

Review

For a sci-fi fan like me, one who has read many sci-fi series, this book is probably the one that appealed to me most. Reading Vučak's sci-fi novel does take some effort, and it would probably be better if you read the previous books first. But don't let me put you off reading this. If anything, *Guardians of Shadow* is still more than capable to be read as a standalone.

Readers' Favorite

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Shadow Masters

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Guardians of Shadow

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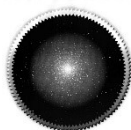
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GUARDIANS OF SHADOW

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.

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Dedication

To Chris ... choosing life's faces

Acknowledgments

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Cover art by Laura Shinn.

<http://laurashinn.yolasite.com>

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		

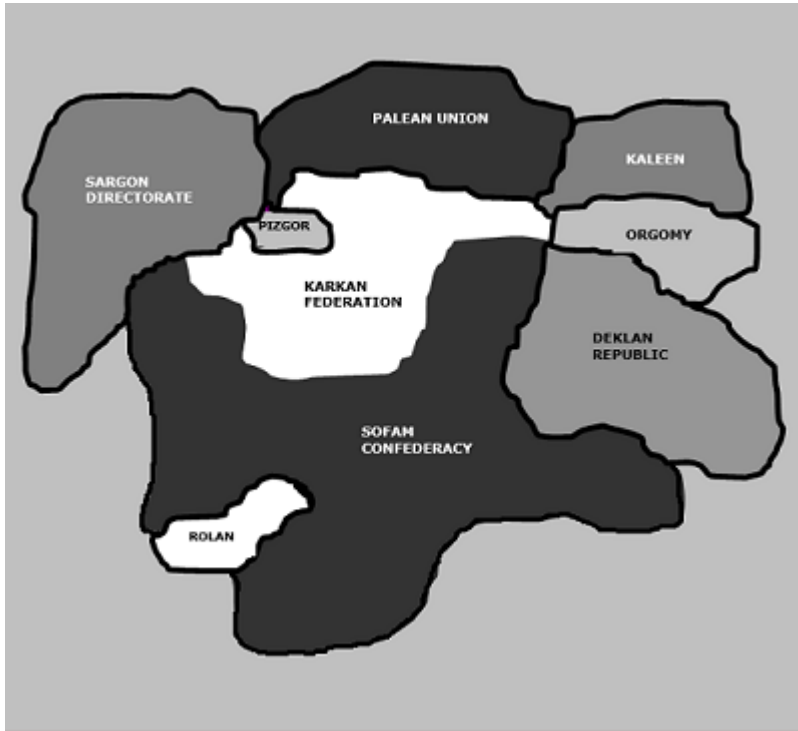
Principal political blocks:

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

Map of the Serrll Combine



Prologue

“Who are you?” Teena whispered, her face lost and tragic.

“I am the harbinger of eternity,” Terr said, but the god of Death in him provided the words.

He could see her bite her lip, trying hard to keep back the tears of doubt and indecision. Something tore inside him and he wanted to embrace her, say the healing words, but he stood rooted. They had reached a cusp, and this time, *she* needed to close the chasm that separated them.

“And can I love you, my lord of Death, as much as I love him?” she choked, her words a whisper, almost too low to hear, the pain in them poignant.

Unbidden, like invisible gossamer, the hand of Death settled about him and he stood in its shadow. The flicker of small lightnings in his hands did not writhe in anger. Blue softness enveloped him as he opened his arms to her and waited. She now saw the real him, Death manifest, and she had to accept him on those terms. Her steps were hesitant and she stopped short of the shimmering aura surrounding him.

Terr stood still, waiting for her to decide. She must want to cross the barrier that would otherwise always stand between them, but she must do it willingly. Then she was in his arms, her body hot to the touch, head on his chest.

“There has always been only me to love,” he murmured into her soft hair with relief as he closed his hands about her and held her tight. “Only me.”

As he stood there, time did not matter, the soft shipboard noises hardly audible. It was enough being one with her. He needed to tell her so many things, but the words could wait. She made her choice and he felt fulfilled. Wrapped in blue light, he cupped her small oval face between his hands. He leaned forward, brushed away a strand of hair from her forehead, and gently touched her full lips with his. After a moment, she let out a soft sigh and her arms circled his neck, pulling him down.

“I thought I’d lost you,” she moaned and her lips parted.

“I shall always be with you, my pet. For all time,” he said gruffly and brought his mouth hard against hers. Gods, how he cherished this woman!

She held him tight, trying to burrow into him as their tongues danced. They were one, body and soul, and he would never let her go. It would take time to fill whatever void still separated them, but neither were short of time. Besides, it was only a small void.

Cloaked in the shadow of Death, removed from a reality she did not fully understand, he feared his display of raw power when he destroyed the Celi-Kran ship may have driven her away. She saw him wield the lightnings before, but not like this, not with such devastating consequences. To an extent, he shared her shock because he had not thought it possible either. He never heard of a second-level Discipline adept capable of such a thing. To reach out with his hand and spear the Kran ship like an insignificant insect...

He would think about it later, wishing he could talk to Sidhara. His master would know what happened, how he managed something seemingly impossible, but the venerated Wanderer was hundreds of light-years away on Anar'on in another reality. A place Terr wouldn't mind being right now. He needed a moment of peace to pull it all together.

As he held her in his arms, enclosed in her faint citrus fragrance, his hand stroked her flowing black hair and he felt complete, his reservations banished. He should not have doubted her, doubted her love, but he guessed that living with someone able to summon a god could not have been easy for her. Sometimes the realization did not sit comfortably with him either, but she knew what he was. She had glimpsed something of what lurked within him when she stood before the silent, towering red cliffs of Athal Than, surrounded by Saffal's rippling sands, feeling the pull through him.

Fates brought him back to Anar'on, and his brother Dharaklin, whom he almost killed in blind revenger for taking Teena from him. Reconciled, Terr wanted to share with her something of its sweeping deserts and amber skies—and where the god of Death restored his sanity and gave him the power to walk in his shadow. Naturally curious, she wanted to see Athal Than. It meant oblivion for her to enter one of the gaping dark fissures that lead into the Keep of Death, but the pull could not be denied. When she started to walk toward the cliff, he

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barely reached her in time to hold her back, sharing her terror at what almost happened. In that fleeting moment of connection, she had glimpsed the naked face of his god, and it haunted her ever since.

The blue radiance around them slowly faded. Although visibly gone, power still surrounded him, but it now embraced Teena. Part of him, the god accepted his duality as she had accepted him.

He smiled into her large green eyes. "Come."

Her face clouded as she pulled away and her eyes turned dark. "Between you and your god, living with you is hard. I don't know if I can take it. Do you have any other surprises you'd care to tell me about?"

"I'll need to show you," he said and pulled her toward the Personal Transport alcove.

"Beast," she murmured tenderly and a dimpled smile wiped away the shadows from her face. "You're crude."

"Always, my pet."

