

Review

Stefan Vučak is an exceptional writer. This book is classic, hard science fiction and will not be disappointing to any fan of this genre. The storyline is also classic science fiction; where an individual needs to make decisions regarding life and death, not only for himself, but for all of society. Some decisions are shocking, but all are made in the spirit of survival. Readers will find themselves wondering what they would do if placed in a similar circumstance.

Against the Gods of Shadow takes readers on a lightning fast adventure light-years away.

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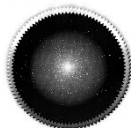
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AGAINST THE GODS OF SHADOW

By

Stefan Vučak



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Note:

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and events are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is coincidental.

Stefan Vučak ©2002
ISBN-10: 0987601415
ISBN-13: 978-0-9876014-1-4

Dedication

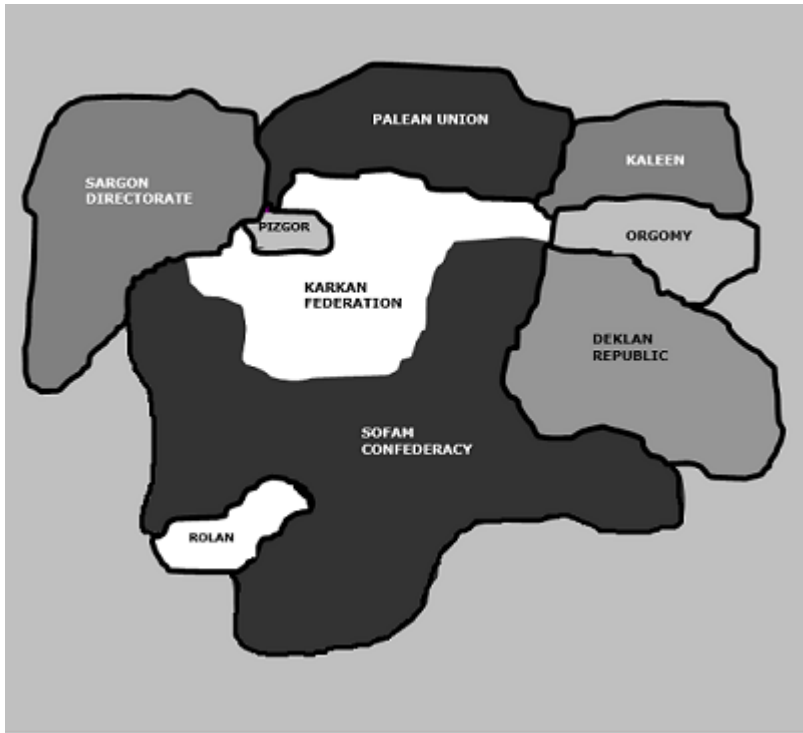
To Ivanka ... and her search for the far horizons

Acknowledgments

Eagle Nebula (M16) – Credit: NASA, ESA, and the Hubble Heritage Team (STScI/AURA).

Cover art by Laura Shinn.
<http://laurashinn.yolasite.com>

Map of the Serrll Combine



Composition of the Serrll Combine

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

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

Principal political blocks:

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

Composition of the Executive Council

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

Prologue

Against a backdrop of greens, yellows and reds, lit from deep within by a trinary of furiously hot protostars, the nebula spread its fiery tentacles into the black deeps of space. Hidden in the stellar nursery a fourth protostar glowed a sullen orange. Thin lances of ejecta streamed out from its magnetic poles. Still young, its enriched core sustained by relatively cold fission elements. The reaction pressure kept gravity at bay until the moment when the star accreted sufficient material to trigger a collapse and induce fusion ignition.

Full of organics, heavy metals, and roiling plasma streams gathered from the ashes of long extinct supernova sheddings, the nebula shone like a beacon; beautiful, but dangerous. Highly energetic particles sleet-ing outward from the core could tear apart the shield grid of any ship foolish enough to venture too close, destabilizing the distortion field matrix and dumping the unfortunate out of subspace to limp away at sublight speed. Like a beacon, merchant ships and liners used the nebula as a waypoint when entering Pizgor space, or heading into Palean or Karkan deeps.

Three days out from planetfall, the crew of the Pizgor registered bulk carrier *Pagin* were irritable and weary. They wanted off the Sargon-made scow and taste open air again, uncontaminated by the accumulated scents of close living the filters never seemed able to remove completely. On a last leg of a tortuous route picking up and delivering a variety of industrial stockfeeds, they wanted to see their families, old loves and perhaps make new ones. They wanted freedom to vent steam and lose sight of faces that have grown irksome and too familiar, if only for a while until the turnaround sent them out again. Pizgor offered a welcome layover where much needed maintenance of ship and men could be made.

Gazing absently at the nebula displayed in the primary nav plot as it drifted by on their starboard quarter, the pilot allowed his thoughts to stray comfortably to his beloved partner waiting for him when they made planetfall. Quietly wise, she had grown philosophical about his need to wander the deeps and no longer tried to tame him. He didn't have to worry about his boys, both were grown men now and free to

make their own lives.

He squinted when a white dot blinked into life on the big display plate. He glanced at his plot master and raised an eyebrow.

“Contact emerging out of Et-Aran Nebula’s shadow. Indicating nav and primary screen only. Range, point-three-eight lights. That places them twelve minutes away at present closure rate.”

“Mmm.”

Chewing his lower lip the pilot watched with morbid interest as the computer rotated profile configurations of the unknown contact. His concern turned to relief when the final image stabilized.

“A picket M-3 sweeper,” he mused and exhaled slowly.

“Contact has altered course and is heading for an intercept,” the plot master announced.

The pilot nodded to himself. He expected that any prowling Fleet ship would want to check them out, but it could have been a different type of ship altogether. He sat back in his command couch, rotated it, and swept his eyes over his three watchstanders, seeing his thoughts reflected in their drawn faces.

Raiders...

Some of the raider scum were simple out-and-out marauders and freebooters preying on innocent commerce out of greed and easy profit. Others dished out mayhem and terror in the name of religious fervor. Of these, the Palean and Deklan orders were the worst. The Almighty help those who fell into their clutches! They didn’t satisfy themselves with simply taking cargo and ships. They took lives, and took them in the most grisly manner possible. In the vastness of Serrill space there was a lot of room for misery.

“About time we had Fleet coverage. We pay ’em enough,” the exec growled sourly and waved his hand at the main plot. “Not that the bastards are around when you need them the most anyway,” he grumbled, his head bent over the engineering panel.

The pilot’s thin mouth twitched. A year back, his exec lost a friend in a raider attack. The search never found anything, not even debris. The ship simply disappeared. Of late, lots of Pizgor merchant carriers were coming to grief, increasingly singled out by raiders. Judging by the results, or lack of them, the Fleet were doing precious little to root out the vermin. That left the risks and soaring insurance premiums squarely

in the laps of ship owners and crews. With problems of his own, he happily left high finance to his owners. He had enough problems worrying about overdue maintenance. *Pagin* badly needed a thorough overhaul. Another run and they might as well scrap the scow. Everyone would relish a lengthy stopover on Pizgor.

“Raise them,” the pilot ordered and nodded to his comms officer.

“There is heavy interference, sir. I’m not sure they have our ping.”

Interference this far out from Et-Aran? Possible, but the pilot was not concerned. The whole region suffered from gravitational instability that induced localized subspace distortion.

“Give them a few minutes.”

Three minutes later, the M-3 made contact. When the main plate cleared, the pilot looked at the stern features of a Palean Fleet officer. The image slightly snowy, broken from background interference, but clear enough. The Palean’s thin hands twined in a characteristic nervous gesture and the long fingers twitched like coiling snakes. A delicate button nose glistened on a small triangular face above a pointed chin and high rectangular forehead. His enormous black eyes reflected no light. What struck the pilot were two purplish scars that angled from above the Palean’s right eye and ran down across a pale cheek. One ended at the chin and the other cut across the neck and throat. They were striking disfigurements if it meant that modern genotherapy could not remove.

“Merchant vessel, this is First Scout Kai Tanard, M-3 picket SSF *Laverne*. Please identify yourself.” The voice raspy, guttural and cold.

The pilot tore his eyes from the amazing scars. In a curious way, he felt reassured by Tanard’s business-like approach. The underlying discipline meant efficiency and that meant no raiders, which made the pilot very happy.

“This is Pizgor registered bulk carrier *Pagin* on a return Deklan run from Pita. Ready to transmit ident dump. If I can add First Scout, you make a welcome sight.”

The M-3 approached the carrier in a leisurely sweep. Its course would bring it close to the merchant vessel as it made a pass on its way out. The pilot thought nothing of it.

