

Review

A shining light of a book, with bright writing, brilliant dialogue, compelling characterization and evocative description. It is what so much science fiction tries to be but fails. The plot is intricate and ambitious, but woven with such skill that it never even begins to unravel. Stefan Vučak wields words as effectively as the characters in the book wield their weapons, and that is with painstaking attention to detail and considerable suspense.

In the Shadow of Death is a fascinating read with a conclusion that justifies the journey. I don't need to tell you the ending because once you start reading you won't be able to stop until you discover it for yourself.

Midnight Scribe Reviews

Books by Stefan Vučak

General Fiction:

Cry of Eagles

All the Evils

Towers of Darkness

Strike for Honor

Proportional Response

Legitimate Power

Shadow Gods Saga:

In the Shadow of Death

Against the Gods of Shadow

A Whisper from Shadow

Shadow Masters

Immortal in Shadow

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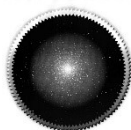
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IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH

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

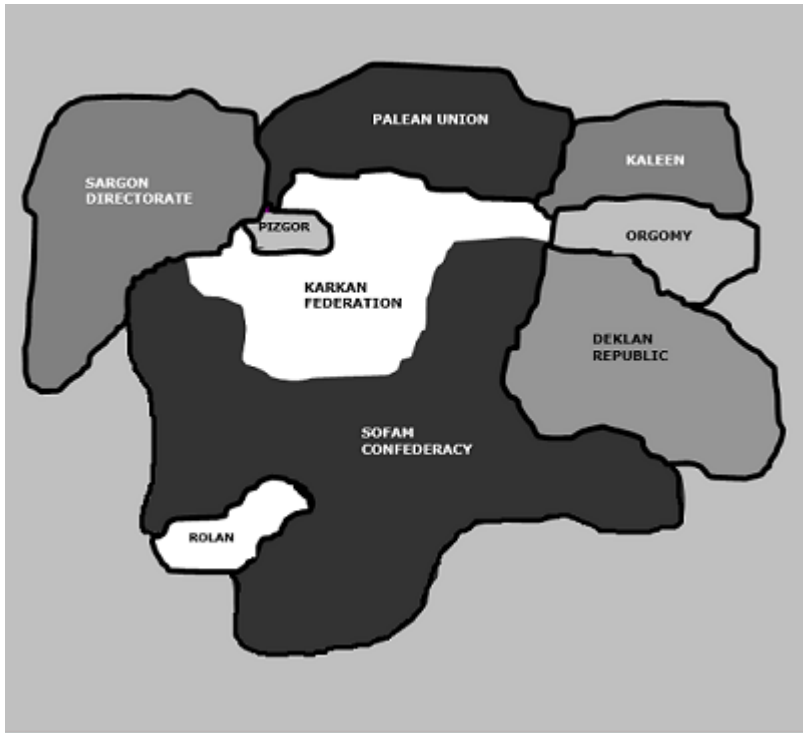
To my father ... for he never gave up

Acknowledgments

Orion Nebula – Credit: NASA, NSSDC's Photo Gallery and C.R. O'Dell (Rice University).

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

Map of the Serrll Combine



Composition of the Serrll Combine

The 238 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 | 80 | 34 | 4 |
| Deklan Republic | 19 | 8 | 1 |
| Palean Union | 27 | 11 | 1 |
| Karkan Federation | 45 | 19 | 2 |
| Sargon Directorate | 30 | 13 | 1 |
| Independents: | | 15 | 1 |
| - Kaleen | 8 | | |
| - Rolan | 5 | | |
| - Orgomy | 6 | | |
| - Pizgor | 3 | | |
| - Other systems | 15 | | |
| General Assembly | 238 | 100 | 10 |
| Outposts | 44 | | |
| Protectorates | 35 | | |

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

The little combie slued beneath her and corkscrewed into a savage right turn that pressed her into the padding of her seat. She grunted from the pressure of the restraining field and twisted her head to follow the orange beam as it flashed past. Her skin prickled and her hair tried to stand on end from the near-field effect of the beam.