As he stood in the alcove, his arm around her waist, he gazed through the transparent hull of the darkened Observation Deck. In a burst of white scintillation, *Tapal* left Devon 3-VL4's moon and the Kran cruiser lying shattered on its surface, and slipped into subspace, cleaving its way through thick strands of yellow and brown gravity waves induced by Devon's sun. It would take *Tapal* fourteen days to reach Tureen's Star on the edge of the Moanar Nebula more than two thousand lights away, bearing them toward an unknown destiny among alien worlds. From Line Tracking Station 3, with Teena and Dhar, they would be transported to Orieli space where his mission would begin, a mission to understand the vast interstellar union...and find out whether the Serrll can accept them as friends. That's the plan Anabb Karr, head of the Diplomatic Branch on Taltair outlined, but no one anticipated Terr would destroy the Celi-Kran invader before the mission even started. Now, he did not know whether he still had a mission. If he did, it might be executed under different parameters. After display of Terr's awesome power, the Orieli would understandably want to know all about Anar'on and its Wanderers, and the uneasy relationship they had with Captal, governing center of the Serrll Combine. If more Krans came, Captal would also be keen to know if Anar'on would help the Serrll Scout Fleet repel the invaders.

Nightwings, the shadow who walks at night...

A tall figure stood proud on the sharp crest of a sand dune, the brown cape of his surtaf stirred in a light wind, the red hood thrown back. Shielded by prominent eyebrows, the orange eyes, protected by transparent membranes, gazed steadily at a far horizon as it merged with an amber sky. Strands of thick tarad grass bowed before him. Looking at him, no one could mistake his mastery of everything he saw.

That's how Terr pictured Dharaklin, his Wanderer brother.

He would need to talk to Nightwings about what happened in *Tapal's* Primary Flight Control. There was no rush, and Dhar would understand his need to bridge the gulf with Teena first. After all, he and Dhar walked under the same shadow. Different certainly, and alien, they still shared each other's very essence. He still found it incredible how the fates brought them together.

Assigned as Envoy Rayon Tantour's military aide on Elexi in the Four Suns to investigate alleged slavery, Terr fell afoul of Kapel Pen, Controller of Elexi. She planned to cede the Four Suns to the Karkan Federation, which would have been a PR disaster for Captal. Pursued by rogue Scout Fleet M-3s all the way to Anar'on, Terr's survival blister crashed in the deep desert. After two days, the nomad Wanderers found him and nursed him back to life, but the desert trek left him without his memory, unable to talk. Dharaklin entered Terr's mind to pull him out of his madness and the two merged into a single personality, forever brothers.

The stars crawled in the black deeps, so far away and so indifferent.

"Quarters," Terr commanded.

A scimitar of cutting blackness, infinite and cold, swept through his body, accompanied by an instant of unbearable pressure. He had a moment of irrational panic as he crossed the interdimensional threshold, but his senses settled when he found himself in another alcove, now deep within the ship. He waited for the transceiver's aftereffect tingle to subside and glanced at Teena. Her hand in his, they quickly walked through the brightly lit lounge of their quarters toward the bedroom, both felt the urgency to be close, share and renew, and perhaps even forget a little.

After a frenzied moment of passion and release, they lay on the bed entwined. The thick carpet glowed faintly green, enough to keep the darker shadows at bay. His left arm wrapped around her, Terr slowly

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stroked Teena's smooth side, her head resting on his chest. Everything was all right now and he finally had peace. She finally accepted him and his duality. Accepted or given in to the struggle, it did not matter. They were one; nothing else mattered.

She shifted and looked at him, eyes searching in the semi-darkness. "I love you desperately, but you don't make it easy sometimes," she whispered and her head sank into the crook of his arm. Her fingernails slid playfully across his chest and left trails of exquisite fire.

He kissed the top of her head and stroked her silky back, marveling at the softness of her skin. "I wield death in my hand, my pet. It is a destroyer and demands sacrifice. That's all there is to it."

"Between you and your god, you two make a pretty powerful combination. No wonder you frightened everybody, including me. I still get the shivers when I think about it."

"I don't know what happened," he said slowly, amazed at the vivid memory still crowding him as though he were standing there, hands raised, the lightnings crackling between them. "When the Kran ship fired at the M-4, knowing it posed no threat and unable to offer resistance, I simply reacted. It did not have to destroy the M-4, but the *Daktar's* central nexus did it anyway. Whatever logic guided the thing did not operate along any line I understood. It was wanton destruction and I needed to remove the blight from my sight."

Pursued by *Tapal*, the Kran cruiser came to Devon 3-VL4 to affect repairs. How it managed to evade the Orieli LTN stations was something Orieli Space Command and the Serrll were even now looking into. Ordered by CAPFLTCOM, Captal Fleet Command, not to interfere since *Tapal* had crossed into Serrll space, Karhide Arlon Dee waited for Scout Fleet forces to arrive and neutralize the Kran ship before it could lift. Instead of an M-6, a single M-4 confronted the *Daktar*.

Her fingers marched playfully across his chest. "When you loosed that bolt of light...I didn't know who you were or what you were. You simply reached out and the Kran ship died," she whispered in awe. "The bolt went right through *Tapal* without harming it. I feared you then."

"And now?"

"I was shocked and surprised, but I'm over it now, I think." She snuggled against him, her arm thrown across him. "You need to give me time, but I kind of like having a god at my bidding. It could come

in handy.”

“If only I were a god.”

“Close enough,” she murmured happily. “What will happen now? Karhide Dee will report the incident to his superiors. It could mean the end of our mission.”

He allowed the silence to cradle them for a while.

“This was bound to happen sooner or later, perhaps not in such dramatic fashion,” Terr conceded, not sure whether to reveal Zor-Ell’s secret how the Orieli conducted alien contacts by superimposing an Observer’s personality onto a native. In the end, he decided it was not his to divulge. The Orieli Observers, open and clandestine, would find out soon enough about Anar’on and the Wanderers. Their reaction would shape Serrll and Orieli relations for centuries to come. “Perhaps it’s better this happened now. More Kran ships will come and we must face them together.”

“And can we face them?”

“I don’t know, my pet, but we’ll have to.”

“If the Krans do come, will Anar’on stand with us?”

Terr sighed. “I don’t know that either. With all the power maneuvering between the Revisionists and the Servatory Party, Captal hasn’t given Anar’on much reason to get involved. It’s all speculation anyway, and the Krans might never come.”

“But you don’t think so.”

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “I don’t want to talk about the Krans or the Wanderers now. I want to talk about us.”

Terr took on his aspect and blue light flooded the bedroom as he gathered her in his arms. She squealed as his mouth sought hers, small fists beating against his chest.

Chapter One

“Come in, Alkarh,” Enlls-rr said cordially and waited for his important visitor to walk through, pleased to see him again. He glanced at Landa, his confidential assistant, and she nodded. There would be no interruptions.

His bearing determined, Zor-Ell strode purposefully into the spacious office and glanced at the Wall communications station opposite the wide executive desk as it pooled through shifting, merging colors. Enlls caught him at it and grinned as he sat down. Bright sunshine streamed through the window screens behind him. Overhead, layers of crisscrossing lines of traffic made checkered patterns in a clear sky.

“My mind bender tells me it’s therapeutic,” he said. “I don’t know. Maybe it is, although I don’t have much time to appreciate its therapeutic qualities. Make yourself comfortable.” As the Zaronian lowered himself into the formchair, Enlls smiled broadly. “I must congratulate you on your promotion.”

