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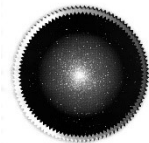
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# 28th Amendment

By

**Stefan Vučak**



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## Chapter One

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*March 12, 2022*

*Fiery Cross Reef, Philippines*

“Talk to me, XO,” Captain Vasily Bandera growled, his steely eyes fixed on the radar masts of the Chinese Type 052D *Luyang III* guided-missile destroyer and its heavier Type 055 *Renhai*-class consort heaving themselves over the horizon, bearing down on him on a reciprocal course.

Bright sunshine spilled across the broad bridge as USS *Barry* shrugged crashing swells coming off the port side, which sent sheets of green water and spray across the forward weather deck. The watchstanders unconsciously absorbed the ship’s sway by bending their legs with each roll. Eight hundred yards off the starboard beam, USS *Curtis Wilbur*, a sister *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer, steamed nine nautical miles ahead of Carrier Strike Group 5 making its way toward the Taiwan Strait, the course taking them past the hotly contested Spratly Islands. They spent the last nine days sailing the South China Sea showing the flag, and now headed for Yokosuka, Japan, home of the 7th Fleet, for maintenance and welcomed R&R.

The PLAN, People’s Liberation Army Navy, ships had harassed Group 5 ever since it left Subic Bay and skirted Palawan before heading west to round the Spratlys. The Chinese clearly did not like the US Navy parading up and down in what it considered its territorial waters. Captain Bandera did not think much of their claim, or the two approaching destroyers. They would bluster and threaten, dash past him, and make a nuisance of themselves around the *Nimitz*-class carrier USS *Ronald Reagan* and its screen of cruisers, destroyers, and replenishment vessels.

He felt mild surprise that fighters stationed on Fiery Cross Reef had not buzzed him or Group 5. The Chinese had spent a lot of resources to build a 10,000-foot runway on the island. Equipped with SAM, Surface to Air, missile emplacements, it had a harbor capable of supporting major surface combatants. Fiery Cross was one of a dozen occupied islands and artificial reefs in the Spratly archipelago China claimed as part of its nine-dash line that encompassed most of the South China Sea. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled the claim invalid under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Predictably, President Zhou Yedong ignored the ruling and continued his program of island-building and reef occupation to consolidate China's position. President Samuel Walters did not think much of their claim either, tired of Zhou's bullying tactics against local fishing boats. According to White House statements, the 7th Fleet continues to exercise its right of free passage through these waters, daring China to do something about it.

The Chinese president had done something about it by sending hundreds of armed trawlers, part of China's Maritime Militia, to fish in Exclusive Economic Zones of all South China Sea countries in blatant disregard of numerous protests. Not impressed with open poaching in their waters, several countries, including Vietnam and Indonesia—backed by US Coast Guard and Navy ships—decided to send a message by sinking a number of trawlers. Determined to assert its sovereignty, China simply sent others to take their place. The situation got particularly hairy around the Spratlys with dumping of raw sewage in Philippine waters in area denial, which outraged the international community.

Commander Gibbs Treadwell glanced from the Electronic Chart Display Information System screen. Small and chunky, a wayward lock of black hair stuck out above his ear the peaked cap could not hide. The exec should get a haircut, Bandera mused, but he never fussed over the little things in his command. Treadwell ran a tight ship, and Bandera liked it that way. USS *Barry* may have an odd rust streak here and there, but he worried

more about the engine plant, main gun, the CIWS close-in mounts, missile cells, and that radars worked. His crew could paint and polish brass once they made port again.

Oreana would be glad to see him, and he definitely wanted to see her, anticipating a feverish greeting twenty-one years of marriage had not quenched. His son Ronny, a sophomore at MIT studying advanced electronic circuit design, was not underfoot at Yokosuka to dampen Bandera's reunions with his adoring wife, for which he thanked the fates. Some things were better done without children underfoot. Especially older children. He smiled as he pictured Oreana's slender arms around his neck, deep hazel eyes bright with anticipation, long auburn hair cascading down her back as her lips sought his. After all the years, he still loved her very much. He missed her desperately when at sea, but the deeps had claimed him long before he met her. She understood his need to roam the waters and did not resent sharing him. With tensions escalating between China and the US, she did worry a little. Well, he also worried a little, but he had a powerful ship under him and all the firepower he wanted if the PLAN sought to mess with him.