Despite the loud thudding of her heart and the clamminess of her hands, she wasn't afraid anymore. Death would be a welcome release now. She had known a flash of real terror, gripping her chest in a vice of pain that made every breath a shuddering gasp. Earlier, with the incriminating intelligence safely recorded, she extracted herself from Kapel's executive offices as smoothly as she came in, as her training taught her. Waiting for the cable-tube to bring her up to the small landing ramp on the roof, she allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction. Garner's vaunted security turned out easier to penetrate than Kapel's lies. Or so she thought.

Running out of Kapel's offices, she scrambled into the combie and waited as the power plant spooled up. The combie gently lifted, then surged into the cold night sky. Raman's sprawl blazed with light beneath her. Above her, lines of traffic streamed in all directions. She activated the comms system and requested a voice-transmit-only link with Talia. Anonymity in her line of work was one of the minimal requirements. As she expected, the link came up quickly. The comms plate cleared and revealed Talia's quizzical small smile.

"Dama, I've got it all! I'm ready to transmit."

Talia frowned and her smile faded. Her oval yellow eyes clouded with a strange, almost mocking regret. "That will no longer be necessary...Kadreen," she said softly.

A jolt of panic ran through Kadreen's body. She stared at Talia's image in confusion and felt the blood drain from her face. Cold dread froze her.

"How...how did you find out?" she managed to choke out.

Talia winced. "I'm sorry, my dear. I really am."

The plate turned dull gray, leaving Kadreen shaken. The whole exercise had been a plot to catch her!

To think it only happened an hour ago.

The night crisp and the city lights behind her gave her scant comfort. Kadreen gave a rueful smile. The price she paid for playing the Family intrigues.

Another beam brushed past the combie and neatly sliced through the starboard impeller. The air suddenly smelled of ozone. Blue sparks arced at her from the curved console and the bubble frame, their touch sharp and burning. She yelped with pain and coughed from the acrid fumes filling the cabin. Some of the nav control pads flashed brown in warning of imminent failure. The power management system flickered between green and orange-white of total shutdown. The combie flipped over on its belly and nosed down.

Kadreen knew she had seconds at most. She glanced around, but could not see her pursuer. Fighting g-forces, she hurriedly punched in the transmission code, her breath a strangled hiss of frustration. The combie shuddered beneath her and began to tumble in its dive. The comms screen acknowledged her code and waited for the command to transmit. Grimly, she jabbed the commit pad.

She felt a silent explosion and the air around her flared with light. She didn't even have time to scream as the combie disintegrated around her. It all happened so slowly, like watching a scene in a Wall. Her last thoughts were about the message. Did it go through? For a split second, she had an image of her body torn apart.

Glowing wreckage fell silently on the dark countryside below.

Chapter One

With absent dignity, Alasi twitched the crude garments around his stringy body and moved in for the kill.

Two suns peeked low over the stalls. Fat and orange, they leaked feeble warmth. Thin wisps of ragged cloud marred the intense blue of the sky. The wind sent dust and trash swirling among the vendor stands and pavilions, and made the awnings flap. Despite the keen morning chill, the soukh crowded and noisy, full of strolling, sometimes hurrying buyers and onlookers from nameless worlds, offered everything for a discerning buyer.

Smells of cooking from the food stalls were strong in the air. It made his stomach rumble. He ignored it. Somewhere in one of the rows of stands, a wail rose above the noise of bartering, yelling, and swearing. A thud nearby cut off hysterical laughter. Nobody paid any attention. Huddled in a corner of rough bricks a bent figure gazed absently at nothing. Beside him, a chipped enameled bowl held a few coins and thin rods. Insects buzzed around his tattered and soiled garments. Alasi hardly noticed him. It was a common sight.

Leaning against a worn support beam, he studied the activity around the stand he chose to hit. Pavlir and his two boys had their hands full. They were busy serving odd fried tidbits to waiting customers shouting and shoving each other for attention. One of the boys hurriedly scraped burnt bits off a large hotplate above the burner, then threw on fresh meats, vegetables, and slices of various breads. Aromatic steam gushed up and the plate hissed and crackled. Beside the stall, stacked tins, biscuit packs, and piles of dried fruit stood unattended.

Alasi allowed himself a grin. This one would prove to be easy.