The last time they spoke, Zor-Ell commanded all Line Tracking Net stations. With LTN-12, the last link in the chain of stations completed and fully operational on Earth’s Moon, additional resource commitments by the Orieli meant greater responsibility. Who better to fulfill that role than the person who made first contact with the Serrll, now five years ago. Where had all those years gone? From what Enlls heard, other survey ships had encountered intelligent life, but none came across an interstellar block such as the Serrll Combine. Zor-Ell also had an unusual personal interest in the Serrll—Earth, anyway, if he believed Terr’s yarn about Orieli Observers.

During an informal gathering on the eve of Zor-Ell’s departure after he explained to the General Assembly the existence of the Celi-Kran and their mindless war against all organic intelligence—it hardly seemed real it was only a week ago—mixing it with a small group of Executive Directors and several lesser lights, the alien told Enlls blatantly that within three years the Serrll would be actively repelling a Kran invasion

or they'd be overrun. Having just sipped a fragrant white wine, the declaration left Enllss spluttering, fighting for control. Ultimately tactful, Zor-Ell ignored his moment of discomfort, but the comment he made was not at all comfortable, and set off a chain of thoughtful speculation within the Security Council, and the Bureau of Defense in particular.

Enllss took solace that it wasn't his problem, not directly at least. As commissioner for the Bureau of Colonial and Protectorate Affairs, he had to be aware of all Executive Council policies even if he did not necessarily need to act on them. Responsible for forty outposts and thirty-four protectorates, he had to fight for his share of funding and resources, navigating through layers of obfuscating bureaucracy and political vested interests. It paid to be well informed, and his contacts in the Bureau of Cultural Affairs made sure of it. Information gathering was not done only through formal channels, and accurate information was lifeblood in his job.

At least Serrll's contact with the Orieli went smoothly, even if no one else would say it, and he had his army of detractors. Exchange of cultural missions arranged, and two Orieli investigation teams now safely quartered, ready to do whatever it is they did. He refrained from asking about their Observers, afraid he might be told. Outrageous as Terr's idea was, it did make a screwy kind of sense. No matter how good, Orieli's two four-man teams could not hope to cover the Serrll in any depth within the two-month timeframe they requested, regardless how sophisticated their data collection techniques. Still, planting hidden observers able to move freely among the population as Terr suggested, took some swallowing. For his peace of mind, Enllss did not want to think too much about how they might go about doing it, and refrained from discussing it with his boss. Illeran had enough on his mind setting policy. There was no need to bother him with detail, which rightly fell within Enllss' sphere of responsibility. The man kept busy marshaling Karkan resources for the general elections in two years' time. A Karkan and a senior Servatory Party wheel, Illeran was a nominal political enemy. Although a good system, power sharing got a bit complicated sometimes.

"Thank you, Da Commissioner, although I occasionally think it is punishment for past sins."

Enllss laughed. "I sympathize, but you'll get used to the mantle of

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power, and you carry it well.”

Zor-Ell’s mouth twitched. “It does give me a degree of freedom to act, with correspondingly higher penalties should I stumble.”

“By damn! You’re right there. Authority can be a dubious honor.”

Zor-Ell crossed his legs. “I miss having my own ship, though. Deskbound these days is living in uncharted territory.”

Just short of average height, he seemed to dominate all the space around them, and his brown eyes shone with intelligence. His skin had a beautiful shade of blue-green, growing black around the eyes and powerful mouth, face covered by short black hair. On the left side of his chest, he wore a small gold-bordered Cluster-and-Circle emblem, a densely packed conglomeration of yellow stars representing the Orieli globular cluster. At fifty-one, he was young for his rank, given a life expectancy of one hundred and sixty. Past sins? Enllss did not think so.

Relaxed, legs stretched, he appreciated sharing confidences with the alien, and an opportunity to glimpse a depth of cultural richness he represented.

“The stars were never a magnet for me, but talking to my nephew Terr, I can understand what draws him out there. My brother also lusted after the stars and I guess he passed it to his son.”

“Terr...a unique individual, Da. In a most unusual way.”

“His aspect? Remarkable indeed, and I hope I’m never on the receiving end of his displeasure.”

“A Discipline adept, and apparently the only non-Wanderer.”

“A mission gone wrong. I’ll tell it to you some time.”

Zor-Ell nodded. “I’d like that.”

“Do you have any family, Alkarh?”

“A brother. He is also a politician, member of the Klanina Caucus on Zaron. Both my parents are still alive and I visit when time permits.”

“I know what you mean. Our jobs own us.”

“I also have a younger sister. She recently obtained command of a sweeper, a general purpose support ship.”

Enllss chuckled. “Funny you should say that. We call our M-3s the same thing, and for a similar reason.”

“Talking of jobs, I appreciate how seamlessly you integrated our investigators.”

“It’s not like you didn’t give us any warning. I trust they’re satisfied

with the arrangements?”

“More than satisfied, thank you. Your willingness to give us restricted access to your library networks will greatly assist our investigation of the Serrll Combine.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Our personnel are ready to board your ship as soon as you clear them.”

“I understand the embarkation is already happening, Da Commissioner.”

“I wouldn’t mind going with them,” Enllss murmured, also chained to his desk. As an administrator, he had a keen desire to understand how the Orieli ran things, and perhaps pick up ideas to help the Serrll. Well, that’s what Serrll’s exchange teams sent into Orieli space would hopefully find out.

No longer a ship commander, Zor-Ell now focused his attention on broader aspects of Orieli’s presence on this side of the Moanar Nebula, and the Serrll in particular. However, his pointed reminder that building the LTN stations was not done to benefit the Serrll, but to extend a security buffer for the Orieli, had not gone unnoticed by the Executive Council. True or not, the Orieli did not have to build LTN-12 on Earth’s Moon to achieve their strategic objective. As a tactical barrier, the chain of stations was effectively complete at LTN-10 without having to enter Serrll space.

Although reluctant to admit it, Enllss acknowledged that Terr could be right. The boy was smart and thought things through. The Orieli had found something fascinating on Earth and were prepared to sit on the Moon scratching the itch, even if it meant imposing themselves on a protectorate, which no one in the Executive liked much, including Enllss, but were forced to swallow their indignation. There were overriding strategic considerations to consider with their Orieli friends. Revealing to Earth existence of a Serrll base on the Moon, and now an Orieli one, stirred too many uncomfortable memories within the General Assembly; memories of genetic engineering done thousands of years ago, a past everyone preferred to forget. When keeping old skeletons, they sometimes rattled when exposed to a breeze.

“When are you departing?”

“Within a few hours. Commissioner Katan from the Bureau of Defense requested to see me and I wanted to make a courtesy call on you,

otherwise I'd be on my way to LTN-5 now.”

“Where the Kran cruiser emerged,” Enllss mused, the incident that started all the recent troubles.