"Eight nautical miles and closing at a combined rate of forty-two knots, Captain. They'll be in our lap in roughly eleven minutes," Treadwell replied, apparently unmoved at the prospect of a possible encounter.

"Are we being painted?"

"Dragon Eye C/S-band and nav radars only. CIC has them lit with surface-search radars."

Combat Information Center kept a close eye on the two Chinese destroyers and all surface/air activity forty miles around *Barry*. The Aegis battle management system would warn him if anything unsettling happened.

"Very well."

They were friends, but neither could afford to forget the sharp divide that existed between a captain and his officers. Bandera's last fitness report placed Treadwell on a short list for a 3rd Fleet billet at San Diego and command of his own *Constellation*-class

guided-missile frigate, but redeployment would not happen until December. Gibbs told him more than once how Arena bubbled with excitement at the prospect of getting back to the States. Both liked Yokosuka, Japanese culture and its unique foods, but it was not home. Bandera decided he'd miss his unflappable, chubby executive officer.

If Treadwell looked forward to getting his ship, Bandera himself was also tapped for detachment to the 3rd Fleet for command of a *Ticonderoga* cruiser. The posting ticked an important career box and put him on track for a destroyer squadron billet. Oreana would enjoy life in Point Loma, the Fleet headquarters, part of San Diego's sprawl. Perhaps they could get a house somewhere on Ocean Beach if they could afford the price. She'd go batty quartered with other wives at the base.

Rank divide or not, did not mean they could not exchange light banter.

"Remember that joint in Yokosuka—"

"The Sushi Palace?" Treadwell added.

"That's the one. I've been to a number of local restaurants, but that joint serves the best otoro tuna sashimi this side of heaven."

"Complemented with blood-warm sake," Treadwell mused with a grin.

"Lots of it. If God needs a chef, he knows where to find his man. Once we're tied up to a post, we gotta go there."

"Suits me fine, Skipper."

Lieutenant Billings, the eager Tactical Action Officer, placed a palm over his mouth mike.

"Captain, CIC reports a flight of two Shenyang J-15s, probably from Fiery Cross, approaching off our starboard beam. Distance, thirty-six miles. Speed, 620 knots indicated. They'll be on us in four minutes."

So, the Chinese were awake on that rock, Bandera pondered. Not that the US Navy were trying to hide or anything. CARSTRKGRU wanted to let the Chinese know this was not their private backyard.



The bridge console radio crackled into life.

“US warships, you are encroaching into People’s Republic of China territorial waters. Withdraw immediately or you will be fired upon.”

“From the *Renhai*, Captain,” Lieutenant Edmonds, the communications officer, declared, wearing a microphone rig over his glistening bald head.

“Give them the word on Channel 16, COMMO,” Bandera said mildly, not overly concerned by the implied threat from the Chinese ship.

Edmonds smiled and nodded. “PLAN warship, this is USS *Barry*. I am exercising my freedom of navigation in international waters. Your order is not recognized.”

“US warships, the South China Sea belongs to us, American! This is your last warning.”

“Bite me,” Captain Vasily Bandera growled and made a cutting motion across his throat.

Edmonds hooted with delight. Several watchstanders turned to look at each other, smiles on their young faces.

A curtain of spray fountained over the port bow as *Barry* pushed its powerful 505-foot sleek hull through blue water at an easy eighteen knots.

Edmonds glanced at Bandera. “Sir, CARSTRKGRU advises they dispatched two F/A-18Fs to provide CAP. They’ll be overhead in two minutes.”