The noise of the soukh felt like a warm, familiar blanket. The only thing that could spoil his breakfast now was Pavlir's wife. Waiting for the right moment to strike, he watched her tending the credit register. Stern and formidable, she dispensed justice with a rough and heavy hand.

Like so many of the stray kids, Alasi ate at the soukh at the expense

of unwary entrepreneurs. Not all traders could keep their eyes both on their goods and the crowd. Alasi remembered well the few who managed.

Despite the Proctor's laws, casual thieving was prevalent and impossible to curb. If caught, the priesthood guards exacted immediate punishment by whipping the luckless victim, to the gleeful hooting of onlookers.

He'd been lucky so far despite Maw's disapproval. "I run an honest farm, neh? We don't starve and I won't have you hauling in useless trash, hear?"

"Yes, Maw," he would say, not hearing her.

He didn't spend all of his time prowling around with his gang. He had chores his Paw demanded be done. Herding a tractor around the farm was not his idea of honest labor. Besides, he did bring in useful plunder from his enterprises that were appreciated, albeit grudgingly.

A highborn Dama walked by. A hired attendant followed behind her, towing two squirming girls. One of the brats tugged at his hand and pointed at the stalls of steaming food. The lady turned and scolded her sharply. The girl pouted and kicked at a pile of stacked tins.

It was beautiful to watch.

The whole array came down in a rolling clatter, accompanied by a scream of indignation from the highborn lady. Surrounded by strewn merchandise the little girl burst into a howl. Pavlir's wife threw up her hands with a curse. The entire scene became an immediate attraction for the bystanders. While the attendant hurried to pick up the girl, Alasi bent down and helped himself to a few of the choicest packs.

"Gotchal!" A meaty hand grabbed his collar.

He aged ten years and almost dropped his plunder. Pavlir's wife shook him like a rag and swung her broad hand. He ducked and jerked free.

"Stop, you ruffian!" She hurled a piece of rock-hard bread after him.

Alasi laughed and sprinted into the crowd. He scrambled around the grinning onlookers and disappeared among the stands, followed by a lot of commotion and shouting behind him. He beamed hugely; it made him feel appreciated.

Maybe it would be a good idea if he avoided Pavlir's for a while.

A typical market day in the city of Raman, planet Elexi of the Four

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Suns.

Alasi opened a packet and dug out a biscuit. Munching, undecided, he rubbernecked through the soukh. Pockets bulging, he wandered past the slave section. It wasn't his favorite haunt and he didn't want to linger long. Too much chance of becoming one of the trade items.

The two suns had climbed higher and the wind had died down, but still crisp. The sky had developed a heavy gray haze. People muttered and shook their heads; another dust storm.

He didn't let it worry him. He checked his torn trouser leg and the grimy shirtsleeve. Maybe he should liberate something more appropriate. He needed to be careful not to overdo it, the mendicant business being touchy at best. Raising his status would cramp his style. Who would drop an odd coin or credit stick to someone dressed almost as well as the potential donor? It took craft to survive in the soukh and Alasi knew all the tricks.

Sticking to the broader avenues, he sauntered past the slave stands and the joyhouses. The owners who could afford it had gaudy holoviews of unholy pleasures waiting inside. Behind windows festooned with flickering lights, women, girls, and an odd boy, stood on display for the perceptive connoisseur.

Few of the slave pens had any shelter. The merchandise here all low rent, mature males suitable for heavy labor only. Most were illegals and aliens, with a few locals among them who had tasted her Benevolence's mercy. There was a lot of yelling and waving of arms as factors tried to encourage buyers to stop and examine. Alasi knew if a mark stopped, chances were he would walk away with a chattel he never really wanted.

Many beggars, pickpockets, and part-time muggers favored this popular tourist trap. Curiously, some of the offworlders felt flattered when ripped off buying a worthless trinket, something to talk about over a cocktail. The priesthood guards made sure such fleecing didn't get out of hand. Bad for business.

The stands changed as Alasi moved into the up-market area. Open platforms and simple corrals gave way to elaborate pavilions, viewing stands and observation lounges. The rarefied prices reflected the needs of the genteel clientele. Unobtrusive, hunched individuals slinked among the strolling citizenry, sweeping the paving clean.