“We're still looking into sensor logs to understand how the thing managed to slip past the first four stations. It shouldn't have been possible.” Zor-Ell paused and stared at Enllss. “About Devon 3-VL4—”

Enllss raised his hand. “Arlon Dee made the correct decision to engage the Kran ship after it destroyed our M-4, and the Executive Council shall state so to Orieli Space Command. As for violating our territorial integrity when he entered Palean space in pursuit of the Kran ship, you need not harbor any concerns. If anyone needs castigating, it's our Scout Fleet for not able to contain the threat. Karhide Dee's action prevented what might have been an appalling loss of life and destruction of infrastructure in nearby systems had the Kran ship gotten away.”

“But Arlon Dee didn't destroy it, Da.”

“No, he didn't, but you need not be concerned about any diplomatic fallout.”

“Master Scout Terrllss-rr...I understand he is Head of Mission of one of your cultural exchange teams.”

“Do you intend to revoke his accreditation?”

“No, but you can appreciate why we might be somewhat reluctant allowing him and his brother Dharaklin entry into our space. With their apparent power...”

Enllss smiled. “The young scamp doesn't do things by half, does he?”

“However unconventional his means, he did neutralize the Kran cruiser and removed a serious threat to worlds near Devon 3-VL4.”

“I'll say it was unconventional, and perhaps rash.”

“Terr could not know that Arlon Dee was capable of dealing with the situation.”

“And was he?”

“Definitely.”

“You seem to be defending my nephew.”

“He revealed a new force we'll have to consider carefully. These Wanderers, we will want to know all about them.”

Enllss noted the subtle change in Zor-Ell's tone. He was not making

a request, but a demand. Under the circumstances, not an unreasonable one. In any future confrontation with the Krans, the Serrll would need Orieli support badly. It was always prudent being polite to someone giving a helping hand, even if it stuck in the craw, and it certainly stuck with some Executive Council Directors, uncomfortable with the notion the Serrll Combine could not manage its own security. Facing a probable Kran incursion at some point, the Serrll should be glad to have someone like the Orieli for a friend, if they were genuine friends, yet to be determined.

“All pertinent data will be made available to your investigators, Alkarh,” Enllss told him formally.

“Inhabitants of an entire world able to link with what they claim are gods,” Zor-Ell mused and shook his head. “Tell me, Commissioner, what is Captal’s relationship with Anar’on and the Kaleen group?”

“You mean, should the Krans invade, will the Wanderers help us?”

“We’ve been engaged with the Krans for five years now. So far we managed to contain them, but the situation is fluid and we still know very little about them.”

“With their Discipline adepts, Anar’on will undoubtedly protect themselves, but I cannot say if they will commit to protect the rest of the Serrll. That’s something I’d like to know myself. We’re discussing it at the diplomatic level with Anar’on. Should the Wanderers ever decide to march on Serrll worlds, we would not be able to stop them. Let me say that Captal treads carefully when dealing with them.”

“The vagaries of politics, Da. No one can tell when past transgressions will catch up with us.”

“If they choose not to support us, we’d only be getting what we deserve,” Enllss said dryly and Zor-Ell grinned.

“The Kran ship on Devon’s moon, study it, but take care. You’ll be dealing with very advanced nanolite constructs, nanobods as you call them. The ship’s central nexus core may be dead, but not necessarily all its systems or mobile units, although Arlon Dee has not detected any residual energy signatures.”

“Our investigators on site haven’t either, but your warning is noted.”

From what Katan told Enllss without bothering to hide his excitement, the Bureau of Technology and Development were salivating with

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eagerness to pick over the Kran ship, although it would probably take years before any alien technology might be applied within the Serrll.

Zor-Ell rose. “Thank you for seeing me, Da Commissioner, and please feel free to contact me at any time.”

Enllss stood. “I should be thanking you, Alkarh. Have a safe return home.”

He escorted his visitor out and returned to his office. With a heavy sigh, he walked to the floor-to-ceiling window screen and gazed at Celean Park below. Taking advantage of a bright, sunny spring day, the citizenry were out in force, looking like insects from this high up. He would not mind stretching his legs either, but his position forbade any such indulgence. Although superbly appointed, including surround holoviews, using the in-house gym just wasn’t the same. He wielded enormous power and capacity to influence the course of worlds, but he could not go out for a simple walk. What use power if it limited his freedom?

A somewhat rhetorical question, one he’d answered a long time ago. He was a driven man who liked power and what it could do. He had the temperament for it, someone told him, but could not remember who. Not only temperament, but also judgment to apply it properly without having it overwhelm him. Many newcomers to Captal fell by the wayside when they failed to cope with that duality. The General Assembly was not a place for budding megalomaniacs, although a few did try sneaking in from time to time, like Ed-Kani Takao, Executive Director for the Bureau of Economic Affairs, senior Sargon member in the General Assembly, and the Alikan Union Party’s Provisional Committee powerbroker—a general pain in the butt.

Enllss would not be sorry to see the last of this particular political opponent. He could picture him right now: standing rigid, completely hairless, his bony face etched with deep character lines, icy blue-white eyes devoid of light, the man was someone to be reckoned with. His vision of how the Serrll should be run differed radically, but in his own way, Ed-Kani lived by a code and with honor, and could rise above parochial interests when required. Honorable or not, it didn’t make him a likeable character.

Enllss looked down at the city. There were no regrets. He had worked hard to reach his position, and he meant to keep it. In two years,

when the general electoral session swept away old enemies, bringing in new ones, of course, he would be an Executive Director and at the absolute pinnacle of Captal power, with awesome authority and crushing responsibility. He wielded both to a large degree already, and felt comfortable with the prospect of stepping up a notch. He was not a manager, but a policymaker, a crucial difference.

As he thought of his visitor, Enllss chewed his lip. Zor-Ell was right, past sins do eventually return to demand an accounting. Did they now return in the shape of Kran invaders? If so, they were not Serrll sins. If anyone was responsible for the current mess facing everybody, the blame lay with the Orieli. Their survey ships stumbled on the Krans and the mindless things were now on a rampage. In reality, no one was responsible.

Contemplating a possible Sargon/Palean merger—another potential nightmare for the entire Serrll—containing raiders preying on merchant shipping, maneuvering to secure Anar'on's Unified Independent Front support, he did not need the Krans souring his day. He was being unreasonable and knew it. Blaming the Orieli for dragging the Serrll into a possible interstellar war wasn't their fault. Unpleasant things sometimes simply happened when exploring, but it did not stop Sargon from exploiting the development. No one could have foreseen Orieli survey ships bringing the Krans from wherever they came from. Politics...he'd often wondered whether it was all worth it.

The comms alert beeped and he touched a glowing pad on the inlaid console in his desk, diverting him from descending into morbidity, never a comfortable environment.

“What is it, Landa?”

“Executive Director Illeran is calling, sir.”

“Very well,” he said impatiently and tapped another pad, not in the mood to discuss political entanglements, but enjoying his work was not part of the job description. He won't be sorry to see the last of Illeran either, come the next elections. Two more years...

He sat down and waited for the Wall to clear. Illeran looked up from his desk and sat back.

“I hope I'm not interrupting.” Hiss.

“Would that worry you?” Enllss demanded amiably and Illeran chuckled. Beneath the façade of political infighting, they were really

good friends. Although the Karkans would love to topple Sofam's hold on the government's policy apparatus, and they worked hard at it, they did not seek to do it by creating social discord, unlike their mutual Sargon headache, Ed-Kani Takao.