Bandera liked the idea of a Combat Air Patrol umbrella overhead in the developing situation, and should keep the J-15s from doing something silly. He doubted the Chinese cared to get their hands dirty, radio bluster notwithstanding. Still, he did not want to be caught napping, the two PLAN destroyers already hull-up.

“Officadeck, sound General Quarters and activate the AN/SPY-62 fire-control radar. I want those destroyers to know I’m ready. COMMO, give *Curtis Wilbur* the word.”

“Aye aye, sir,” the two officers responded immediately, and jarring claxons went off throughout the ship.

“General quarters! General quarters!” the Officer of the Deck

announced over the ship's 1MC public address system. "All hands, close up and rig for surface and aerial engagement. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill."

Bandera heard running feet and the slamming of watertight doors as the crew went to their action stations.

"CIC reports main turret indexed and ready to engage," Lieutenant Billings announced in a measured voice, not able to totally suppress his excitement at the possibility of action. "Phalanx safety interlocks off, but not enabled for autofire mode. Helm and engineering control is on the bridge. VLS cell doors closed, but confirm Evolved Sea Sparrow birds on the rails. All weapons and defense systems are online. Material condition Zebra set in all spaces. The ship is at general quarters, Captain."

"Very well. Tell CIC to label the *Luyang III* as target Alpha, and the *Renhai* as Beta."

"Aye aye, sir."

"With your permission, Captain, I'll take over in CIC," Commander Treadwell announced gravely.

"Granted. Don't shoot 'em up yet, Gibbs," Bandera said with a smile.

"I can dream, can't I?" Treadwell quipped as he made for the hatch.

"Commander? If the J-15s cross the five-mile exclusion zone, lock 'em with the Sparrows and give them a final warning. If they get missile lock, don't violate the ROE unless they fire. You're then free to splash them. That goes for *Wilbur* as well."

"Aye, sir," the exec acknowledged and dogged the hatch after him.

Bandera did not like the current Rules of Engagement, but the standing orders were clear. He could defend his ship any way he saw fit, but could only fire if fired upon. Four years ago, a North Korean frigate took advantage of that rule and sank USS *McCampbell*, a sister *Arleigh Burke* destroyer, with torpedoes when it came too close. USS *George Washington*'s carrier screen destroyed the PROK frigate and accompanying OSA II missile boats, a consolation prize only. It did not make up for the loss of 281

lives and a valuable ship. Despite the tragic incident, the ROE remained unchanged. Stupid politics getting in the way of sound military doctrine. Stupid or not, violation of standing ROE orders meant immediate court-martial.

Captain Kinnock had been a good friend, but Bandera did not want to join him in a watery rendezvous by not being prepared. If the J-15s obtained missile lock, he promised himself he would fry their electronics with every AN/SPY radar his ship had.

A multirole naval aircraft, the Shenyang was a modified copy of the Russian 4th-generation SU-33 Flanker, comparable to the F/A-18 Super Hornet, and one badass bird. It had a maximum speed of 1,300 knots with a range of 1,900 nautical miles, easily able to reach his ship from the Chinese mainland. The two elements coming at him from Fiery Cross meant they deliberately meant to provoke him. Its avionics suite was said to be unreliable, but with a full load of PL-12 medium-range air-to-air and YJ-83K, NATO designated CSS-N-8 Saccade, anti-ship missiles, Bandera did not particularly care if they held the aircraft together with duct tape. He wanted them out of his airspace, and the sooner his CAP cover showed up, the happier he'd be. Bad enough having two PLAN destroyers messing with his mind. USS *Barry* had enough Sparrow SAMs in the vertical launch cells to take care of the J-15s, but the Hornets were better suited for the job.

Billings turned to look at him. "Captain, CIC reports the J-15s have not altered course and will overfly us in eight seconds. They don't have missile lock."

"They want to sightsee, eh? Tell the Exec to make sure they know we have them designated," Bandera told the TAO, making his intentions plain.

"Aye aye, sir!" The young officer immediately spoke into his headset mike. "CIC acknowledges."