A sale was in progress at Tarad's Circle. Alasi pulled up his hood

and stopped to watch the Tridan factor at work. Tarad was all heavy bones and knobby muscle. A short, stocky runt, powerful around shoulders and legs; a good indicator of high gravity habits, if an unreliable one. He wore a long leather kilt, a narrow jeweled belt, and soft ship's boots. Despite the rawness in the air, his muscled upper body bare beneath a thin maroon cape. A jeweled armband adorned each thick wrist.

Alasi fingered the dull ceramic of the identification band around his wrist. Tarad had a large hairless head, a broad nose and small piercing eyes. His ears were vast black-veined flaps that sagged to his shoulders.

A burly keeper, hands crossed before his chest, glowered at the slaves. A vicious knobby whip hung at his belt. Standing in twos and threes, ignoring the waiting buyer in the paved lane, the slaves gossiped among themselves.

The Palean, dressed in the working grays of a master scout, gazed blankly at the stock arrayed on the viewing stand. Short and thin, he exuded an impalpable air of superiority. His hands twined in a characteristic gesture, the long fingers twitching. His delicate button nose glistened on a small triangular face. He had a pointed chin and enormous black eyes bulging beneath a high forehead. A thin mouth drooped at one corner.

Two rented attendants hovered behind the officer.

A muscled youth, dressed in a fine green tunic, stood aloof from other slaves on the stand. Tarad pointed at him and jerked his head. The boy was a bit slow and the keeper snarled.

“Bow, scum!”

Tarad flicked his bony wrist. The thin leather baton cracked against the youth's shoulder, staggering him. His eyes darted hate at the factor and he bowed slowly. The baton whistled again; another grunt. The muscles on his back twitched, but the youth remained bowed.

Tarad's mouth twisted into a scowl. “That'll teach you obedience, animal.” He glared at the other slaves. “Anybody else, neh?”

He shoved the baton into his belt, fixed on an ingratiating smile and hunched in supplication. Clutching his cape, he turned to face the Palean.

“Your pardon, most excellent Tal.”

His eyes skimmed over the officer's pressed uniform and the well-filled features with their certainty of fat Serrll credits. He ignored the

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hired help as beneath his attention.

To him the Paleans were nothing more than another form of scum, strutting around like they owned the universe. He regarded them as an arrogant, haughty people, but a pragmatist, he never allowed personal feelings to interfere with business. He would simply charge more. His hands fluttered in anticipation.

“The boy is one of the best I have and tractable with a bit of discipline. Tarad’s Circle is reputed for the finest in living merchandise. If we don’t have it, no one has it. That’s my motto.” Tarad cackled.

The Palean’s enormous eyes roamed over the pitiful assembly of flesh. He shook his head in resignation. Not much of a choice, but this was the best of a bad pick. The other lots held only brutes, fit for heavy work and not much else. Certainly not fit to serve in his household. After all, as a senior Fleet officer on this station, he needed to maintain a certain standard.

“I can see how you administer your discipline, friend Tarad. No matter, he will do. I’ll take him. And I’ll take that one as well,” he said and pointed a slender finger at a resigned specimen.

“A wise choice, gentle Tal.” Tarad nodded eagerly, his ears flaring. “It’s a pleasure to do business with a professional who knows his merchandise. Both are in top condition and only one owner. At least twenty years in each of them.”

“If that turns out not to be the case, you can rely on me to be back,” the Palean piped in a thin voice. His smile thin, without humor.

“Ah, the Excellency jests, neh?”

“Sure. Price?”

“This is your lucky day indeed, Tal. I’ve got a new consignment from Saiam and you can understand I’m anxious to get rid of my current stock. Practically *giving* them away!” Tarad wrung his hands in despair.

“Do you hold any locals?”

Tarad looked around quickly, then shrugged apologetically.

“That’s illegal, worthy Tal. Why, the Benevolent Proctor would have me strung up on the altar for even thinking of such a thing.”

“Might not be such a bad idea, seeing the kind of starved trash you’re trying to push on unwary customers.”

“Don’t tempt the fates, your Excellency. Her priests are everywhere

and it's not wise to antagonize the powerful.”