"Not particularly."

Broad pale green scales covered his wide, slightly flattened head, glinting faintly under bright ceiling light. Beneath a thin ridge of darker scales, fishy black eyes stared from horizontal slits. A sharp pointed tongue flickered between thin, dark lips. Around him, lush greenery and potted plants decorated the humid room, reflecting the tropical nature of his native Karkan. Enllss could see a large fish tank flush against one wall. In the gloomy interior, shadowy shapes glided with myopic eyes.

"Your alien visitor gone?" Illeran asked and tilted his long delicate neck.

"And curious about what happened at Devon and what position Anar'on will take," Enllss told his boss.

"I'm not surprised. We're still to hear from Prime Director Marra-kan."

"The Devon incident has given him a lot to consider."

"And everybody else. The thought that we might need Anar'on to protect us is galling. Anyway, I didn't call to talk about Anar'on, fascinating as the Wanderers are. Ed-Kani saw me a little while ago, as did that Palean slime worm, Ti Inai. Both expressed outrage at how our mighty Scout Fleet were left wanting and we needed to depend on the Orieli to defend us in a grave crisis."

"Grave crisis? It was one ship!"

"Not my words, Enllss. Still, they do have a point of sorts. Katan at Defense has some awkward explaining to do why Devon wasn't properly supported."

"By damn! It's an ecoforming world, not a military base."

"Agreed, but that M-6 wasn't around when we needed it. The Scout Fleet took too long to respond."

"If Ed-Kani has a problem with our defense posture, he should be beating up on those comfortable Prima Scout chair warmers at COMPALOPS, not us. They're the ones who let everybody down. Why are you involved?"

“Because Devon is an ecoforming world, which makes it my business...and yours.”

“Look, Illeran. The Devon thing has given the Alikan Union Party Provisional Committee some temporary oxygen to trumpet the merger, but they’re a long way from achieving it. Coercion of independent systems to secede into their camp isn’t played anymore. Not openly anyway.”

“It’s making the Palean Congress nervous. It made Tao Karam’s faction nervous, perhaps enough to start thinking that a Sargon/Palean merger might not be such a bad thing after all. Especially if more Kran ships show up and the Fleet is polishing its hulls instead of using them properly. It’s a ridiculous proposition, I know, but we’re talking about public perception, not reality. If you don’t count the loss of billions of credits when Devon’s ground stations got shredded by those Kran things, and you’ll be hearing from BueAdmin about that, it highlighted the vulnerability of every protectorate and outpost in Palean space.”

“Including Deklan, Kaleen and Orgomy space. You don’t need to tell me, but the Palean Union won’t be paying to clean up the mess on Devon.”

“You’re missing the point. Instead of landing at an ecoforming world, the Krans could easily have hit an inhabited system. Everybody was lucky this time. What about the next time? The Paleans are pitching the emotional angle. It doesn’t have to sound reasonable for people to start worrying.”

“I am aware of all that, Illeran, and I didn’t miss the point. What did Katan say?” Enlls knew Katan, of course. Rather young for a commissioner and running an important bureau such as Defense, but the Kar-kan worm handled the job well enough.

“The M-6 is on location now, which is really terrific since the Kran cruiser is destroyed and the Orieli ship is gone. Not a good PR image, and Ed-Kani made sure everybody knows it.” The tongue flickered again.

“What does he want? Place M-6s along our entire frontier? He might be able to stir some public sentiment with such a stunt, hoping it’ll score points for the Sargon/Palean merger, but when things calm down, people will see through his rhetoric.”

“That’s been the pattern so far, but things may not settle down.”

Guardians of Shadow

Enllss shrugged. “Nothing we can do about it. Besides, even if we wanted to, we don’t have that many M-6s to deploy.”

“We may need to commission some of our mothballed hulls.”

“That’s Katan’s problem. Talking of our Sargon colleague, I saw him the other day with a brand new hand.”

Always impatient, Ed-Kani sought to intervene directly after failing to woo Pizgor’s three systems and two outposts into the Sargon/Palean camp, giving the Alikan Union Party the required number of General Assembly representatives to claim one additional Executive Council seat and threaten Sofam’s control of the government. When Marrakan, Controller of Anar’on and Prime Director of the Kaleen group of stars, learned of the plot to assassinate Kernami Asai Tainam, Pizgor’s Prime Director, he attempted to persuade Ed-Kani to desist. It required a small demonstration, resulting with Ed-Kani possessing a stone hand. How the Wanderer could reach from Anar’on to Capital astounded Enllss, but it achieved the desired effect. With modern genotherapy, Ed-Kani had his hand regenerated, but every time he looked at it must have brought less than pleasant memories.

It could not have happened to a nicer guy, Enllss thought comfortably.

Illeran snorted. “Marrakan stopped short. Everyone would have heaved a huge sigh of relief had Ed-Kani joined his ancestors as a block of stone.”

“For sure, but you’re overreacting,” Enllss told him bluntly. “Over the last two years the Provisional Committee hasn’t stirred. The merger is a background annoyance fueled by diehards like Ed-Kani and Ti Inai.”

“And you refuse to see the threat,” Illeran snapped. “As a prospective Executive Director, you need to focus on the strategic, a point I made before. Ed-Kani is a tormented man. He has two years within which to leave a lasting legacy as someone who changed the course of Serrll history. Things may be quiet today, but that’s only because we’re in the storm’s eye, not that the storm has passed. He’s not someone who’ll give up. I’m surprised at your casual attitude, Enllss.”

He shrugged off the criticism, figuring that Ed-Kani Takao was not the only tormented man. Also in his last ten-year term, after almost

thirty years of unbroken service in Captal, Illeran would return to Karkan a respected maluran, but one haunted by unfulfilled dreams. As the senior Servatory Party coalition partner, the Karkan Federation constantly fished for gambits to unseat Sofam's hold on the Executive Council. They faced serious impediments, which Illeran spent a lifetime trying to overcome. He too wanted to see Karkan rule the Serrll Combine rather than an Alikan Union, but it wouldn't happen in his lifetime. Enllss almost pitied him.

"Come on, Illeran. You're cutting it a bit deep, aren't you? I'm aware as you are how a Kran incursion could fuel Ed-Kani's ambitions, and what it could mean for Tao Karam's wavering supporters. I wasn't grown in a jar. Should his faction lose control of the Palean Congress, Ti Inai's faction would move in and the merger might assume a different and more aggressive complexion. But we're mitigating the threat, or Sill-Anais is, which is saying the same thing. If those Kran things decide to strike, we have public information conditioning programs in place to neutralize whatever Sargon or the Paleans might come up with. We're prepared for what we know. By definition, the unknown is a surprise."

"That's what's worrying me, you Sofam heathen," Illeran murmured, his tongue flickering.

"You're twitchy over nothing. If another Kran attack does come, it's likely to be Kaleen and Orgomy, not the Paleans."

"A supposition only!"

"They're much closer to Kran space. I've asked Katan to provide additional Fleet coverage along the borders of both."

"You talked to him without clearing with me first?"