In a genuine tactical scenario, Bandera should be in CIC directing any action, with the exec on the bridge conning the ship. The current situation did not look like a shooting confrontation,

and he wanted Treadwell to feel the load in CIC and build proficiency. Not that his very competent commander needed it, but as a prospective skipper, it all looked good in a fitness report.

Two black shapes appeared above *Barry* and streaked over *Wilbur*, making the air tremble as the Chinese fighters thundered away on afterburner. Did they think Bandera would tuck in his pants and slink away when he saw them?

A second later, two F/A-18 Super Hornets sped after them to honor the threat.

Billings grinned. “Sir, CIC reports the Shenyangs have turned east and are bugging out.”

Not anxious to test themselves against pros, or were they waiting for something else to happen?

“Very well.”

“Captain, the PLAN destroyers are now at 3,000 yards,” Billings added.

Bandera did not need an update. He could see the looming warships approaching fast, white water cleaving off their bow. A long roller crashed against the *Luyang III* in a sheet of spray. The Chinese built them pretty, he decided. Just like the Russians used to before they turned their inventory into tomato cans.

“We’re painted with Dragon Eye and C/S-band radar by both ships. No missile lock.”

The heavier *Renhai*-class destroyer seemed to be heading unwaveringly toward *Barry*. At 13,000 tons fully loaded displacement, it outweighed an *Arleigh Burke* by more than 3,000 tons. Armed with a single 130mm bow gun, a welter of missiles and AA mounts, the Type 055 was a modern blue water warship not to be sneered at. The lighter *Luyang III* would pass on *Barry*’s port side by what looked a comfortable 100 yards. Still tight and a gross violation of maritime safety law, not that the Chinese gave a toss about international law.

If either ship wanted to do business, Bandera figured they would have done so while still below the horizon. Keep pushing until something gives seemed to be the PLAN’s tactic. Well, he had a ship ready to dish it out if they wanted to play. Armed with

a single forward 127mm gun, two 20mm Phalanx CIWS mounts for close-in business, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, RIM-66M surface-to-air, RIM-162 Evolved Sea Sparrow Missiles, torpedo tubes, and a host of sensors and electronic decoys, *Barry* could take care of itself.

The four warships raced toward each other beneath a deep blue sky.

Through the armored glass of his bridge, Bandera watched the *Renhai* loom before him, seemingly intent to ram him bow on. Its inward-sloping box superstructure designed to reduce radar cross-section signature looked like an apartment block, topped by a rectangular housing and sensor mast. He clamped his mouth, not wanting to issue an emergency turn order to the helm. If he backed off just once, the PLAN ships would know they could unsettle the mighty US Navy anytime they wanted.

No one pushed around the US Navy, Bandera mused, and no Chinaman would push him around either.

“Captain...” The officer of the deck glanced nervously at him. Responsible for the ship’s safety during his watch, he did not like the idea of *Barry* run down.

“Hold your course,” Bandera told him quietly, assuming responsibility. “Sound collision alarm.”

The OOD promptly pressed a large red mushroom button on the sloping bridge console. A piercing blare tore from the forward stack, and bridge watchstanders grabbed whatever they could, certain they were about to witness a major incident.

Almost on top of them, the *Renhai* swung slightly, and *Barry* shuddered as the two ships scraped against each other, accompanied by a shrill squeal of ripping metal. The Chinese ship pulled away, leaving creamy water in its wake, the whine of its gas turbines unnaturally loud from its stack.

“Sir! Target Alpha is turning sharply to port! They’re gonna hit!” Billings cried out in alarm and pointed with an outstretched arm at the port window. Coming straight at them towered the scimitar bow of the *Luyang III* destroyer.

“Helm! Crash turn!” Bandera shouted. “Hard right rudder!”

“Crash turn, hard right rudder, aye, sir!” The helmsman spun the small 30-centimeter chrome wheel against the stop to engage the crash turn sequencer.

Creamy water churned behind the stern as the two propellers strained to turn the heavy destroyer. Physics is a bitch, and it took precious seconds for the four GE LM2500 gas turbines generating 78,000 Kilowatts of power to swing the ship’s 9,300-ton hull to starboard.