It was not always easy to do business on Elexi. The way to stay off the sacrificial altar was to hand over the squeeze to the guards with a smile. Pay your altar dues to the priests and pray for forgiveness from her Benevolence. He had dealt with this in one form or another on many worlds. Elexi may be a hole, but one still needed to be careful.

The Palean dismissed Tarad's concerns with a twitch of his hand. His position as chief of staff to Prima Scout Cannan, the Four Suns Fleet commander, carried with it some privileges.

“I'm not interested in legality. What I *am* interested in is a female.” It would make a welcome change to wake up, among other things, to a pretty face rather than the churlish expression from one of his servants.

“To brighten your dawns. I understand perfectly, eminent Tal,” Tarad said with a knowing smile and drew closer to the Palean. “Just the other day, I got a perky little wench, part of my last Saiam consignment. She was the Praetor's fourth. You must know, worthy Tal, a Saiam courtesan is worth her weight in kerner stones.” He grinned broadly, showing a row of uneven, blackened teeth. “Wait, I'll fetch her!”

The Palean scowled. “Hurry it up. I'm freezing out here!”

Tarad bobbed his head and disappeared through an ornately carved triangular doorway set into a stone wall behind the viewing platform. He'd spent a lot of his own money turning the pavilion into a major attraction, to the envy of some of the factors around him. He wasn't bothered overmuch by what they thought. He would happily carry any of them as part of his sales stock.

He appeared in the doorway, beamed and stepped aside. A tall girl stood beside him, almost a woman, and looked regally around her. Her sleeveless dress, sides cut to the hip, clung to her body, outlining a supple form. A simple strap crossed firm breasts. Her fine delicate features were expressionless beneath large green eyes. Copper hair fell in thick braids to her waist. The Palean hissed in appreciation and licked his lips.

Some of the males strolling down the line of pavilions stopped and nodded in admiration. Most of the women hardly paid any attention. The highborn Damas had their chins in the air and daintily moved on.

The girl glanced at the Palean and raised her head in defiance. Wearing a smug grin, Tarad gestured with his arm and the girl walked with

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mincing steps to the front of the viewing stand. She stopped and turned her back. Tarad's features clouded and his baton rose. The Palean's long arm flashed out and clutched the factor's thick wrist. Tarad's head snapped around in surprise.

"Can't have the merchandise spoiled, can we?" the Palean said easily. He watched the play of emotions on Tarad's face with cold amusement, then released the hand.

"Heh? Certainly not, your worship. Certainly not." Tarad cackled and tapped the baton against his thigh in irritation.

"An exceptional item indeed." The Palean's eyes roamed greedily over the girl's figure.

Tarad nodded with satisfaction and jerked his head at the girl. She turned reluctantly.

"Now..." His hand moved sensuously along the girl's arm. "Look at that alabaster skin, the high features, and the vibrant shine of her hair. Believe me, Tal, she is no phony. Only the finest from Tarad's, neh?"

"How much?" the Palean demanded, suddenly feeling warm.

"Oh, very cheap, heroic Tal. I'm being most reasonable for one of our Fleet heroes. You understand, she's the best I've got. I can—"

"How much?"

"Couldn't go lower than six hundred," Tarad said, all cold business. The Palean chuckled.

"I appreciate your sense of humor, friend Tarad. Especially on a day like this."

"I'll take twelve hundred for all three. My last offer. I can't give them away."

"One thousand. Take it or leave it."

"Oh, yes, noble Tal! I'll take it. You're most generous." Tarad grinned and flashed a look at the keeper. "Guard her!" The keeper merely blinked.

Tarad jumped off the viewing stand and extended his hand.

The Palean rummaged in his pocket and brought out a handful of colored rectangular sticks. He counted out the money with maddening slowness while Tarad simpered with impatience. He would have preferred a credit transaction, but money was money. The officer placed the last finger-long stick into Tarad's hand and looked up.

"There, that should do it."

“Worthy Tal?” Tarad coughed self-consciously. “I think you’re twenty short.”

“What? You question me?”

The hard glare stopped Tarad’s outburst. He swallowed and bowed quickly, ears drooping.

