, I could have skipped it. It’s supposed to be a working lunch, but nobody is in the mood for work. Having already dealt with the important stuff, President Walters and his party are ready to depart. At least you and I won’t have to deal with their trade delegation. You’re coming back to the Guesthouse?”

“Within the hour. Plenty of time to pay my respects to Walters and Tanner.”

“Your absence was painfully conspicuous, you know.”

“I felt like eating out, and I had nothing on the agenda that needed my presence. I didn’t call to talk about your lunch. We need to meet. There is a developmental shift in the American Taiwan policy.”

“Oh? Something serious?”

“Curious, more than anything.”

“When and where?”

“Eight o’clock tomorrow. Your office.”

“Done.” The line went dead.

Shen Lei’s substitute bodyguard appeared at the entrance, spotted him, nodded and withdrew. Keung patted his stomach, cleaned out the pipe and absently tugged at his glasses. Favoring his right leg, he walked toward the entrance.

“I trust you found everything satisfactory, sir?” The girl at the booking desk smiled brightly at him.

“Superb as always. Thank you.”

Outside, he sniffed the raw air and walked toward his car idling beside the curb. At least the sun still shone, but the smog had started to roll in.

“The Guesthouse, sir?” the bodyguard inquired diffidently as Keung climbed in.

“Yes.”

The bodyguard slammed the door shut, took his seat up front and the BMW eased into the traffic.

\* \* \*

Shen Lei watched Keung’s retreating back as the Standing Committee chairman walked briskly down the corridor, his right leg not moving quite naturally. He hoped the old injury wasn’t bothering the chairman too much. The limp tended to be more noticeable during winter, but according to the specialists, a purely a psychosomatic reaction. That’s what Keung told him. Psychosomatic or not, the old gentleman hobbled in winter months, not that it impaired his movement in any way. Still uncomfortable, the pulled tendon never healed right. A simple jump off a tank and Keung now had a bum leg. Karma.

When the chairman disappeared into the elevator, Shen turned and gave Chuan an appraising stare. He didn’t want to know what transpired in the room that demanded this man’s death, and he didn’t particularly care. Curious, of course, and would find out eventually from the chairman, but perhaps not. Whatever the plan, it had to be big. Strictly speaking, he should report this incident to his Ministry of State Security handler, but his loyalties were clear. To keep them happy, his report would read that the chairman had lunch at Da Giorgio’s, and that was all. No need to burden them with unnecessary details.

Keung had always been a considerate master and never abused the power of his position, unlike some he knew, but that’s how Party politics was done in Beijing, and the rest of China, for that matter. Being a simple man, although his horizons had expanded under Keung’s persistent tutelage, Shen had no desire to accumulate power. He held the rank of Sergeant First Class in the People’s Liberation Army, more than sufficient for his needs. As the chairman’s principal bodyguard, it gave him authority far beyond the strict interpretation of the regulations. Given a paid apartment in the Zuojiashuang residential district, practically in the CBD, a prize beyond measure, living space being so scarce and waiting time counted in years. It only had a single bedroom, but as he didn’t have



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the weight of family, it adequately sufficed his needs. Besides, having a family would only distract him from his work and the chairman wouldn't be pleased. When he wanted female companionship, there were plenty available to satisfy his needs. He had nothing to complain about.

"Wait here, Professor," he said soberly, rubbed his throat, and walked into the room.

Shen stepped into the bathroom, moistened the face washcloth under the tap and carefully wiped down the bench top, bowl, fittings and toilet. Working his way from the writing desk, he slowly went through the room, carefully cleaning the ashtray. Probably unnecessary, but hotel cleaners would not be this thorough, and Shen disliked relying on random factors to cover his trail, not when a simple precaution ensured anonymity. He left the washcloth on the bathroom bench and strode out, wiping the inner and outer door handles with the corner of his jacket.

Chuan looked amused as Shen locked the door shut. "A bit of James Bond intrigue?"

"Perhaps, but you cannot be too careful. Some people would pay a lot to know what went on in this room, or worse. This is for your safety as much as it is for the Chairman's."

"I did not mean—"

"Let's get going, Professor."

Shen led his charge to the service elevator to avoid surveillance cameras mounted in the lobby. They got out through the emergency exit door behind the hotel, and he steered the bemused scientist toward a narrow street where he left his car, not wanting to use the hotel's underground parking lot where cameras would record his entry and departure.