“You’ll have a clear run home, Pilot,” Tanard said with a thin smile that only touched the left side of his face. “Transmit ident.”

The pilot glanced at his comms officer who touched a pad on his color-reactive console.

“Ident received. You’re cleared for transit to Pizgor, Pilot,” Tanard grated, nodded once and cut contact.

“Bureaucratic crap!” the exec growled, shaking his head.

When *Laverne* got to within 28,000 talans, it raised its secondary shield grid. In the engineering spaces deep within the ship, almost directly above the phased array projector dome, the computer increased the level of energy management readiness. Stripped helium nuclei plasma powered the primary fusion chamber that fed the artificial anti-matter convergence point and kept it from collapsing. The energy surge from particle annihilation channeled through the containment field into separation wave-guides. Most of the generated power surge directed into massive secondary bus nodes in the hull that formed the protective screens.

Laverne’s secondary shield extended four talans beyond the primaries along almost spherical lines of force. With both shield grids in place, a cocoon of energy enclosed the M-3 that extended nine talans. The wave-guides allowed some of the energy to flow into a separate reaction chamber that flooded the single Koyami 2/F generator. Coils fully powered up, the computer waited for the command to synchronize the firing pulses with the shield management system and the ship would be ready to engage.

The pilot saw nothing unusual about the M-3 extending its shields, especially if it made ready to enter high boost, or checking out a strange contact. When the shields began to pulse, he felt his face drain and his mouth go dry.

“Sons of canal worms!” the exec snarled and lunged for the bright green flashing pad above the engineering panel. If nothing else, the emergency beacon pod would tell Pizgor SC&C they were gone. He never got the chance to launch the beacon.

Energy surged from the M-3’s Koyami generator into the projector dome and formed an overload point. Slung beneath *Laverne’s* belly a track of dull yellow ionization lanced from the projector dome. It flashed between the two ships in a barely registered instant. A flare of secondary discharges ripped through the navigation deflector grid of the bulk carrier directly above the command bubble, the target carefully

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selected. The shield discharge around the impact point a tangle of force lines that streamed around a yellow-green bubble of light. *Pagin's* nav deflector grid never designed to withstand impact from a warship immediately collapsed around the surge point.

A stream of eighty-two TeV sent in sixteen-millisecond pulses tore at the ablative hull material of the command bubble, forming an expanding cloud of metallic and ceramic debris. Under sustained bombardment the hull began to glow from dull red to searing white before it deformed and ruptured in a plume of molten spray from internal pressure.

When the M-3 opened fire, the merchant pilot knew he and his ship were doomed. That didn't stop him from feeling intense outrage at betrayed by the very service meant to protect him. He saw death in the faces of his watchstanders and he could do nothing to save them. His nose crinkled at the strong smell of ozone as the air ionized from the near-field effect. Small blue sparks slithered across exposed surfaces, crackling eerily, jumping over naked hands and faces; a torment of a thousand insect bites. The three watchstanders plucked at their bodies, yelping and screaming in a frantic dance of contorted pain.

The pilot sat rooted, his face set in stony agony. *Pagin* gave a violent shudder when the screen collapsed and the internal temperature immediately soared. Audible computer warnings accompanied flickering alerts from the color-reactive display plates. The primary engineering panel glowed orange-white, indicating imminent power failure. Others pulsed brown in their demand for attention. The pilot felt his hair sear, the stink sharp, and looked up. The nav bubble heated bright white, spattering droplets of molten material on the crew below. The comms officer howled as fiery drops struck his face. He fell on the deck writhing, clawing at the burns. The hull creaked as frame plates deformed. The main plot display cracked with a snap that sent needle shards of polymer scything in all directions. The very air burned, cooking exposed skin, eyes, and lungs. The pilot managed a single anguished cry when the hull finally ruptured. Solid light tore through the command deck, vaporizing equipment and bodies, turning everything into glowing plasma.

Laverne shifted its fire to the carrier's drive spaces. The beam burned into the ship's hull and sliced through the antimatter reactor core. The

screen collapsed entirely and *Pagin* immediately dropped out of sub-space. Although no longer under direct fire, the reactor assembly breached. The containment field flickered and dissipated, setting off a runaway reaction. In a burst of white brilliance the reaction consumed the reactor core, blazing outward, turning the hull and the ship to vapor. As the expanding sphere cooled, it coalesced into an irregular cloud of sleet particles and gas. The glow gradually died, leaving only a front of fading radiation.

Laverne powered down, dropped its secondary shield, and boosted back toward the glowing nebula.

Chapter One

Bulging and huge, Praxa dominated the sky and gave the impression it would fall and squash everything beneath it. An uncomfortable feeling and intellectually a baseless fear. Nonetheless, it took most people a while to make the emotional adjustment. So close to its primary, Lemos scooted in a tight thirty-nine-hour orbit around the gas giant to maintain its distance. In eons to come, it would be inexorably pulled into a tighter orbit and eventually torn into rubble by tidal forces.

Torn by violent storms, streaked with red, green, and muddy bands of nitrogen, ammonia, and organic contaminants, Praxa was a turbulent world. The different gas layers and the organics within them made it extraordinarily valuable as a cheap source of base chemical feedstocks. To Kai Tanard, hands clasped behind his back, fingers twining, Praxa was also a beautiful world to watch.

Praxa's sun hung low in the sky and dribbled out its yellow light with feeble enthusiasm. Outside, shadows were gathering, black and defiant. A thin wind chased a scrap of paper around the faintly glowing parking apron. His *Laverne* rested on the landing ring, connected to the ground by support umbilicals and an access tube. Two other M-3s lay parked beside it, legitimate Fleet units that belonged to Ril Seen, the base commander. He reminded himself he needed to call on Seen later.

Across the field, lights blazed from the open maw of a maintenance hangar. He could just make out *Zaradej's* stern, his specially modified cargo auxiliary, protruding from the edge of its holding cradle. The forced inactivity gave him a singular opportunity to refurbish the disguised carrier's single Terrasec 8/B projector. Beside it, undergoing routine preflight checks, lay one of two haulers of his cover Tai-Mari Line.

"Well?" a softly modulated soprano inquired behind him.

He turned from the window screen and glanced sharply at the slim woman sitting casually on the corner of his desk. Tall for a Palean, gorgeous and deadly. Beneath a wide forehead, enormous black eyes, bold and provocative, silently mocked him, barely hiding her revulsion.

Framed by a triangular face, her button nose accentuated a small, narrow mouth. Long flowing black hair hung straight to her waist.

“My intelligence shows an increased Fleet presence—”

“Not entirely unexpected,” she said with a dismissive wave of her slim arm.

“You’re missing the point, Re Nette. An increased Fleet presence implies that Captal may have gotten weary of Pizgor’s complaints and finally decided to address the raider issue. I would start being very careful,” he said affably, his voice harsh and heavy from his damaged throat.

“Oh, I’ll be careful,” she murmured with a seductive smile. Her single-piece light gray coverall clung without looking provocative, revealing a supple form. “You just keep giving me the targets.”

“It might be prudent to cut back for a while.”

She tossed back her hair. “I’ll keep your suggestion under advisement.”

He grunted and pursed his lips. *Have it your way*. He wouldn’t be shedding any tears if she happened to run into an M-3.

“About your maintenance bill. You really should stop stressing that hull. This is your second major power plant overhaul in a year.”

“I cannot catch them if I don’t chase them. How much?”

“Four hundred thousand Serrlls,” he said without a trace of emotion.

She winced at the scandalous price, much more than she expected. “With six fuel cells,” she pointed out and her chin lifted in defiance.

“If you want the cells Re Nette, they’re an extra three thousand each.”

She pouted and turned her head slightly, which caused her finely shaped breasts to lift.

“That’s plunder!”

“You want the cells, you pay the price. I don’t dicker, you know that.”

Re Nette climbed off the desk, shook her head and placed her hands on nicely rounded hips.

“I’m good for it. In the two years we ran this venture, have I ever asked for anything? I even gave up good targets to make you happy. Palean targets!”

“I’m touched, really I am, but you weren’t keeping me happy. It was

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yourself.”

Her eyes blazed with fury, hating him. “You’re worse than a thief, Tanard. A thief robs you once and you’re rid of him. You, on the other hand, keep sucking without end.”

“I run a business, not a charity. If you don’t like the arrangement, you can always seek other opportunities,” he said equitably. He could not forget even for a moment that behind Re Nette’s beguiling eyes lay a cold, heartless killer. If he were to show weakness just once, she and her kind would pick him clean.