“Oh no, kind Tal. It’s just...” The Palean scowled, towering over the little factor. Tarad cringed. “Must have been my mistake, Lord. I couldn’t think—”

“Fool!” The Palean turned to the attendants waiting behind him. “Take them to the estate and see that they’re taken care of. Especially her!”

“Tal,” one of them murmured and bowed low.

With a last glare at Tarad, the Palean stalked into the crowd.

“May a thousand canal worms feed on his stinking carcass,” Tarad grumbled after the retreating figure. Even for a lousy twenty credits, he felt sore at having a fast one pulled on him by one of the marks. He grunted in resignation and pocketed the proceeds.

He jerked his head at the keeper. The three slaves shuffled into Tarad’s office. Working from hand to hand, he touched the identification band on each wrist with a small rod. Thin wafers slid out of the register console onto the dealing table. He motioned with a hooked finger at one of the attendants who hurriedly collected the wafers; copies of the sales contracts.

“Off, off!” He waved at them impatiently.

The slaves clambered off the display stand and gathered around the two attendants. After a whispered conference, they all disappeared into the crowd.

For Tarad, simply another sale. He swiveled on his toes and raised his baton.

“Here, here! Tarad’s Circle, specialized dealer in slaves, houses of joy, and all the imaginable delights to suit everyone, rich or poor...” his voice lost itself in the clamor of the market.

Twirling his identification band around his wrist, Alasi watched the Palean officer vanish into the crowd and spat on the ground. Glaring hate beneath his tattered hood, he mumbled obscenities and bad wishes.

He twitched the thin garment around his shoulders and ambled

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through the mob. Undecided, he headed toward the outskirts of the city, toward the winding delta, the hilly grain fields and his home. He loved to drop in whenever he felt the city start to crowd him. Besides, he had to unload the pickings making a bulge in his spacious pockets. There was also a matter of some unfinished chores, and Paw wasn't likely to be amused by his lengthy absence, he thought gloomily.

Against the backdrop of Raman's towers, Alasi walked along the narrow meandering path that followed the riverbank. The wind had picked up, sighing through the tall grass. He stopped beneath the drooping branches of an old mud gum and looked back at the city.

Bush clicks chattered among gray branches of a nearby gum. In a flash of bright brown feathers, they swooped in a graceful curve toward the heaving grass. Alasi hummed some nameless tune he'd picked up at the soukh. His long hair whipped around his eyes. He ignored it.

A glint in the sky stopped his humming. Instinctively, he pressed himself against the gnarled bark of a mud gum. He watched as two personal combies, flat pebble-shapes, skimmed low over the fields, their dark blue inverted triangle emblems flashing. A Serril Fleet patrol, lackeys to their Deklan masters. Alasi spat and wished pestilence on the scum. The combies vanished in low clouds, leaving him cold and alone with the setting suns.

Far to the north, a brown wall of dust drifted across a dark sky. The storm would blanket the city, grounding the communals and the little commuter sled-pads. The Deklans would curse the damned planet and its refrigerated climate, being colder than what they were used to at home. Alasi smiled happily.

He rounded a curve in the river, cut across a grass field and clambered up a steep hill. Breathing hard, he pushed through a thick clump of jeer brush and stopped beside an old rotten trunk. Tall paperbark gums bordered the narrow valley below. Nestled against the hillside stood a small, stone straw-roofed cottage. Gray smoke rose in a thin column out of a blackened chimney. Poultry fluttered around the yard, cackling in alarm. In the stalls, two cows stomped impatiently. On the yellow grass in front of the cottage rested the polished shape of a flat oval M-1 personal scout. Brandishing a phase rifle, a priesthood guard stood beside the extended landing ramp.

Alasi stared at the guard and his lip curled in distaste. To him the

man was a pariah who had sold his soul to the Deklans in return for decent food and lodging. Alasi might foresee a remote possibility of being polite to a native Deklan, but there was a special kind of hate reserved for the slimy traitors of his own kind.

About to walk down, he saw his father stagger out of the cottage. A guard stood in the doorway laughing, his rifle held over his shoulder. Alasi stared, stunned by the scene. He felt the blood drain from his face and his mouth go dry. His mother ran out and flung herself at the guard. The goon backhanded her and she fell. His father rushed the guard and Alasi wanted to shout a warning. Standing beside the landing ramp of the M-1, the other goon leveled his rifle and a thin beam of ruby light lanced out. Alasi's father fell in mid-stride.