USS *Barry* heeled steeply as she drove into a minimum-radius turn and almost evaded the charging PLAN ship. Foam and green water burst across the deck and cascaded over the side. The *Luyang III*’s sharp bow clipped *Barry* back off the port anchor well deck and ripped through with a jarring crash. *Barry* trembled and tipped farther to starboard as the Chinese destroyer tore off part of the bow. Watchstanders were thrown around the deck, and several screamed from sustained injuries. Its own bow crumpled like a wad of tissue paper, the *Luyang III* swung to starboard to pass behind *Curtis Wilbur*.

“Weapons free!” Bandera shouted. “TAO? Order CIC to fire two rounds from the main gun at target Alpha!”

Face pale, Billings spoke rapidly into his mike. The prospect of actual action not so appealing anymore.

The forward 5-inch coughed white smoke in rapid succession and ejected two spent casings on the slick deck. The radar-guided rounds struck the Chinese ship’s stern flight deck and sent up plumes of black debris. The PLAN destroyer promptly launched a Saccade SSM. The missile in its booster stage roared into the air above a column of gray smoke, far too close to USS *Barry* to be effective, but the threat had to be honored.

*Barry*’s Aegis fired two RIM-162 surface-to-air ESSMs to intercept.

“TAO, two more rounds,” Bandera ordered quietly. He wanted to Harpoon the *Luyang III*, but his main gun had a more immediate effect. Anyway, sinking the PLAN ship might be somewhat extreme, regardless of any provocation. Punching some holes in them should make the US Navy’s resolve to stand

its ground abundantly clear.

He glared at the retreating *Luyang III*.

*Eat shit.*

One Sparrow missed, but the second nailed the anti-ship missile as it plunged down to target *Barry*. The missile detonated in a yellow-black cloud and the concussion rocked the ship. Bandera heard sharp pings as shrapnel impacted the double-steel-walled upper bulkheads and hull.

One of the gun rounds struck the *Luyang III's* forward superstructure, probably the bridge. The ship suddenly slewed to port and lost way.

"Sir, target Beta has turned and we're being painted by their X-band targeting radar," TAO announced, looking shaken by the sudden turn of events. "Its forward mount is indexing at us!"

Prepared to fire his main gun at Beta, Bandera saw its gun wink. Almost immediately, a crash somewhere on the stern shook his ship. In rapid succession, white puffs came from *Curtis Wilbur* and straddled the Chinese destroyer. Debris from the mangled bridge structure flew into the sky. The sensor mast sagged and slowly toppled over the side.

"Sir, CIC reports target Beta has broken radar lock and ceased forward motion."

Bandera grinned without humor. With its mast down, it damned well had broken lock. Dark smoke twisted above the Chinese destroyer as it slowly gathered way again. It could still fire its main gun, torpedoes, and missiles, but with targeting radars inoperative, he considered it a marginal threat.

"Tell CIC to maintain fire-control lock on both ships," he growled, not prepared to brook any further interference. "If they see a gun index or their torpedo tubes traverse, they're to open fire without waiting for orders."

"Aye, sir!"

"COMMO? Give *Wilbur* a 'well done'."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Officadeck? Damage report!"

"Water coming in from the anchor chain locker. Forward

compartments sealed. We lost the bow sonar mounting and fifteen feet of bow. The helicopter landing deck is out of action. Eight ratings injured. Three casualties.”

*Damn!*

“Very well,” he muttered and studied the two damaged destroyers.

Neither looked to be in immediate distress. Technically, rendering assistance was not called for, as the bastards did not request help. Let them drown. The incident would undoubtedly get the Chinese hot under their dim sums and further inflame the strategic situation in an already tinder-dry environment. Bandera had nothing to reproach himself for. He defended his ship from a deliberate attack. The Chinese were looking for trouble and got it. He only hoped Rear Admiral Hogan Poole, commander Carrier Strike Group 5, would see it in the same light. What the higher-ups at the Pentagon and the White House might think did not concern him. He had casualties and a wounded ship to worry about.