Raider scum!

He looked forward to the day when he would be able to take *Laverne* out and clean them all up. He savored the thought in a moment of pleasant anticipation.

“Urgh! The only opportunity I want right now is to slit your throat. My cashflow is rather tight right now and your maintenance bill hasn’t helped. You know I’m good for it. Come on. I’ll make it up to you on the next haul.”

“I’m about to burst into tears, Re Nette. You know the rules. No credit. You want the cells, I want to get paid.”

She nodded slowly. “All right, but I’ll remember this, and you better hope I don’t meet one of your Tai-Mari ships out there.”

Tanard walked to her and peered down into her eyes, the scars on his cheek suddenly brightening. He extended his arm and caressed her hair.

“If one of my crew develops even a sniff, darling, I’ll be coming after you, and I won’t be just taking your cash then.”

She blanched at the naked threat in his deep black eyes, then smiled seductively and forced her slim fingers to run down his unmarked left cheek.

“Thief,” she growled, backing down. His time would come, she’ll see to it. “Two cells, that’s all I can afford.”

“And how were you intending to pay for them?”

“Lecher! I can give you some foodstuffs.”

Tanard mulled it over. He can always resell foodstuffs and they both knew it.

“I’ll notify Stores.”

“You have a cushy operation here, Tanard. I wonder what the base

commander would do if he knew—”

“Knew what? That this is a legitimate import/export business with its own repair facilities? Your complaint that I’m overcharging for my goods? Is that what you’d tell him?”

“I’d tell him a sight more, love.”

Tanard laughed then, a horrible mangled sound. A bright red spot appeared on her cheeks and her tiny fists clenched in fury. He reached with his fingers and lifted her chin, his eyes boring into hers.

“Nothing personal in this, Re Nette. It took all of us a long time to get this going. So far, it’s been profitable, very profitable. You wouldn’t want to spoil it now...for the others. Would you...love?”

One of the major problems the raiders faced was lack of secure maintenance and logistics resources to service their ships. The other, shipping intelligence. The whole covert operation revolved around those needs, and Tanard provided both. For the privilege, he took a cut off the top. Early on, one enterprising individual thought to beat the game and refused to pay the squeeze. Tanard went out with his M-3 and personally took care of business. There were also a few untimely deaths in the families of the luckless raider crew. The other raiders didn’t know how one of theirs vanished, but he had not been required to repeat the demonstration.

“I can’t see how you manage to sleep at night,” she snarled and walked out, the sliding door panels barely getting out of her way.

“I sleep just fine,” he said softly to the retreating back and shook his head.

For some, it took a bit longer to get the message. What did she expect? That he would fall swooning at the sight of her enticing figure and beguiling smile? Stupid female! If she only knew what was at stake here. The bitter irony of the whole setup, he really didn’t need the raiders anyway. The AUP Provisional Committee in its infinite wisdom thought otherwise. To him, they were a major security risk, one that might compromise them all, but the operation had grown too deep and intricate to start changing the organizational structure now.

The comms alert beeped. He turned and tapped a pad on the inlaid console in his desk. The Wall cleared and he resigned himself to another dull pep talk.

“Friend Maran, a pleasure as always,” he said formally as custom

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dictated. “And my apologies for keeping you waiting.”

The Palean in the Wall frowned as his eyes flickered involuntarily across Tanard’s scars. “Business?”

“An enterprising, ah, partner,” Tanard rasped wryly to his boss and Le Maran nodded.

“You’ve kept up with the latest developments?”

“I understand Prime Director Kernami Asai Tainam received permission to address the General Assembly,” Tanard said heavily and bobbed his head. “The Executive Council would not have done that unless they intend to take action.”

Le Maran hooked a finger at him. “They already deployed additional Fleet units. The extra patrols have captured three raiders and destroyed another.”

“You won’t see me mourning.”

Le Maran tilted his head slightly. “Not even for your own?”

“My own? Very amusing.”

“If Kernami’s petition is approved, our operation could become untenable, friend Tanard, and I don’t mean because of an increased Fleet presence. We could become subject to a Bureau of Cultural Affairs intelligence penetration.”

“Irrelevant. Lemos is secure and deniable,” Tanard pointed out with a tight smile and Le Maran shot him a cold look.

“Nothing is totally secure or deniable. Especially where our raider partners are concerned. However, Fleet presence or not, the Provisional Committee wants you to intensify your operations. We must show Pizgor that even with Fleet support, they’re still vulnerable. If we hurt them enough economically, the Triumvirate will fold.”

“The Committee is wrong,” Tanard said bluntly. “Instead of being aggressive, we should rein in our activities, at least until the situation stabilizes and the pattern of Fleet unit movements becomes more predictable.”

“Your activities will be curtailed in any case. The raiders will know what is going on, if not from their own sources, then from yours. They’ll be cutting back their raids through sheer self-preservation. At least the smart ones will. We must counter that. To continue pursuing our objectives, you will need to use your own assets.”

“Isn’t that defeating the very reason why we got raiders involved in

the first place?”

“The reason why we got them involved in the first place, friend Tanard, is that we couldn’t achieve the level of penetration into Pizgor’s commerce using our ships alone. I know you deplore the tactic, but the results have more than overcome your moral squeamishness. If we back off now the last three years of effort will be for nothing.”

“So far,” Tanard murmured absently and touched the scar on his throat. “It’s not the Fleet we need to worry about, friend Maran. Like you said, it’s BueCult. If they become involved, it means penetration in depth. Even if the Fleet units are eventually pulled out—CAPFLTCOM cannot keep them around Pizgor forever—BueCult will keep digging, and they don’t give up. The Committee must know that.”

“I will try and get you more information regarding the BueCult side of the penetration if it eventuates.”

“Should they ever suspect we’re using active Fleet units—”

“They suspect that already,” Le Maran piped irritably and pursed his thin lips, hands working in characteristic agitation. “They just cannot prove it.”

“You know, of course, the Fleet will start escorting commercial shipping.”

“Then you eliminate the escorts,” Le Maran said harshly and Tanard stared at him in disbelief.

“You can’t be serious?”

“I’m perfectly serious.”

“The Fleet will—”

“I know the implication, friend Tanard. Do you?”

Tanard bristled. *Oh, you little shit!* Le Maran could not mean what he just said. As a Fleet officer, Tanard knew more than anyone the presumption of this stupidity. Hadn’t Le Maran learned anything from his last attempt to mess with the Fleet? Apparently not. Well, Tanard would not take the fall for this one.

“I need to have these orders on formal record, friend Maran.” He smiled oily, hands twining. “Including my strongest protest at this action. I suggest this is inviting disaster.”

Le Maran studied his protégé and gave his famous imitation smile.

“You don’t want to be playing this game with me, *friend* Tanard.”

“Oh? And what would that game be?”

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“Careful you don’t overreach yourself.” Le Maran bit his lip, then nodded with a jerk. “If that is what you really want...”

“It is.”

“You’ll get it, then, but I must express my severe disappointment at your attitude.”

“I regret that, and I am only pointing out a possible scenario, in case of any, ah, misunderstanding later,” Tanard said sweetly, his mangled throat turning his voice into a rasping growl. “When I get your confirmation, you can inform the Provisional Committee that I will maintain the raids using my assets. Including action against Fleet escorts. One other thing. I want to renew my application to be relieved.”

“When we’re possibly facing a major disruption? Out of the question!” *Got you, you sly bastard*, Le Maran gloated. “You have a duty, First Scout, that outweighs any personal consideration. Carry it out,” he piped and cut contact.

The Wall resumed its cycle of random color whorls not dissimilar to Praxa’s own display.

First Scout...It sounded more like hollow mockery than an honor, and Tanard felt sure Le Maran knew it. To the pits with him. Tanard grunted in disappointment and strode back to face the window screen. His application to return to normal Fleet duty had been a long shot at best, and playing this charade had grown tiresome. The Committee must know, the longer he stayed locked in this post, the chances grew proportionally that his cover with COMPALOPS, Commander Palean Operations, would be penetrated. With the BueCult machinery likely to turn its attention on his activities, it would only be a matter of time before they caught up with him. He already pushed the security limits now. Well, if he couldn’t be relived, he would simply have to make sure Lemos could not be compromised and he didn’t get caught. Executed as a traitor wasn’t part of his game plan.