Enllss straightened his shoulders. "Look, I did my job. If you're worried about the Krans, talk to Director Bakral. He runs the Security Council. If you want to know what Ed-Kani and the Provisional Committee are doing, talk to Ed-Kani Takao. Sargon is your coalition partner, not ours."

"No need to be testy, Enllss. You used your initiative and it's something I'd have approved anyway, but you don't go out of your way to make life easy for me. I'd like nothing better than to slit your political throat, and maybe my successor will do it. One day we hope to see the Sofam Confederacy humbled, and the Karkan Federation will rule, but not at the expense of destroying Serrll's social fabric, which is what the

Alikan Union Party would do if Sargon and the Paleans unite.”

Enllss could not help smiling at the thought of poking some fun at his friend, although a political opponent. “Tell me. Hypothetically speaking, of course. If those two merge, would the Karkan Federation join with us to marginalize them? That is if you value Serrll stability as much as you say.”

Illeran grinned and shook a finger at him. “That’s treasonous talk and you know it. Even if such a blasphemous idea did enter my mind, it’s not something I could commit the Karkan Federation to doing, and you’re being obtuse as usual.”

“I’m being realistic, that’s all. Nobody wants the merger, even if one would give you partnership in government.”

“The Karkan Federation is already in government,” Illeran hissed, cut the connection and the Wall resumed its color pooling.

But not its most important policy-making machinery, my friend, Enllss mused.

Essentially, Illeran was correct when he said the Karkans were in government. Executive directors were posted according to the number of seats each interstellar block held as a percentage of total Serrll voting systems. Power sharing avoided many political complications, and defused possible unrest by blocks who might regard themselves disenfranchised. It wasn’t an ideal system, but it worked well enough and everyone was represented. However, the arrangement did sometimes produce odd relationships, like the one Enllss enjoyed with Illeran, a senior Servatory Party member.

Still, the Karkans and Sofam in coalition? Entertaining as the idea was, he really did not want to test it. Nevertheless, it was a titillating thought, worthy of canvassing at cocktail gatherings. Who knows, Ed-Kani might get to hear an outrageous rumor and start wondering about the solidity of his support. Having Ed-Kani walk around with a concerned frown on his sour face was always a good thing. A doubt cast is like a pebble thrown into a still pond. There is no telling what the ripples would disturb, or uncover.

Would the Karkans really side with Sofam if they were forced to choose between stability or upheaval? Given the stakes everyone was playing for, it might be worthwhile to find out. Enllss needed a serious strategy chat with his First Assistant. He leaned across the desk and

tapped the comms pad.

“Landa, get Tariq to see me.”

As a commissioner, looking after Sofam’s interests was not always a matter of worrying about protectorates and ecoforming projects.

* * *

Renlow sat in the contoured couch, hands clasped behind her head, and allowed her gaze to drift across the towering expanse of the nebula. Lit from within by furiously burning young stars, columns of brown and orange gas loomed above a darker sullen mass of green. Alien stars glowed against the black deeps, indifferent to the architectural majesty the Karina shaped. Perhaps the only majesty came from her own mind, she decided ruefully. Introspection was not something a hard-bitten commander should indulge in, but it did make for a diverting moment. Besides, it was a pretty vista, deadly but pretty.

Instead of wasting time gawking, she should be studying anomalous tracks that appeared four days ago, identified by the Burlig scanners sown along the nebula’s edge in LTN-2’s forward area. Cent Comp’s analysis proved inconclusive, but she could not shake off the feeling the Krans were testing the limits of her defenses, although why launch a strike now puzzled her. After five years trying to penetrate the Line Tracking Net, they had to know the station defenses were impervious. Pattern analysis of their forays to date suggested their heart wasn’t really in it, which was inexplicable. Accepting the futility of attempting to understand what drove the machine intelligences—more capable brains were working that problem—she indulged herself by studying the nebula. Not professional behavior at all. Still, she needed something to divert her mind from duty.

Without warning the image jerked and she looked at three bright blue pulsing dots moving swiftly toward her station a bare half a light off. Beside each dot, a small window displayed available information on distance, timings and speed, but she did not need to see the data to know what those dots were. The infernal objects probably made a blind portal jump to appear so suddenly. Otherwise, LTN-1 would have picked them up if the Kran ships tried sneaking through the nebula, a

costly option they discovered before. Jumping blind was risky, but tactically very sound, especially if the intention was to arrive unannounced and in force. An operational departure from their normal behavior, it caught her attention. Far on her right, two orange dots representing Orieli pickets were already shifting course to intercept. She nodded with approval.

However unusual the arrival, in one respect the Krans were operating predictably. The three ships were bunched close for mutual support, giving them the ability to tandem their fire control, something the Serrll seem to use extensively. By channeling each ship's projector emission into a single collimated beam, the combined power was devastating, which the Orieli found out the hard way. Reaction, counter-reaction, counter-counter-reaction...

"Opturkarh Renlow?" Cent Comp's firm masculine voice prompted diffidently through the VI coupling.

She sat up, washing her mind of distracting Karina images, focusing on the approaching threats. At the rate of closure, she had almost seven minutes to get ready before things started getting intense.

"I see them," she responded instantly. "Execute condition three and inform MC that I'm on my way up."

"Acknowledged."

She took in the immediate tactical profile, confident that *Trailer* and *Marin* were more than capable taking care of three Kran *Daktar*-class cruisers. Tandem fire control worked fine in a sustained bombardment scenario, but not so good against fast maneuvering targets. Moreover, tandem fire forced the triad to maintain formation, not a good thing in a rapidly evolving environment where individual maneuvering might be required. From the Kran attack profile, she was confident in the station's ability to defend itself. Nevertheless, a twinge of uncertainty lurked in the background of her mind. It wasn't exactly fear, more like puzzlement, she told herself, forcing her stomach to relax. The Krans were not ordinary aliens, and she needed to be ready for the unexpected, which of course, was a contradiction.

As Renlow watched the projected tracks, she realized the Kran vessels would approach uncomfortably close to LTN-2 before her pickets could engage. It would be up to the scanner array to eliminate the threats before the Krans could come within an effective firing envelope

of her station.

She stared at the crawling dots and bit her lower lip. Something wasn't right here. If the Krans were serious about neutralizing her station, they must know that sending three ships, although powerful units, would not be up to the job. With their interceptor nets fully modulated, the Orieli warships were effectively immune from detection and able to close with lethal effectiveness, largely negating any tandem response. The Krans found that out to their cost in previous probing incursions, and they never repeated a mistake. There must be more of them lurking somewhere.

Draw away her forward pickets and attack from an exposed quarter? With the vast expanse of the Karina on her port flank and the deep emptiness everywhere else, she could not see where another threat could emerge. If this was an attack in depth, the Krans should have thrown in more triads to saturate her defenses; an ineffective tactic with the scanner grid array providing a screen one billion ampirs deep around the system's primary.

It was not like the Krans to throw away ships in a futile gesture. Watching the blue dots drawing closer, the bright red line of their projected trajectory taking them toward KSN-013D, a ringed blue-green gas giant one point-three billion ampirs from the primary, she felt uneasy. It didn't make sense going there. How could the Krans threaten LTN-2 with such a maneuver? It worried her. She could not do anything except wait for the tactical situation to develop—and be prepared.