The biased left-leaning media would have a field day with the incident, citing another reckless confrontation by an irresponsible US Navy. Appeasement and diplomacy, that’s how the Chinese should be handled. In time, President Zhou Yedong would eventually see the error of his ways and promote a more open society, all evidence to the contrary. Screw them, Bandera thought. Those shitheads had no idea what the hell really went on in China or the South China Sea. If they loved the place so much, they should go there! One week living under the benevolent Chinese Communist Party regime would change their pacifist tune.

He climbed out of his comfortable leather seat and approached the bridge window. The *Linyang III* lay dead in the water. The *Renbai* edged toward its starboard side, probably to assist, clearly under command, even though damaged itself. The air shook as two Super Hornets overflew the action area.

“Sir, CIC reports the two J-15s are inbound again. Range,



thirty-two miles. Closing at 960 knots indicated,” Billings declared urgently. “CIC has directed the CAP to intercept.”

Bandera sighed. *Still wanting more, eh?*

“COMMO? Send a sitrep to Admiral Poole and advise him of our situation. Tell him I’m able to maintain station, but at reduced speed.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

A bank of fluffy white clouds were developing on the starboard quarter ready to unleash an afternoon squall, typical at this latitude and time of year. From an easy cruise to show the flag, his day had suddenly lost all shine.

Lieutenant Edmonds turned to face him. “From CARSTRKGRU 5, sir. Acknowledged your transmission at 1032 hours. You are to make for Subic Bay for temporary repairs and await further orders. USS *Curtis Wilbur* will provide escort. Message ends.”

“Notify *Wilbur* of the change in orders.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Billings touched his headset mike. “Sir, CIC reports the Hornets engaged the J-15s and splashed one. A Hornet sustained minor damage to its starboard wing and stabilizer from a short range PL-8 air-to-air missile, but is able to make recovery on *Reagan*. The surviving J-15 has withdrawn. No other threats indicated.”

“Very well, TAO.”

Right then, Bandera fervently wished for a shot of bourbon. Preferably two as he realized the rendezvous with Oreana was now shot. Would they fly her over to Subic? He’ll make some calls and see.

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President Samuel Walters closed the blue folder, let out a long sigh, and leaned back against the soft brown leather chair. His eyes burned from too much reading. Manfred had his daily schedule booked solid—often double booked—from eight in the

morning to six, which meant nothing as his day generally started at six and ended at ten...if something untoward did not come up. Of course, something always happened to shred the schedule and spoil his evening plans. Still, late evenings were the only relatively free time slots where he could catch up with the day's briefing papers. Manfred had a staff who filtered and summarized all information streams piped into the White House from every government organ and international sources, and actioned most things necessary to run the Administration. Nevertheless, Walters always had a stack of folders Unice left on his ornately carved *Resolute* desk before she left for the day. He eyed the two remaining files without enthusiasm and decided he'd had enough.

He stood up, stepped to the small side table, and poured himself a fresh cup of coffee—he really ought to cut down—from a silver carafe and added one teaspoon of brown sugar. He smelled the enticing aroma, sat down, and sipped the fragrant brew. A glance at the electronic clock/weather station positioned on the left corner of the desk next to Cathy's picture showed 11:28 PM. In the upstairs residence, she would probably be reading in bed, patiently waiting for him to come up. They had an agreement worked out over the last five years. If he did not show up by midnight, she should not wait for him. Regrettably, there were far too many nights when he walked into a dark bedroom.

Despite a long day, Walters felt relaxed, relishing this moment of quiet solitude, not interrupted by Manfred, visitors, phone calls, or Unice—he could not imagine life without his fiercely loyal executive assistant. With him since his days as a Michigan senator, she hinted more than once that she looked forward to walking out of the White House for the last time and taking a long break somewhere soothing and tropical. She would need to wait another three years when his second term ended to do that. By then, he and Cathy would also be ready for a break somewhere soothing and tropical.