To date, the operation turned out stunningly successful, vindicating the Committee’s bold strategy and the staggering investment. Three years ago when a senior Palean Congress representative approached him and the plan laid at his feet, he goggled with incredulity. His widely known dissenting views cost him promotion to Master Scout and made him even more determined to voice his dissatisfaction with the Palean’s submissive role within the Revisionist coalition. His was not a lone

voice. A fervent supporter of the Alikan Union Party, others also saw Palean interests coincide with Sargon's. In the end, he agreed to head the Pizgor project. What price patriotism?

Setting up the legitimate side of the business operation on Lemos turned out to be complicated, but uneventful. They picked a civilian to run the ground operation, and the humorous irony of the whole thing, Tai-Mari Line turned out to be very profitable and helped offset some of the running costs of his cover. The covert side took two long years of threatening and sucking up to raider pilots trying to convince them of the overwhelming advantages in joining the cooperative, constantly having to allay mutual suspicion and mistrust. In the end, ship by ship, they came. Despite the travails, they were also years of duty and opportunity undreamed of. To actually help shape the future course of his people! His part would be recognized eventually, he knew that.

If he could only shake off the growing feeling of foreboding.

Dismissing the thought, he turned his attention to more immediate matters. Some of the raiders would undoubtedly be nervous or skittish. Le Maran was right about that. Still, the lure of easy profits would keep most of them in line, provided he did his part. Le Maran's easy dismissal of the Fleet as an operational threat represented a major concern. He considered Le Maran a fool if he did not see the danger. Captal's political machinery might be ponderous and slow to move, but it did move. Once started, it was equally difficult to stop.

No, Le Maran knew the implication, all right, he decided. The cold reality, Le Maran and the organization that stood behind him, could not afford to be swayed by these developments. Too much lay at stake in time, resources, and expected results to be sidetracked now. In the larger scheme of things, the faceless men behind Le Maran considered Lemos expendable. An untarnished, if unpalatable truth, one Tanard had momentarily forgotten.

Still, attack Fleet units? He considered it a rash action borne of expediency.

All right, he would continue to raid, but the missions would need careful planning and organization if he were to take out his ships. He didn't relish getting caught by a passing M-4.

Out on the open apron hovered Re Nette's ugly ship. He stared at it for a while. Boxy, utilitarian and deadly, a predator. A flicker of light

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caught his eye and he looked up. A large bulk carrier, its pale crimson nav grid pulsing, came down under SC&C guidance. It could be making a delivery or picking up, no way of telling. He watched as it settled smoothly, leaving it hovering two or three katalans above the apron. Flat cargo pads rushed toward it from the storage tank farm. Two slabs of the apron dropped away and from the holes emerged enormous hose couplings. They attached themselves to the carrier's hull and the flexible pipes twitched as liquids gushed through them.

So, the ship appeared to be making a delivery as well as picking up, Tanard mused and swept his eyes across the sky. The atmosphere on Lemos thin and frigid, but at least it had one, and the moon's principal point of attraction, representing an incalculable saving in infrastructure investment that would otherwise have been necessary in a vacuum environment. He liked the night skies the best. Barely eighteen light-years away the Et-Aran Nebula provided a spectacular and free display. What entertainment Lemos otherwise provided verged on considerably more earthy and expensive attractions.

Hands twining, Tanard felt the fates suddenly crowding him, and not bearing gifts either.

* * *

Still early in the morning, beneath the white sun's relentless glare, the pale amber sky already swam and shimmered, turning the flowing sands into a silver sea that chased away the shadows. A thin wind, hot and parched, stirred the sharp dune crests and drove whispering sand into ribbed ridges along the sweeping dune slopes. A band of brown haze from a distant dust storm hugged the eastern horizon. The rolling dunes fell away and blended into beds of yellow sands and pea-gravel flats. Low in the sky, Aribus a dull gray crescent, waited to sink into oblivion after a tiring night.

With the wind tugging at his cape, Terr pushed back his hood and squinted. Against the shimmering horizon the pale sands merged into browns and reds as they piled against the Katai Than escarpment heaving itself out of the desert. The cleaved buttresses separated the highland plateau beyond from the lowland plains behind him. A solidity and permanence about the towering, jagged cliffs brought from him a quiet

nod of satisfaction. It also brought back mixed memories of his crash four years ago up on the plateau beyond. The burning sands failed to claim his life then, but they managed to take his soul, perhaps a crueler fate.

A shadow merged with his and he looked up at the tall hooded figure beside him.

“We should pitch camp,” Terr muttered wearily and dropped his pack. He sat cross-legged on the cool sand and sighed, his leg muscles protesting at this unaccustomed abuse.

Dharaklin stood still, his sinewy two point-three katalan frame a column of rock. The shadow he cast sharp and black. In a fluid economical move, he lowered his pack and pulled back the yellow hood of his brown surtaf robe. The vertical red slits of his large orange eyes betrayed nothing. The thin membranes designed to protect the eyes from fine sand slowly lifted, revealing an inner fire. His dark yellow skin dry, drawn tight over the bony ridges of his long face. His broad flat nose, nostrils flared, added to his skeletal appearance.

“We had a good walk, Sankri,” Dhar said heavily, his deep voice lingering in the air like a ripple of dying thunder. Alien he might be, but as a Saddish-aa Wanderer, his brother deserved to be called by his warrior name.

Terr grunted and wiped oily sweat off his face. He unclipped the water bottle from his belt, bit into the spigot and took a long mouthful of deliciously cool liquid. He dropped the container into his lap and exhaled loudly, content.

“It will be a good walk once we reach the base of the escarpment tomorrow.” He stretched his arms and swung them back until the joints creaked. “Right now, my legs are killing me and I need sleep.”

Dhar chuckled, his narrow dry lips pulled back in a thin smile that revealed even brown teeth.

They found a little hollow where two low dunes merged. On the lee side, the morning breeze only a dying whisper. Its attraction lay in its shaded position as the sun burned across the northern sky. It would provide some protection during the day.

They scooped away the soft loose sand to enlarge the hollow, revealing a pea-gravel base. Two telescoping poles were driven into the sand face some one-and-a-half katalans above the ground, leaving them

protruding about a katalan. The elbow joints folded down and the ends were driven into the gravel. They dropped an insulation sheet over the poles and secured it on the outside with piled-up sand. The spread surtaf robes made a soft ground sheet. It might have been crude, but nevertheless an effective shelter against the fierce day sun.

Sitting cross-legged, humming to himself, Terr rummaged through his pack. He didn't mind the rustic Wanderer existence, but insisted on a few simple modern conveniences, and rations were one of them. Munching on a bar concentrate, he looked up at his frowning gangly brother and grinned.

"What's the matter? Lost something?"

"I thought I had a jar of berry paste in here somewhere..." Dhar mumbled absently, pawing through his pack. His face lit up as he triumphantly held up a white ceramic container.

Terr grimaced at what was about to come. "Must you?"

Dhar frowned and shook his head in admonition. "This is the ultimate in culinary delight, you heathen."

"It's the ultimate in sensory assault, that's what it is."

Scowling in disapproval, Dhar unscrewed the jar and took a long sniff of the contents. Wearing a beatific smile, he waved the open jar at Terr with a flourish. A sharp pungent aroma immediately filled the shelter and Terr fell into a fit of feigned coughing while he wiped his eyes. The smell not really bad, a mixture of lube oil and rotting wood, a ritual they played every time Dhar unveiled the foul substance.

Terr stuck to munching his bar, occasionally shaking his head at Dhar's obvious relish at consuming the sticky reddish paste. He did try the stuff himself once. In fact, the delicious mixture, a leftover from the prana water-making process, was highly nutritious. Perfect desert food, but he had to get past the awful smell first.

As an all-purpose insect repellent, the paste had few equals.

Later, stretched out, hands behind his head and his pack for a pillow, Terr allowed the dry heat to suffuse through him. The smell of burned rock, sand and dried tarad grass strong in the air, his spirit soared. Right now, without cares or responsibilities, there was no tomorrow, he felt happy. Next to him, Dhar already asleep, face relaxed and peaceful, the stern features now soft and vulnerable. A side of a Saffal Wanderer few ever came close enough to see.

Terr dozed off to the soft whisper of the sands.

* * *

Already dusk and cooler when they stirred out of their shelter, the crispness tempered the oppressive heat, heralding the creeping night. Overhead, blotched by winking stars, purple streaks smeared the sky. Low in the north the bent pattern of stars that made up Amulran the Damned burned bright, waiting for the Stalker to loose his arrow of revenge at his enemy. Those stars always came out first. A warning from the gods, perhaps? A message?

Feeling drowsy and lethargic, they took their meal in silence, each still living among the thoughts of his dreams. They collapsed the shelter and packed up. With darkness settling around them, they silently headed toward the stars of the Stalker and the dark escarpment.