Old rundown cottages lined the opposite side of the neatly swept street, now empty, waiting to be demolished and replaced by a new condominium. The few squatters rarely showed themselves and local kids took advantage of this playground, smashing in windows and doors. Progress had slowly eaten away traditional architecture residential districts, replacing them with soulless concrete and steel. He didn't much care for it.

Shen waited for a gap in traffic moving too fast along the narrow roadway, then scrambled across the street, pursued by blowing horns. He unlocked his scratched dark gray Honda Civic, climbed in and

slammed the door. Chuan slid in beside him and buckled his seatbelt. Shen slipped on a pair a black leather driving gloves, started the engine and eased into the traffic. The chairman had offered to get him a new car, a ‘be my wife’ BMW, which he appreciated, but declined. The Honda now eleven years old—amazing how the years marched on—but it served him well.

From the 109 National Road, he turned right onto the West 2nd Ring Road heading north. Although heavy, the traffic moved steadily. Approaching the university along Xinxi Road, he turned right, maneuvering the car into the visitors parking lot behind the Earth and Space Sciences building. The rear entrance crowded with students returning from lunch. Several of them recognized Chuan and waved. Shen looked around, but couldn’t see any cameras. Still, they might be there anyway. Once inside, he casually wiped his face as the young professor steered him toward a bank of two elevators.

When they got out on the fourth floor, brightly lit from tall windows, Chuan strode quickly down the broad corridor exchanging brief pleasantries with several colleagues. Shen wrinkled his nose at the pervading odor of books and chalk, reminding him of his schooldays, although he had never seen the inside of a university. The Army provided whatever education he had. Chuan entered his office and motioned at a cloth-covered chair.

“This will take a couple of hours at least, Mr. Shen. If you like, you can visit the cafeteria while I run the models.”

“Thank you, Professor. I’ll wait here, if you don’t mind.” He would have relished a meal and something to drink, but his indulgence would create unnecessary exposure. Somebody might remember him, and that would never do. He also wanted to make sure the professor did not talk to anyone.

“As you wish.”

The small office packed with bookshelves, spilled periodicals, file folders, and stacked books. Two large flat computer screens crowding the cluttered desk made it appear cramped. The place also had a somewhat musty smell common to libraries. Shen made himself comfortable and watched Chuan power up the screens. The professor shifted his glasses, leaned over the keyboard and began typing. Sunlight streamed in through a smeared window.

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He didn't have a bad life, Shen reflected. Certainly better than being yelled at by incompetent officers when he first joined the Army. Mindless abuse he and others were forced to swallow. Any sign of rebellion would have been dealt with harshly. Off duty, packed into cold barracks, he and his friends would talk without voicing open dissent. He had seen a colleague snatched in the middle of the night after being betrayed by a stooge. Still, army life had its compensations and Shen became a very proficient soldier. When picked for the Snow Leopard Commando Unit, his training in security and anti-terrorism techniques brought him to the attention of the Ministry of State Security. Not long afterward, they placed him in charge of Keung Yang's bodyguard detail. Life became very easy then and his loyalties slowly shifted as he began to know his master.

The phone rang, but Chuan ignored it. An hour or so later, he nodded, tapped a key, and Shen watched a wave simulation play itself on one of the screens. The purple wave front rippled from the African coastline, breaking up as it struck western Europe, moving rapidly toward the American eastern seaboard. Noting Shen's reaction, Chuan smiled.

"Without our high speed computer, simulations like these would not be possible."

"How fast is the tsunami moving?"

"The wave train moves at roughly 900 kilometers per hour...airliner speed."

Shen blinked, fascinated by the image.

The large color printer beside the desk came to life, producing two A3 sheets. Chuan glanced through the printouts and frowned. Fifteen minutes later, another simulation rippled across the screen and the printer churned out more paper.

Chuan completed two more runs, switched off the screens, sighed, and sat back. He gathered the printouts, folded them and inserted them into a cardboard folder. After glancing at Shen, he removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"I'm done. A most interesting exercise."

"The execution programs—"

"I wouldn't worry about them, Mr. Shen. I ran a number of simulations for different locations. The Cumbre Vieja runs won't stand out. The Chairman need not be concerned about a breach in security. No

concern.”

“Nevertheless, I insist that any trace of these runs be deleted.”