He glanced at the round presidential seal inset into the thick light gray carpet and his eyes drifted toward two dark three-person sofas flanking a glass-topped coffee table with its crystal vase

of mixed dry flowers. Above the fireplace mantel hung a grim portrait of George Washington. On either side were four smaller paintings of Constitution fathers. A somber rendition of Lincoln hung on his right, but the rest of the curved wall lay bare. Walters did not go much into memorabilia shelving or extraneous decoration. Unice hinted more than once the Oval could use some sprucing up, looking too drab and clinical, which intimidated visitors. This was a place for work, not entertainment, he told her. He eyed the door that led to his private office, thinking he really ought to do his paperwork in there, but he felt cramped in the small cubicle. When James Hoban designed the White House, the man had no idea what ergonomics meant.

He pushed back his chair and stood, ready to retire. A knock on the door made him purse his lips in irritation.

“Just once...” he muttered softly.

Marina Sellman peered in and cleared her throat. “Sorry for the interruption, Mr. President, there is a situation in the South China Sea.”

He glowered at the tall Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs. Dressed in navy blue slacks and jacket, long chestnut hair tied in a bun, her stern look reflected his mood.

“China has finally invaded Taiwan?”

Her small mouth twitched. “No, sir. We had an altercation between two 7th Fleet destroyers off Spratly Islands and elements of the PLAN South Sea Fleet. One of our destroyers sustained moderate damage during an exchange of gunfire. Carrier Strike Group 5 CAP downed a Chinese fighter and their destroyers have withdrawn. Our ships are heading for repairs at Subic Bay.”

“When did this happen?”

“Approximately 10:20 AM their time. According to taskforce commander, Rear Admiral Hogan Poole, the Chinese are yet to respond. I called in the senior National Security Council members for a briefing in the Situation Room Watch Center.”

“Who’s coming?”

“The Chief of Staff, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense,

National Security Advisor, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. They should be here within the next ten minutes.”

His evening in the dumpster, and probably the rest of his night as well, Walters nodded.

“Good work.”

“Admiral Poole is on the video link if you want to talk to him.”

He only needed salient facts, which he already had. He could interpret the strategic impact without a blow-by-blow description of the incident.

“What can he tell me that I don’t already know?”

Sellman colored. “I’ll call you when everybody’s in, Mr. President,” she said quietly and gently closed the door.

Walters reached for his cup, only to find it empty.

*Damnation!*

And damn Zhou Yedong and the entire Chinese Communist Party.

He sat down, reached for the in-house phone and pressed a button.

“Hi, Sam. You coming up?” Cathy answered softly with something extra in her voice that suggested a special welcome.

“I wish I could, hon. Unfortunately, I have an incident on my hands and I might be a while.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll fill you in later. Don’t wait up.”

“You’ll find the bed warm,” she purred and hung up.

They had a solid marriage, and one reason Walters believed it remained solid because he treated it as one unbroken romance and love affair. Their two girls married, one living in New York, the other in Boston, left him and Cathy to enjoy the few precious free moments that came up without interruption. There were days when being president was not as much fun as he thought it would be. When he sank into one of his retrospective moods, Manfred always straightened him out. A formidable chief of staff, Walters readily acknowledged his administration would not have lasted a year were it not for his friend’s wisdom, administrative

skills, unwavering pragmatism, and ability to terrorize Congress.

He should have remained a simple Michigan senator.

He knew what he was getting into, sort of. When Manfred suggested that he run for the White House, Walters laughed at him, but his friend got him the Oval Office. A comfortable majority in both Houses enabled his administration to carry out a formidable reforming legislative agenda, and under Larry Tanner's guidance, America regained lost international respect and again became a genuine leader of the free world. Walters looked forward to an easy three years in office and retirement. He might have them were it not for China and its president, Zhou Yedong. Walters may very well be remembered as the president who started WW III...if anyone remained to remember.