It became easier once they hit the long stretches of rocky flats, leaving the rolling dunes far behind. They didn't talk much and there was no need for words. Each content to bask in the warmth of being together, sharing an intimacy in this reality far removed from the discipline and demands of shipboard life. Words would only limit and confine the bond they had.

Total silence ruled the desert. Only the soft crunch of gravel from their footfalls and even breathing made a hesitant intrusion. As night consumed them and it got colder, the sky assumed a bright, crystal clarity, and the stars burned steady. Terr reveled in the quiet satisfaction of reuniting with this land of wonder and magic that once tried to claim his life, and which he now came to love. Love also brings with it uncertainty, rejection and pain.

The gods who ruled the Saffal deeps wanted nothing, and everything. The shadow of Death within which he now walked a heavy burden sometimes. He hadn't flaunted his power or used it to dominate another even when tempted. The mere fact that he could unleash untold destruction at a whim transformed him. Feeling invulnerable, cloaked with immortality, it was inevitable that sooner or later arrogance and pride would rear their ugly heads. Dhar understood him better than he thought, and his quiet, simple words of warning left Terr deeply disturbed. A sobering revelation that led to much soul-searching.

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Tomorrow, beneath the shadow of Katai Than, he hoped to find some of the answers.

‘The mere presence of power is an influence’, straight out of the *Saftara* chronicles...and he allowed himself to forget.

Deep into the night, Aribus lifted itself out of the desert; the fat crescent all golden and bright, and the sands came alive. The shadows gathered and hid the dips between the dunes, while the sand glittered and sparkled like fields of new snow. Terr paused, rested his left leg on a small boulder, elbows on his knees, and looked around in wonder. Seeing this, no one could fail to feel the pull of this land. Rima peeked over the horizon, still wearing a cloak of blood, but the moon would soon catch up with its larger companion and chase the shadows away.

Dhar met his eye, sharing the magic, and they continued their march toward the growing blackness of the escarpment that loomed before them.

Dawn broke out of a dark red sky and the stars fled. Towering over the landscape the orange and brown granite buttresses of Katai Than almost glowed beneath the sun’s cool light, and the desert transformed. Dark shadows still lurked among the smooth cliff faces, and the sand pools took on the soft yellows and whites. With sunlight warming his left cheek, Terr gazed with satisfaction at the welcoming wall of rock that stood before him. To his right, not more than 120 katalans away, the cliffs opened to reveal a dark, forbidding gorge. Pointing at the opening, he turned triumphantly to Dhar and grinned.

“Hit it right on!”

Dhar frowned and chewed his lower lip. “Not *quite* on.”

“Picky.”

Pleased with himself, Terr rubbed his hands to kill the chill. Renewed with energy, they headed for the opening.

Shrouded in gloom and shadow the sheer cliffs stood protectively over a world remade. Stands of tall tarad grass crowded the mute canyon walls. Their broad spiky leaves were still curled until the sun coaxed them to open when it broke over the cliffs. Spare thorny brush poked timidly through the grass. An occasional solitary peelath, its wide leaves heavy and limp, leaned away from the rocks. Stillness and peace permeated the harsh landscape that went beyond mere tranquility and rustic beauty. Even the cold air held its breath, heavy with the sharp smell of

rock and sand, of burned tarad and oily peelath.

Between the cliffs, the twisting dry watercourse worn smooth by ancient rains, making it for easy walking. The wild beauty and serenity of the rough backdrop tugged at Terr's heart. Since his crash, he walked these sands but once, fulfilling Sidhara's demand that he confront his demons. It took him another two long years, troubled years, to be here again, but why was he here? Did he seek to restore himself, to replenish some emptiness that had started to grow inside him? Instinctively, he knew he needed this moment to still, if for a while, the turmoil raging within him; a legacy left him by the gods of the Saffal.

Dhar, sensitive to his alien brother's mood, did not intrude. As a Saddish-aa Wanderer, he more than anyone understood Terr's ordeal. Initially, Terr had not wanted to come to Anar'on, preferring to spend their leave somewhere more boisterous. Dhar watched Terr's inner struggle with his terrible heritage, able to help in the only way possible—by just being there for him. In the end, still uncertain, Terr finally agreed, silently contemplating what awaited him in the desert keep. With quiet satisfaction, Dhar watched as his brother's spirit cleansed itself among the whispering sands.

They walked on in silence, aware of each other, alone with their thoughts.

After a time the dark cliffs opened to reveal a grassed valley floor and a still pond surrounded by a wooded glade of gently swaying peelath. Taklan moss palms leaned over dark, still waters. Long strands of moss hung limp from the branches and nodded at their reflection. The soft white sand of the small beach merged with the glassy brown pool without a ripple.

Arms hanging at his side, Terr pushed back the emotions that crowded him and turned to face Dhar.

"Nightwings," he whispered. "We're home."

* * *

"It's a conspiracy!" Kernami Asai Tainam thundered, his fist raised, and the Assembly floor erupted with a collective roar of thousands.

Standing tall and regal, his dark ebony eyes burned with scornful intelligence. His face narrow and gaunt, belittling his powerful frame,

his skin almost black. He surveyed the chaos before him with quiet satisfaction.

The two visitor gallery levels that ran above the General Assembly floor were packed with Capital citizenry. A more than usual mixture of dignitaries from around the Serrll added flavor. Assembly sessions didn't normally attract a full house, but this one far from usual. An almost palpable undercurrent of excitement and expectation ran through the galley. Everyone wanted to see the Sargon and Palean representatives roasted. The session also held particular significance for the independent nonaligned systems, and the visitors didn't want the proceedings sanitized by government propaganda.

The din of rousing voices drifted and rolled through the chamber like booming surf. Raised above the main floor at the back of the chamber stood a three-tiered platform. On the second platform, arranged behind a horn table were twelve seats, now filled by nine somber-faced Executive Council directors and the Moderator. The upper platform held a longer crescent table for the senior commissioners, themselves engaged in huddled discussions. On the lower platform, four exquisitely upholstered formchairs were laid out for visiting dignitaries. Kernami stood there alone, grasping the sides of a transparent lectern. Above the platforms a giant Wall switched from the solemn faces of the directors to the uproar on the floor.

They built the General Assembly chamber to house nine hundred delegate seats, each seat holding a representative of one star system. It would be a long time before they were all filled. An ancient building, round with a high domed roof, classical Sofam cursive adorned the rim between the dome and the ornate walls. Every few years some Assembly rep would motion the floor to tear down the structure and replaced with more modern architecture. Modern being so subjective, the various committees made it impossible to agree on a new design. So the building stood, patiently enduring.

"Order. Order!" Tari-Lama roared, enjoying himself hugely, and banged his gavel against the desk. "These proceedings shall come to order or I will clear the floor!"

The announcement generated gleeful hooting from the chamber and calls of derision from the visitor gallery. Any attempt to suspend

the session would cause a riot and Tari-Lama knew it. Despite the seriousness of the proceedings, this was obviously not the time to stand on official protocol. He meant to give Kernami wide latitude to present his case, but that didn't mean giving him leave to flaunt all the conventions.

"I caution you, Prime Director, the Assembly will not tolerate flights of colorful rhetoric as a substitute for facts," he said, staring at Kernami with a distinct lack of approval.

Kernami raised an eyebrow at the ponderous form of the Moderator outlined in the lectern display plate.

"He cautions me!" He sneered at the floor and pointed an accusing arm behind him. "Pizgor is locked in a struggle for its economic survival and he cautions me! Palean and Sargon raiders are plundering our commerce and he cautions me."

This sparked a howl of indignant protest from Palean and Sargon representatives, as Kernami intended. Tari-Lama loved it, relishing the undisguised political process, away from the silent and deadly counter-thrusts played within the Executive Council chamber. He banged his gavel furiously in a vain attempt to restore a semblance of control over what threatened to become a spectacle. Pleased with himself that he resisted giving into pressure from Palean and Sargon directors to grant Kernami a closed session, some laundry had to be aired in the open.

"Order! Order! I will have order or this session will be ended right now!"

The remark only served to trigger another round of applause and cheering as delegates jumped out of their seats, arms waving wildly. It took a while to restore a semblance of propriety, and only after the marshals bodily ejected some of the more vocal gallery visitors. Even after everyone had settled down, there remained an undercurrent of seething, hissing voices.

His patience strained, Tari-Lama rose to his full one point-seven katalan height and glowered darkly at Kernami.

"And you, sir. If you persist at inciting the floor, I'll have you thrown out!"

Kernami gave a grim smile and swept his arm at Tari-Lama and the other executive directors.