Frowning, Chuan nodded. “Very well.”

He switched on a screen and ran a program that wiped all log entries generated by the simulations. Finished, he clasped his hands and leaned forward. “The printouts in the folder will show four simulations, each triggered by varying degrees of explosive force. The first two runs simulate detonations of two and four megatons respectively. Although a two-megaton blast will trigger a flank collapse, it would be moderate, on the order of twenty to forty cubic kilometers displacement, and would generate a minimal wave train of less than one meter along the United States eastern seaboard. Clear so far?”

Shen nodded. “Clear enough.”

“I would prefer to discuss this with the Chairman, but never mind. A four-megaton detonation will trigger a slide of some ninety to 120 cubic kilometers, creating waves of up to eight meters. The last two runs represent equivalent forces from multiple detonations using conventional explosives. Each detonation assumes a yield of 500 metric tons of TNT. My calculations show that twelve such charges would be sufficient. Yes, twelve.” Seeing Shen’s puzzled expression, Chuan chuckled.

“How can so many individual explosions achieve an equivalent yield of a single thermonuclear device? Simple wave mechanics. When two standing wave fronts occur at the same time and are in phase, called antinode points, they reinforce each other and the resulting energy yield is magnified. Of course, the detonation sequence must be timed precisely, but that’s covered in the printouts. Do you understand?”

“Not quite, but I’ll remember what you said.”

“Good. In that case—”

“In that case, the Chairman has everything he needs,” Shen rasped and stood up, feeling his heart beat a little faster. He clenched his fists and took two deep breaths, waiting for the ideal moment to strike.

“Glad to help.” Chuan switched off the computer and rose. “An induced collapse, a fascinating concept. Truly fascinating. Please assure the Chairman of my confidentiality.”

“He’ll be relieved to hear that.”

Turning, Chuan reached for the folder.

Recognizing the moment had come, Shen’s training took over. He

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grabbed the professor's head and in a fluid motion drove it against the desk's sharp corner. The neck bones snapped with a sharp crack. He stepped back and allowed the body to slide to the floor in a loose heap. Shen bent over the scientist, pulled off his right glove, and checked the neck for a pulse. Satisfied, he flexed his fingers and picked up the professor's cellphone lying on the desk. He quickly scanned the incoming calls log and deleted the call he made to the professor, then wiped the touchscreen and the phone. Finished, he slid his hand into the glove and took the folder. As he stood in the room, he slowed his breathing, allowing himself to relax. In the corridor, no one paid him any attention as he closed the door after him and walked briskly toward the elevators. When they found the body, it would look like the professor had slipped—a regrettable accident.

He slid into his car, dragged out his cellphone, and pressed the encryption key. "It's Shen, sir...I'm on my way back now...No, no problems...Very good, sir."

He pocketed the instrument, engaged first gear and pressed down the accelerator. He had plenty of time to park his car at the State Guesthouse, pick up the official BMW and get the chairman. There wouldn't be time to grab a quick sandwich, but working for the chairman, he had skipped meals before. Anyway, the Guesthouse kitchen will have something for him. As the car pulled out, he reminded himself to wipe down the passenger seat and have the car thoroughly washed.

With the comforting noises of traffic around him, he switched on the radio. He really should replace the thing with a CD player, the old cassette motor having packed up on him. Nodding, he placed his mind into neutral, not wanting to think about the computer simulations he had seen and what they implied.

Did the chairman actually consider setting off an induced flank collapse at La Palma? It wasn't any of his concern. What about the afterward? Provided no trail led back to the chairman, there would not be any afterward, and Shen made sure no trail remained.



## 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.

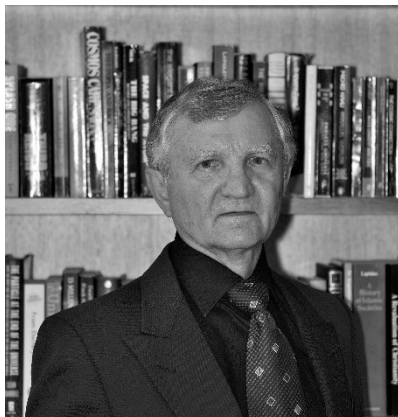
Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cellphone systems. He applied his IT discipline to create realistic storylines for his books. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends 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**

2017 Book Excellence Awards finalist

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?