“Operational caution,” the computer announced. “LTN-3 advises they are under attack by two Celi-Kran *Daktar*-class cruisers and two *Sandar*-class battlecruisers.”

Renlow frowned. There it was again. The Krans could not possibly hope to disable LTN-3 and its transport portal with such a small strike package. By wiping out the portal with Perilia, the link to Orieli space on the other side of the Karina Shield Nebula would be severed, disrupting a strategically critical logistical gateway and communications relay. The Krans recognized the portal's importance and mounted attacks before, using different tactical scenarios, none of which worked. A variation on the same theme? What they were doing simply did not make any tactical sense.

Small force or not, with her pickets engaged, she could not support

LTN-3 even if there was time to do so. Likewise, they could not help her for the same reason; they were simply too far away from each other in distance and time. Clearly, the Kran ships had made another blind portal jump to avoid detection. A disturbing tactic for PERCOM to ponder, but she had enough on her hands without worrying about grand strategy.

It looked like the Kran foray was an attack in depth after all, but what *kind* of attack?

“Anything from LTN-1?”

“Negative.”

As the first link in a chain of security outposts, the station was heavily armed and defended by three battlecruisers. Why didn't the Krans choose to take it out? If their intention was to neutralize the transport portal, why go after LTN-2? She could not comprehend their thinking, which also concerned her, but she'd been concerned ever since getting command of LTN-2, a fast track to her own cruiser, something she'd yearned for ever since deciding to join the Orieli Space Arm. Put on the prospective commanding officer list was an honor in itself and a sign of Orieli Space Command's approval of her abilities and potential. So far, she had not done anything to disappoint that trust.

“Detach VI coupling.”

She issued a mental order and blinked hard as the link with the computer severed and reality crashed into her senses, revealing the lounge around her. She could manage the current situation from her couch without having to be physically in Mission Control, but as the station commander, her presence was mandatory. Cent Comp ran everything and would execute any engagement, but under her direction. In theory, there was no need to man any of the LTN stations, the computers well able to look after them in any scenario, but OSCOM had not become that sterile yet. Besides, scientific research programs helped keep everybody motivated. She straightened her dark indigo one-piece tunic and hurried toward the PT alcove. Turning, she clasped her hands behind her, projecting a recruiter's image of a competent officer, which amused her intensely.

“MC.”

The aftereffect tingle faded and she swept her eyes around the spacious control room. The concave ceiling glowed dull red, reflecting the

increased readiness of the station. She faced three full-dimensional interactive holoview displays projected above a curved console covered with flickering touch-sensitive color pads—backups should the virtual interface coupling and voice command links fail. In front of each four-kanampir-wide display was seated a watchstander in a broad reclining couch, monitoring his area of responsibility, ready to act as ordered. Set farther behind them were two command stations.

Taroptur Ghere turned his head and nodded as she took the right seat. Another competent officer, she thought approvingly. Young, still yet to gain experience—that’s why he drew this assignment—his enthusiasm and infectious humor made up for any awkwardness. Liked by everyone, he needed to work on gaining respect, something only time and attention to duty would earn him. On reflection, she had not been all that different, now seemingly a lifetime ago.

“*Trailer* and *Marin* will close the triangle with the Kran cruisers in eight minutes and thirteen seconds, Da. If the *Daktars* maintain their heading, they’ll never enter our effective engagement sphere. We’re at condition three and ready to play. Interceptor nets are modulated and the scanner array is on active standby. Cent Comp is maneuvering the array to unmask the targets and keep them in line of sight.”

Although the defensive screens made the small moon on which LTN-2 was built effectively invisible, making targeting the station more difficult for the Krans despite knowing its spatial location among the six other moons circling 013B, the large rocky planet looming above them, they were not invulnerable. Nevertheless, every tactical advantage counted. Long before the *Daktars* could come within firing range, the scanner grid array mounted outside the star’s distortion field limit would provide covering fire in depth. Discovering the array’s one-billion-ampir envelope had cost the Krans dearly and they learned to stay away. So why send only three ships, and why head for 013D?

“No other threats?” Renlow demanded, her voice even and pleasant. Everyone was apprehensive enough without her adding to the natural tension by appearing flustered.

“None detected, Da, but there is a possible problem,” Ghere said and nodded at the tactical holoview display.

For a moment, she couldn’t see it, and then frowned. The full-dimensional projection showed orbital paths of all planets, and right now

013D stood directly behind 013B, effectively occulted from the system's star and the orbiting scanner array. What significance that had, she could not say, but could not fight off the feeling something was very wrong. The *Daktars* would not place themselves behind the gas giant without an objective in mind, one designed not to make her happy.

Chin in hand, she stared at the displays and felt mounting uncertainty coil inside her.

Excitement slowly built in MC as the minutes dragged on interminably. Everyone waited to see what the Krans would do, unable to do anything else. They'd been through this before and were blooded, figuratively only, of course.

Just outside the gas giant's distortion limit, the *Daktars* dropped relational normal and stopped. Renlow leaned forward and stared at the alien ships holding position 650 million ampirs from her, comfortably out the scanner grid's range. Almost immediately, each ship launched two projectiles at an estimated closure rate of nine times light speed, using Orieli measuring system. Whatever those things were, they would reach 013B in two minutes and sixty-six seconds—and it did not look like the scanner array would be able to intercept them when they *did* come within range, not with the massive barrier of 013B between it and the objects.

It became painfully clear why the Krans positioned themselves behind 013D.

Cent Comp anticipated the threat and moved the scanner grid below the planetary plane to bring its projectors into line of sight with the incoming missiles. Barely clearing the orbital path of 013B, it fired almost continuous bursts, leaving behind four tracks of vivid blue ionization decay as the deadly beams traversed the distance through subspace. It took a prodigious amount of energy to fire at such range, but the star to which the scanner grid was anchored provided an unlimited supply to power its quantum point singularity used to open an interdimensional rift, the scanner's actual energy source.

Apprehensive, not certain how missiles of all things, no matter how fast or type of warhead they mounted, could threaten her, Renlow exhaled softly as the array obliterated four of the incoming objects. Two missiles managed to evade and continued their headlong rush toward

013B. Whether LTN-2's modulated interceptor net confused one or it could not maintain target lock due to the growing gravitational density induced by 013B's mass as it reached the planet's distortion limit, a forced collapse of its drive caused it to drop into normal space and it detonated instantly in a sphere of white radiance as LTN-2's layered defenses took it out. The last missile closed with the orbiting moon on which LTN-2 was built and spontaneously exploded.

Even as the deadly exchange took place, the *Daktars* were shifting position, moving above the planetary plane to bring themselves behind 013B again, blindsiding the scanner array. Six more projectiles streaked toward LTN-2. In the narrow window where the Kran ships fired and the missiles entered its acquisition cone, the scanner array reduced three to molecular dust, but three managed to get into 013B's shadow. Two detonated as they entered the planet's distortion limit, but the remaining one found the moon.