"And I submit that this august body has already thrown me and my cause out," he said with dignity, then turned to survey the Assembly

floor. A dangerous gamble, but sometimes one had to gamble to win. The prize this time, Pizgor's very survival. He nodded to himself at the ensuing silence and grasped the sides of the lectern. "I'm charged with making wild accusations. I in turn charge the Assembly with dereliction of duty and failure to uphold the Constitution and the Articles of Association. I charge the Executive Council for its complicity!"

That almost ended it. Even some of the commissioners were making protesting noises. If Kernami sought, his approach would not get him any. The media thrived on it. Assembly sessions were usually dull and stuffy affairs. This one shaped to be a ratings buster.

Ed-Kani Takao rose and locked eyes with Kernami, his quiet dignity radiating a frosty hostility. His icy blue-white eyes were blank windows set wide on a narrow, bony face. Completely hairless, it offset the deep character lines around the eyes and mouth. He pulled back his lips into a toothy smile.

"Mr. Director, you were given a singular opportunity to present your case to the Assembly. If you have evidence supporting your charges against the Sargon Directorate, I would urge you to present it. Emotional outbursts are a futile gesture, wasting everyone's valuable time." The last delivered with an almost silent hiss as he snapped his delicate jaws several times. Without taking his eyes off Kernami, he settled himself back into his seat.

No one could mistake Ed-Kani's warning or enmity. The considerable power wielded by the Sargon Executive Director should not to be forgotten or underestimated. Sargon could make life much more difficult for Pizgor in many more subtle ways. Kernami acknowledged the warning with a barely perceptible nod.

Tari-Lama banged his gavel and shot Ed-Kani a look of clear displeasure.

"The Chair has not recognized you, sir!"

Ed-Kani shrugged stiffly, unconcerned. He might have failed in preventing Kernami from having his moment of glory before the Assembly, but that did not mean he or Sargon had to take cheap tirades from the provincial. Utter nonsense anyway. All this fuss over three lousy systems. It is not as though Sargon would plunder and sack them if Pizgor ceded. Couldn't Kernami see that? Sargon would not interfere with Pizgor's internal machinery. It was simple politics and numbers.

Tari-Lama fumed. Damnation, this was getting completely out of hand. He allowed a trace of pique to creep into his voice as he pointed his gavel at Kernami.

“I will not tolerate this kind of behavior from you any longer, Prime Director. This is your last warning.”

Kernami heard the words and sensed the Moderator’s growing frustration. What can the old fool do to him anyway? He checked that thought. Needlessly antagonizing the Executive would not be prudent. In the end, the Assembly would give him what he wanted. The evidence he intended to present irrefutable, but their memory and mood a fickle and transitory thing. He cannot afford to forget the Executive Directors ruled here, and there was nothing wrong with their collective memory. To them, Pizgor represented a minor irritant, which they could go on ignoring if he pushed them too far.

With evident reluctance, he swept his gaze over the nine directors and commissioners seated behind them, and gave a curt bow. Bitter as the taste might be, these men controlled the Serrll, and he needed their help.

“My apologies, Mr. Moderator. It shall not happen again.”

Tari-Lama nodded stiffly. “Then proceed, if you please.”

Damned provincial!

Kernami had turned the Assembly session into a personal performance, and well done, he admitted grudgingly. It’s not as though the wily devil didn’t have a case, and he played the emotional card to the extreme.

Facing the floor, Kernami clasped his hands behind his back and thrust out his powerful chin.

“Pizgor is not a major power; three systems and two outposts. That’s all. By virtue of our location, we turned Pizgor into an important commercial hub. We happen to be at a nexus through which several vital trade corridors intersect; routes between Sargon, the Palean Union, and to a lesser degree, the Karkan Federation. In the past, this position generated considerable commercial benefit for our systems. Benefit that enabled us to maintain our independent nonaligned status.” He paused, allowing the audience a moment of anticipation.

“That was in the past. Now, dreams of an empire are threatening to end our very existence!” he thundered and chopped with an open hand

before him. “An empire that’s even now swallowing individual independents in order to bolster its percentage of held systems. Kirkov and Tolan 2FB, gone in the two years since the last general electoral session. Now, those forces are eyeing Pizgor! Having failed to seduce us with hollow diplomatic platitudes and empty economic inducements, they now seek to force our cooperation by blatant disruption of our commerce.” Kernami brought himself up to his full height and pointed an accusing finger at the Assembly.

“I accuse the Sargon Directorate and the Palean Union of orchestrating a policy of active destabilization of an independent group in blatant violation of the Articles, and I seek your help to stop them!”

Beautiful to watch, the floor on their feet, applauded, jeered or protested. The visitor’s gallery loved it. Waves of noise swept through the chamber while Tari-Lama, enraged, ineffectively pounded his gavel. Order finally restored, the air tingled with tense anticipation of more to come.

Tari-Lama gave a final bang with his gavel and stared fixedly at Kernami.

“Mr. Director, I hope you’re able to substantiate those allegations. The Assembly takes a dim view of any breach of the Articles or the sovereignty of its members. However, it takes an equally dim view of attempts to subvert the due process using hollow histrionics.”

Since the Revisionists controlled the government, it was a foregone conclusion the Executive Council would authorize action to investigate Kernami’s claims. However, more lay at stake here than Pizgor’s immediate problem, and the Revisionists were looking at other issues. Any Sargon/Palean merger would relegate the Karkans to bit player status and destabilize the Servatory Party. The Revisionists wouldn’t mind seeing that at all. Unfortunately, such a merger would also plunge the Serrll Combine into political and economic turmoil, and perhaps general warfare. That could not be tolerated. Even if it meant indirectly bolstering the Karkans—what a thought! The Executive could not afford to forget that the Captal government ruled for all.

Kernami knew he had Tari-Lama’s support and the support of the Revisionist Party directors, regardless of the fact that they were using Pizgor for their own agenda. It wasn’t over yet. He tapped a pad on the lectern’s control panel and the giant Wall behind him cleared to show a

holoview schematic of Pizgor, Sargon, and Palean borders. Deep orange lines traced the major trade corridors, all converging and crossing through Pizgor space. A network of bright blue dots surrounded the five systems. Many of them clustered around the Et-Aran Nebula in Palean space, twenty-eight light-years from Pizgor.

“There you have it, and it’s not histrionics,” Kernami said with a sweep of his arm and waited for the Assembly to digest the information. “That chart represents two years of raider activity on our commerce.” The view expanded to include a substantial portion of space around Pizgor. The incidence of blue dots displayed an all too clear correlation with trade routes that wound their way deep into Palean, Karkan, and Sargon space. However, the density profile in striking contrast to the evident abnormality that surrounded Pizgor. The rising murmur from the floor showed the point had not been lost on them.

Kernami tapped another pad and the Wall began a regression sequence.

“A year ago,” he said quietly, the force of his words unmistakable.

Everyone could see a clear reduction in the density of dots surrounding Pizgor and the intersecting shipping lanes. The other routes maintained their random distribution profile. After all, raiding *was* profitable anywhere, however abhorrent to the victims.

Kernami did not bother watching the repeater plate set into the lectern, concentrating instead on gauging the mood of the floor.

“Two years ago.”

The density reduced even further.

“Three years ago.”

The buzz from the floor now pronounced. The distribution of raider events around Pizgor and its approaches assumed the same random pattern as for incidents elsewhere in the Serrll. It was a devastating demonstration.

Tari-Lama had seen the figures and the graphics as part of Kernami’s submission to address the Assembly, as did the other Executive Directors. Most of them conceded that Pizgor had a legitimate grievance, to the fulminating protests from Ed-Kani Takao and Tao Karam, Palean’s senior representatives. They were voted down and Kernami received his hearing. No one could have predicted, though, the effectiveness of Kernami’s performance or the impact of his charges. Could

those charges be really true? On the surface the statistics were damning and were even now being checked by the Bureau of Economic Affairs. Tari-Lama had to keep in mind that Ed-Kani Takao ran the Economics Bureau. Would the senior Sargon representative attempt to thwart the investigation in the pursuit of his merger policy with the Paleans? For the stakes they played here? Something to watch, but if Ed-Kani sought to manipulate the due process, he ran a fearful personal risk, as was Sargon.

He banged his gavel, deep in thought.

“A very effective display, Mr. Director. On the basis of your presentation the Executive Council is inclined to acknowledge abnormal levels of anomalous raider activity around the Pizgor group. Can you now demonstrate how this implicates the Palean Union and the Sargon Directorate?”