To kill time, he snagged the top blue folder and glossed over a paper on vital US manufacturing sectors and tactics to entice companies to pull out of China. In their blind drive to increase profits, commercial interests allowed the CCP to compromise copyright and intellectual property rights, which allowed China's state-controlled enterprises to flood the world with cheap copies, eroding the very profits mainstream brand manufacturers sought to maximize. The stolen technology also allowed the Chinese military to modernize rapidly and expand. He slapped trade sanctions and tariffs on China to curb the practice, but despite Zhou's assurances to clamp down, the practice only accelerated, supported by blatant cyber hacking of strategically sensitive industries, such as microprocessor chip designers, chip foundry equipment suppliers, and defense contractors in particular.

Time for more positive action.

A knock on the door and Sellman walked in. "They're here, Mr. President."

He walked down wide marble stairs into the basement. Two Secret Service minders followed close at his heels. A Marine guard, resplendent in his gorgeous dress blues, snapped to attention and opened the secure door to the main Situation Room, one of four meeting rooms situated under the West Wing. He usually preferred to use the Briefing Room for small meetings,

but the current development apparently warranted a more formal venue.

Everybody inside automatically stood as he made his way to the black leather chair at the head of a long bare brown table and sat down. The others resumed their seats and looked at him. Facing him on the far dark beige wall stood an enormous LED Virtual Mission Center screen showing a tactical map of the South China Sea. Little blue and red triangles denoted friendly and potentially hostile forces. Fortunately, none were near each other. Single smaller screens flanked the VMC, displaying the blue White House logo. On his right, a blank 62" screen hung mounted on the wall. On the left wall were two more large screens. Subdued overhead lighting accentuated dark wood ceiling cornices and side paneling. The room held none of the elaborate communication stations and computer screens when Walters held videoconferences with world leaders, or monitored a covert military ops. He used one of the other specially equipped Situation Rooms as an operations comms center for that.

He glanced at the clock: 11:47 PM. He turned and fixed his eyes on Oliver MacCreedy, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Only three weeks into his position after succeeding his predecessor, Walters liked the young-looking four-star Air Force officer. The man had command presence and a can-do attitude. Face grim, black hair curt short, MacCreedy returned his gaze.

“Current situation, General?”

## About the Author

Stefan Vučak has written eighteen novels, which include eight SF books in the Shadow Gods Saga. 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.

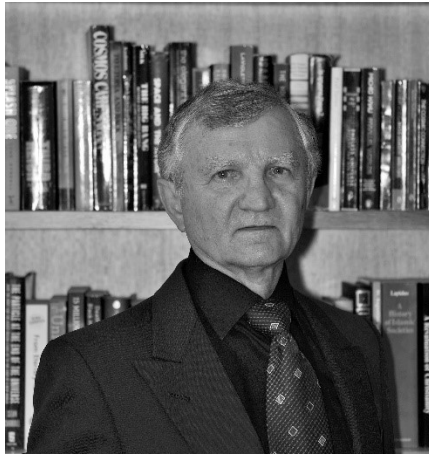
Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cell-phone systems. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends time as an editor and book reviewer. Stefan lives in Melbourne, Australia.

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

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

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

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

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

### **A Whisper from Shadow**

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

### **Shadow Masters**

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



### **Immortal in Shadow**

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

### **With Shadow and Thunder**

The Orieli are caught in an interstellar war and now they are about to drag the Serrll Combine into it. Betrayed by his Wanderer brother Dharaklin, First Scout 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!

## **Lifeliners**

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

## **Autumn Leaves**

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

## **All My Sunsets**

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

### **F/X-26**

A radical new sixth generation air superiority fighter...Betrayal and murder...A fight for survival. The future of air combat lies in unmanned remotely controlled vehicles. All Ogdan Kostan had to do is prove it. He demonstrates the fighter to the Air Force, a first vital step to have it accepted by the Pentagon in its budget submission to Congress. The aerospace lobby immediately launches a campaign to destroy the F/X-26, as it threatens their own programs for the next generation fighter.