Not overly concerned that a single missile represented a credible threat to her station, Renlow watched it impact the moon's secondary interceptor net in a brilliant display of slithering discharges. Some fragments survived, hurling hypervelocity debris against the primary net, only to flare into incandescence. A tremor ran through her feet as the station rocked under the strike. Whatever hit her, she could not see how a few fragments could cause a tremor. Even if the missile itself detonated against the surface, such bombardment was not a threat unless one of those infernal things struck LTN-2 directly. The missile's nine times light speed came as a shock, but apart from scattering some rocks, even an antimatter warhead would be ineffective against her.

In the tactical plot, she watched *Trailer* and *Marin* close with the *Daktars*, still undetected. They'll sweep away the threats and life could return to normal.

The Orieli Sardan-built *Tangar*-class battlecruiser had an effective range of 300,000 ampirs. The ship could project a maximum of 320 TeV in almost continuous single or variable bursts of up to twenty-four milliseconds. Saturated with that much energy, matter was literally torn apart into its constituent quarks as the binding forces were released.

The Kran *Daktars* were caught completely unprepared when the two Orieli ships dropped normal critically close to the gas giant's dis-

tortion limit and fired into them from point-blank range. They concentrated their fire on the larger trailing segment of the leading Kran ship and internal explosions broke the segment from its forward component. An instant later, a pencil-thin blue-white spear of light shot through the opposite sides of the hull and faded as the quantum singularity power grid failed, which left the segment drifting. The severed forward component drifted lifelessly.

The two remaining *Daktars* responded with intense fire, using the decaying residual tracks from the Orieli ships fire as targeting guides, but the layered interceptor nets kept out the deadly beams. A second Kran ship was disabled and the third did not wait to share the fate of its consorts. In a flash of white scintillation, it transited into subspace and fled. *Marin* transited immediately and streaked after it.

Another severe tremor rocked LTN-2 and Renlow grabbed the armrests, not liking what was happening. A second missile hit? How could a mere missile generate such a disturbance?

“Cent Comp? Analysis!”

“A gravitational instability locus is forming around the secondary net impact point,” the computer announced and displayed a graphical image in the holoview plot. It looked like a twisted sink into which the force lines of the two defense screens were wound, pulling in surrounding moon matter. Renlow stared at the image and felt her face drain. She was looking at a singularity interference point, which could not be possible. Another prolonged tremor shook the station as the moon’s structure fractured and deformed under intolerable stresses. The secondary net failed and the ceiling immediately flashed pulsing orange.

“Emergency evacuation procedure now in effect!” Cent Comp blared. “Emergency evacuation procedure now in effect!”

Renlow understood what happened, although she did not comprehend how it was done. Her station faced mortal danger. She bellowed an order to the three watchstanders.

“Out!”

They did not need urging and scrambled toward the two PT alcoves behind her. She turned and watched as they entered and vanished. When they were gone, she jerked her thumb at Ghere. Alone, facing an imminent loss of her command, she cast a glance around the control room. Sidetracked for a moment, she wondered how the incident would

look on her record.

“Confirm evacuation complete,” she demanded to make sure, forming the words mentally.

“All forty-six personnel extracted,” the computer declared.

Satisfied that everyone was safe, she stepped into the alcove and reality changed. She opened her eyes and found herself on an RV/6 dart’s flight deck, already launching. Without hesitation, she walked out of the PT alcove and slipped into the front couch. Looking somewhat uncertain, no longer totally confident, Ghere monitored the tactical station beside her, the only other crewmember required on the command deck of the small ship, his demeanor grim, the joviality gone.

“Just like a drill,” she told him softly. He gave a small smile in return.

“VI enable,” she snapped and the onboard computer linked with her through the virtual interface. Her station might be destroyed momentarily, but she needed to maintain an image of total control even when everything around her was chaos.

Remnants of the primary and secondary interceptor net screens shielding the moon were torn apart, white arcs discharging along the force lines. Although the station below her was still intact, on the starboard horizon, the moon’s distorted surface crumpled and caved in on itself. A hellish blue glow made the stars beyond ripple and waver. She switched quickly between sensor modes, relieved to see two darts stationed on her. They all made it out safely.

“Open a channel to *Trailer*.”

Almost immediately, Karhide Ari-Ann’s face solidified in her mind.

“Da, I’m going to lose the station, but we managed to get away in one piece.”

“KSN-013B3 is breaking up, Opturkarh,” Ari-Ann replied heavily. “It is literally collapsing into a gravitational hole, and there is a growing energy field building around it. Whatever hit you is swallowing the moon. Without knowing how far the effect can reach, I suggest you put some distance from it and stand by for retrieval.”

If the phenomenon was some type of point singularity, would it continue to suck in matter and grow, establishing a genuine subspace anomaly locus? In such an event, the rocky planet hovering above her could itself be in danger. It explained why the Krans made this type of attack. Unable to get close enough to prosecute her with their ships

because of the scanner array, those cursed missiles of theirs gave them a potent standoff capability, which they exploited exquisitely. No one said the Krans weren't smart.

"I read you, Da. Anything from LTN-1?"

Ari-Ann frowned. "I've lost contact with them and its three pickets."

Renlow sagged in the couch and pursed her lips. So, the Krans did not neglect the station after all. A mess. Fifteen minutes, that's all it took to wipe her out, and maybe LTN-1 as well. She did not think it possible. Perilian Sector Command had much to reconsider; glad it wasn't her problem.

Did all the LTN-1 personnel make it off safely? She had a friend there. Nothing romantic, Tuval was just someone she felt comfortable with. Not dashing or brilliant, or anything, he was simply nice to be around. She would not mind if their friendship turned into something more serious, but there was no hurry. The few times they'd been together were pleasant. He had an easy way about him, completely unself-conscious, with a droll sense of humor she loved. Now, that connection might never blossom, and she wondered if he got out. A future that once had possibilities might now remain only a passing dream.

"LTN-3 reports receiving fire from unknown type of projectiles, presumably the same things used against you," Ari-Ann added, his features drawn. They were all having a very bad day. Looking unbearably weary, he sighed. "And I've just lost contact with *Marin*."

"Thank you, Da," she said softly and cut the link, suspecting she knew what happened. Did *Marin* fall to a Kran missile?

She took in the visual sensory input and watched the image of the small moon receding behind her flare as blue radiance enveloped it. She could vividly imagine the torturous grinding of rock as the moon was consumed. Did they scream in agony even when there was no atmosphere, and no one could hear it? Abruptly, in a flash of blinding white light it vanished, leaving behind total blackness. Sensors did not detect a residual gravitational sink. Whatever swallowed her station was not a point singularity, that being the dubious good news.

She glanced at Ghere, but had no strength left to give him.

Tense, shock setting in, she waited for *Trailer* to close.

About the author

Stefan Vučak has written eight Shadow Gods Saga sci-fi novels and six contemporary political drama books. 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.

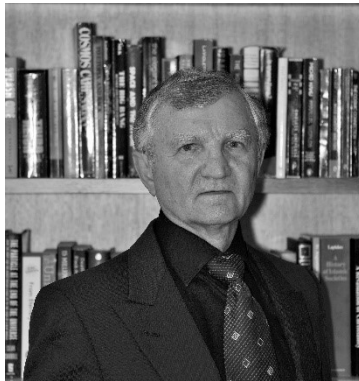
Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cellphone systems. He applied his IT discipline to create realistic storylines for his books. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends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