The wave of murmuring from the floor and the gallery indicated a tense expectation of another fiery outburst. Kernami bowed to Tari-Lama and faced the floor.

“Under the umbrella of the Alikan Union Party, our two giant neighbors flanking us seek to establish themselves as the power in the Servatory Party opposition. It’s no secret they see themselves supplanting the Karkan Federation as the senior coalition partner in opposition to the Revisionists. Before they can aspire to realizing this lofty goal, they need a third seat in the Executive Council. Everyone here knows what that means. They need to boost their quota of held systems to at least twenty-five percent of all member systems. Ordinarily, Pizgor would not care what they do among themselves, but when they seek to achieve their ends by swallowing isolated independents, we take notice. If through inaction, this Assembly allows Pizgor to be swallowed by one of our neighbors, Sargon will win and the Serrll Combine will be wreaked from within.”

Elderly, still vigorous, Tao Karam stood up. “If the Moderator will allow a question?”

Tari-Lama turned toward the Palean. “The Chair recognizes the senior Palean Union representative.”

Tao Karam nodded and twined his hands. “The Assembly has been presented with entertaining speculation mixed with questionable statistics. As a recognized nexus of trade corridors, everyone would expect

Pizgor to come in for more than its share of raider attention. I now ask Prime Director Kernami to tell us how this translates, as he so colorfully puts it, into a conspiracy.”

Kernami smiled at the wily old Palean. *This will be sweet.*

“I will be glad to,” he breathed. “Director Tao Karam is correct when he asserts that Pizgor’s trade nexus is a natural magnet for raiders, and it is, but it’s not that simple. Analysis of raider activity on our commerce, attack profiles and location densities, clearly show that this level of penetration is beyond anything even groups of raiders could sustain, let alone mount. Such protracted effort requires coordination, logistical support and control. As everybody knows, raiders are loners, opportunists who shun any cooperation or control, unless the profits are so overwhelming as to outweigh the risks. I submit to this Assembly, only sophisticated organization and a communication infrastructure can execute the demonstrated and sustained level of raids perpetrated against us. I also submit this infrastructure can only be supported from a central base of operations. A base provided by, supplied and protected by Sargon and the Paleans to further their merger!”

* * *

“Prime Director, do you realize the magnitude of your demand? Ach!” Sill-Anais retorted incredulously, trying hard to keep amusement out of his voice.

The man was indeed provincial if he could not see past parochial delusions. As a main trade nexus, shipping corridors around Pizgor presented an almost irresistible target for raider attention. But a campaign by Sargon and the Paleans to stifle the three core systems as a preliminary to a takeover? It seemed incredible. Still...Sill acknowledged the *possibility*, however outrageous. Despite Kernami’s assertion, there had to be a more innocuous explanation. The alternative could plunge the whole Serrll into open warfare. Sargon wouldn’t dare!

Standing beside the floor-to-ceiling window screen, Kernami watched streams of communals, combies, and private sled-pads wind their way through Captal’s darkening sky. In the distance, murky haze swallowed the city. What did people down there know of Pizgor’s struggle, or care about it? If Sargon did swallow Pizgor, would it even be

noticed? Probably not, he mused. The loss of his five systems would not be newsworthy enough to warrant a mention. He knew he was being cynical, but whether the comfortable masses below knew it or not, the status of every nonaligned independent system might be threatened, and it was his job to make them aware of that. If Pizgor fell, the Paleans would openly move on Kaleen. Sofam stopped them doing that once, but would they care to do so again if the merger succeeded? The Deklans would carve up Orgomy, and years of work to make the Unified Independent Front a political reality would be destroyed. With it would also be destroyed the moderating influence the independents wielded within the Executive Council with their single seat. The Capital government could become an autocratic bureaucracy, severely limiting individual freedoms.

It simply made it all the more imperative his efforts did not fail.

The political road he trod a rocky and tortuous trail. Twelve years in the Triumvirate Assembly have prepared him well to deal with external and internal obstacles. Wresting control of the Triumvirate was only a stepping stone. One more year and he would complete his first eight-year term as Prime Director of the Pizgor group. Behind him lay achievements to be proud of. Surrounded by Sargon and Palean systems, Pizgor could not expand. It could grow in other ways, and under his leadership, it had. He invested heavily in infrastructure of the two outposts, to the maligning of his opponents and doubts within the Triumvirate. In the end, the gamble paid off. The young and the vigorous took up the challenge to mold what they saw were better worlds, certainly different.

Still to be completed, his greatest satisfaction lay in the expansion and integration of cargo receiving and handling facilities on the three principal worlds. The offshoot had been steady growth in Pizgor's shipping ventures that brought in valuable revenue and helped finance local public infrastructure and facilities, while raising everyone's standard of living. Would the people continue to accept his policies and the frenetic pace of change by his administration? Although he expected a comfortable nomination to a second term in the next year's Triumvirate elections, he could not afford to stumble. Supported by Sargon and Palean funding the conservative factions would instantly pounce and drag the populace into ignorance and blind servitude. He cannot allow even the

possibility of that happening.

He swayed the Assembly with his flamboyance, but he needed to know if Captal was serious in its commitment or merely sought to brush him off with bureaucratic maneuvering. His gamble fraught with its own dangers, he felt irritated that Tari-Lama chose to handle the issue by two commissioners rather than at the Executive Council level. Perhaps that was simply his ignorance of the due process. Whatever the reason, he wouldn't leave Captal until he got what he wanted.

He half turned and swept his hand at the somber order of the Center and the sprawl of Captal beyond.

“What do you see out there, Mr. Commissioner?”

Sill glanced at Enllss, who didn't even twitch an eyebrow while maintaining diplomatic inscrutability.

“Stability,” Kernami said firmly. “A certainty in your future, gentlemen. For the people out there, even a measure of contentment. The only thing concerning them is satisfying their drives and ambitions. Anything else is completely incomprehensible or irrelevant. Even the naked political struggle between the Revisionists and the Servatory Party is merely a diversion to be debated as an intellectual preoccupation, not something to be fought over.”

Sill sat back into the yielding couch and pulled at his chin. Lines of responsibility etched their marks on his dry, pinched face. His brow may be knitted in concentration, but his wide-set green eyes were alive with interest. Kernami had shown a level of innate skill on the Assembly floor, but he lacked experience dealing with Captal's political machinery. His frontal assault on the Assembly effective only because of its novelty. Still, if Kernami thought the Executive was moved by Pizgor's plight, he would be disabused. His presence merely a fortuitous coincidence of events that allowed the Executive to address two problems within a single objective. Gazing at the grim determination of the towering alien, Sill reminded himself that this meeting was a culmination of almost two years of relentless lobbying by the Pizgor Triumvirate, and its leader in particular. He admired his persistence.

“You can save your sales rhetoric, sir. The Executive has agreed to review Pizgor's situation and I am tasked with executing it. Ach! But what you're demanding is extreme.”

“Extreme? Abolition of raiders is extreme? Stopping political bullying is extreme?” Kernami raised his eyebrows and gave a rueful smile. “Given Captal’s predilection for inaction, perhaps my expectations are extreme and my trust in the due process misplaced, seeing how Deklan itself has in the past used those same tools in the execution of its expansionist policies.”

Sill bridled, stung by the half-truth of the remark. Impatiently, he ran his fingers through the two bands of gray in his otherwise white hair, and his eyes clouded. This infidel would lecture him in political correctness or observance of the Path? Sill took a deep breath.

“The qualitative difference in the pursuit of our policies, sir, the Deklan Republic uses the rule of law to achieve its objectives. We don’t stoop to using raiders.”

Kernami raised open palms before him. “Forgive me. That was unconscionable, Mr. Commissioner,” he said in contrition and bowed. “You have my unreserved apology for that thoughtless remark.”

Sill nodded stiffly. Still smarting, he nevertheless respected Kernami’s tactics. The apology undoubtedly sincere, as was the reminder of Deklan’s less than glorious past. If he were honest with himself, that past also reflected the Synod’s present misguided policies as well. It would be useless to deny that Deklan lusted after the nonaligned Kaleen and Orgomy worlds. With the pending merger of those two groups into what would become the Unified Independent Front, that longing was destined to become an unrealized one. Thwarted from the Path by heathen infidels. An insufferable situation and a sin against the Path! He checked the unworthiness of his thoughts and muttered the words of the second litany of subservience, praying for forgiveness and enlightenment.

“I shall consider it but an aberration in the context of wider issues at hand here,” Sill said, still slightly miffed.

Enlls-rr propped his chin with the palm of his hand, thoughtfully studying the imposing figure of the tall Pizgor leader. He had never seen Kernami before, but he recognized a competent politician at work. Kernami played Sill beautifully, histrionics and all. This might give him momentary satisfaction, but he skirted danger with his provocative tactics. No one takes kindly being held up to ridicule, and Deklan was particularly prickly where Orgomy was concerned. Sill was also a priest of the

Path and a real power in the Ecumenical Synod on Deklan. During his twelve years in the Assembly, Sill nurtured a reputation as a careful and decisive decision-maker. His elevation to Commissioner for the Bureau of Cultural Affairs two years ago, all too clearly demonstrated the care with which he took in shaping his political career. The very Bureau Enlls used to head and Sill used to be one of his Branch directors. From their early clashes on the Assembly floor, he came to respect Sill's enormous abilities. Kernami had to know Sill was nobody's fool. So why goad him?

Strictly speaking, as Commissioner for the Bureau of Colonial and Protectorate Affairs, Enlls had no business sticking his nose into the Pizgor affair. When Sill asked him to attend, he accepted readily, with Tari-Lama's unreserved approval, probably because Enlls was a Sofam Confederacy Assembly rep and Sofam wanted to keep an eye on the proceedings.

He cleared his throat and reached for the still steaming pot of special herbal tea. His powerful and muscular body alert to the underplay of nuances around him. He filled everyone's cup and leaned back into the folds of the formchair, savoring the redolent aroma permeating the room, his dark gray eyes noting everything.

Unabashed, Kernami walked to the low table and lowered himself into a formchair. He picked up his cup and sniffed appreciatively.

Enlls knew Sill detested the brew and served it only to humor him. Outside, dusk stole over Captal, tingeing the sky with streaks of red. The city already ablaze with light and color. Unobtrusively, the services management system increased the brightness of the walls and the ceiling, lighting the open office spaces.

"You're quite correct, Mr. Director when you say that what you see out there represents stability," Enlls mused and sipped at his tea. A smile lifted a corner of his mouth as he scrutinized Kernami over the rim of his cup. "Despite your highly effective eloquence on the Assembly floor, sir, Pizgor cannot say that it isn't enjoying the same level of stability."

Kernami lowered his cup and looked at Enlls in astonishment. Could Enlls have penetrated his objective already?

"You cannot mean that."

“I do mean it. Consider. Is your populace oppressed? Is there warfare? Is there persecution or denial of personal liberty?”

“The political and economic cost—”

“Exactly, sir,” Enlls said quietly and thrust out his square jaw. “Only Pizgor’s political sovereignty is threatened—”

“Only? I suggest that much more than our sovereignty is threatened, Mr. Commissioner. The whole foundation underpinning the right of independent systems everywhere to exist is threatened. The tenets of the Serrll Constitution are now undermined by Sargon’s aggression!”

“Perhaps. How does that impact on the quality of life of your citizens?”

“Without freedom and the right to self-determination—”

“Hypothetically speaking only, would the Triumvirate disappear if Sargon or the Paleans absorbed Pizgor?”

Kernami’s internal struggle evident, his dark ebony eyes burned bright. “The threat to Serrll stability—”

“Is purely a political dimension.” Enlls smiled with grim satisfaction.

“*Purely* a political dimension? Hardly that. The trade network supporting the prosperity of all is attacked here.”

“Which is an economic threat only, is it not? The populace tends to rise up and swallow governments only when their basic material needs fail to be met. Consider Sargon. Despite their martial and authoritarian regime, their rule is generally a peaceful one. To ensure they remain in power, the ruling elite gives the people what they want. I would suggest, Mr. Director, by threatening your commerce the raiders are undermining only your economic policies, which I suggest is Pizgor’s principal concern,” Enlls said, forcing Kernami to acknowledge the blunt reality of his position.

Kernami pursed his lips in frustration, then smiled ruefully.

“You would know a lot about that, Mr. Commissioner. Economic warfare is Sofam’s principal weapon of choice.”

Enlls chuckled without taking offense and placed his cup down with a soft click. He would have been keenly disappointed if Kernami failed to recognize *all* aspects of Pizgor’s predicament.

“And we have achieved much with it. Not least securing the senior position in the Revisionist Party coalition and a government majority

on Captal. With the history lesson cleared up, let's move on. Despite what you profess to believe or say, Mr. Director, the Captal government views the level of raider activity on your commerce with gravity."

"You mean, the Paravan Trading Association does." Kernami did not want to annoy the commissioner unnecessarily, but he needed to be convinced.

"They may be only shipping and trading conglomerates, insurance underwriters and financiers," Enllss said casually, his eyes sparkling. "In your view, bottom crawling, scum-sucking profiteers. Not at all worthy to be associated in the same breath with lofty ideals such as political self-determination, or a lone cry for freedom about to be stifled by an insensitive empire, right? Before we all get swept away with patriotic fervor, it would be prudent to remember that those same scum also enables the Serrll to enjoy a remarkable period of stability you admire so much. I would therefore table my pretensions and cheap shots in the interest of achieving my objective. That's to facilitate Pizgor's traders to operate without hindrance or threat in the pursuit of *their* profitable interests. Does that sound about right?"

His cup poised before him, Kernami looked thoughtfully at Enllss. "While Sargon and the Paleans are set to annex us?"

"Please! That one made good copy for the late news, Mr. Director, but you cannot be so naive to think Sargon or the Paleans would do anything so foolish—"

"I don't know anything of the kind! Their raids—"

"Are crude instruments of persuasion, not an invasion force. Contrary to popular folklore, political objectives are *always* subservient to economic ones. You must know that, otherwise you would not be here pleading your cause."

Kernami nodded with a gleam of open admiration in his eyes. Enllss was wily and he should not seek to deceive him.

Sill watched the exchange, comfortable with Enllss dominating the dialogue. Although his operation, he didn't mind. On the Assembly floor, Enllss had been a skilled debater and a formidable opponent. Their clashes were classics of partisan ideologies, but Sill knew when he was outmatched. Enllss didn't hesitate to field a razor tongue as a foil to his keen intellect to totally destroy an opponent. Kernami might be

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good in his own environment, but he had never been tested in the crucible of the Assembly floor, as many a shattered career testified.

“Mr. Commissioner,” Kernami said, “although I agree with you in principle, Sargon’s tactics against us demonstrate that in our case, their objective is hardly an economic one.”

Enllss grinned, his smile now predatory. “That’s why they will fail. If they’d been prepared to simply attack you economically in any serious way, you would be part of a Sargon Prefecture even now.”

Kernami chuckled and nodded. He could work with these two.

“I apologize if I appeared to be provoking you. I needed to know if Captal is serious about helping us. Since we’re to talk about objectives, I may look it, but I am not *that* naive to believe Captal’s resolution to help us is prompted by a sudden gush of concern for Pizgor’s economic or political plight. I suspect you just happened to see both of these interests coincide with yours.”

Enllss smiled. “My dear, Mr. Director, please understand. Raider activity has a social impact and the government was compelled to act. You merely accelerated the process. Whereas what Sargon and the Pa-leans are doing is personal, revolving as it does around individual political power.”

“You’re right to remind me of the distinction. However, the results for Pizgor are equally unpleasant, regardless of the motivation. Since the political dimension of Pizgor’s plight has already been addressed, what’s Captal going to do about our economic one?”

Sill leaned forward. “Ach! That, sir, is what I want to talk to you about.”

About the author

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

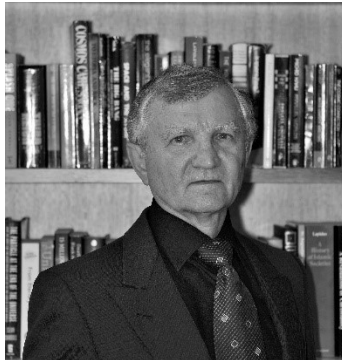
Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cellphone systems. He applied his IT discipline to create realistic storylines for his books. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends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

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Shadow Gods books by Stefan Vučak

In the Shadow of Death

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

Against the Gods of Shadow

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

A Whisper from Shadow

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

Shadow Masters

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

Immortal in Shadow

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

With Shadow and Thunder

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

Through the Valley of Shadow

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

Guardians of Shadow

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

Other books by Stefan Vučak

Cry of Eagles

2011 Reader's Favorite silver medal winner

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

All the Evils

2013 Eric Hoffer finalist

2013 Readers' Favorite silver medal winner

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

Towers of Darkness

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

Strike for Honor

2013 Readers' Favorite gold medal winner

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

Proportional Response

2015 Readers' Favorite finalist

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

Legitimate Power

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

Lifeliners

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