“Paw!” Alasi yelped in helpless panic.

He knew what was going on. He had heard it described often. In the soukh the gangs would get together and talk. They'd talk of late-night calls where whole families vanished, never to be seen again. They dreamed about killing the Deklans, the slave traders and the corrupt city Proctors, sleek from their profiteering. It was only talk and they knew it, something to cheer them up. The priesthood guards kept things too tight to allow open dissent.

One of the guards motioned his mother toward the ship. The other tried to get his father to stand. Alasi's two sisters followed uncertainly. He gulped and clenched his fists. In a huddled procession, he watched his family being marched into captivity. He could not understand it. They held their farm outright and didn't owe anybody anything. The farm wasn't much, but Maw managed to bring in valuable cash and his father worked hard.

The landing ramp withdrew into the craft. Its crimson nav shield pulsed and it climbed quickly into a dull sky.

Alasi watched for a long time the point into which the M-1 vanished. He felt strange, lightheaded, no feeling of disbelief, only a dull ache of loss. His family gone, it was likely he would never see them again. Deep down, he knew that. They could be anywhere, dragged off to some nameless labor camp, even Anulus. Life was bleak and unforgiving. If this was Serrll justice, he wanted no part of it.

Through gathering clouds the stars winked bright. Low on the eastern horizon a thick band of stars that was The Arch, stretched across

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the sky.

The wind felt frigid as it keened through the grass and the creaking branches of the gums. Alasi clutched the tattered garments around his body and gave a strangled sob. A heavy weight rolled over his heart and he whimpered at the pain. He hadn't cried in a long time, but hot tears of bitterness and rage slid down his cheeks now.

"Maw." He lay face down in the grass and sobbed.

* * *

"Second Scout Terrlls-rr, reporting as ordered, sir!"

He was screwed and knew it.

Not daring to move, he allowed his eyes to flicker over the silent figure sitting behind a gray-bordered, matte black desk. Prima Scout Anabb Karr was bulky and not very tall, but his presence dominated the office. His olive skin a wrinkled parchment on which the years etched deep lines, reflected a chiseled, narrow face stamped into a prominent scowl of disapproval. A ragged blue-veined burn from a phase rifle creased his left cheek. They said it tended to turn a mottled red when he got angry.

Terr figured he would probably have a chance find out.

The way he heard it, Anabb had made his reputation by being one crusty son of a bitch. Terr kind of hoped it was only a rumor.

Maybe he would find that out too.

Everything about Anabb looked ordinary, except for the eyes. Close-set ovals, they were brown pools smeared with flecks of amber. Hidden beneath ridges of narrow white eyebrows, they cut where they stared. If there was any sympathy in those eyes, Terr sure as hell couldn't see it. He disliked mixing it with high brass of any kind, and Anabb in particular. As COMDEKOPS, Commander Deklan Operations, Anabb was the most senior Serrll Scout Fleet officer in the Deklan Republic. Instead of occupying a cruiser-sized office on Deklan, he had chosen to plant himself on Talon, the Fleet's premier base and support facility in the sector, much to the annoyance of the base commander. No one liked having a flag officer breathing down one's neck, silently criticizing one's every move, but it appeared that Anabb was a rule unto himself and didn't particularly give a canal worm's butt about

what others thought.

Standing stiffly at attention, Terr wondered which of his recent sins warranted this summons, and whether he would survive the encounter. Either way, it had to be serious.

Anabb looked up, pulled back his shoulders and gave Terr a slow, measured look.

“Sit down, Second Scout,” he said in a cold gravelly voice devoid of emotion, like stones being rolled in a barrel.

Terr winced. This was not good. As long as they didn’t take *Ramora* from him.

“Thank you, sir.” He picked one of the formchairs and made himself as comfortable as circumstances permitted. The thing squirmed as it molded itself around him.

Behind the wide expanse of Anabb’s desk a window screen took up the whole wall. Tall slim towers of the Center reached toward low dark clouds. It only needed one bad thought and the rain would come down. Talon was a cold and miserable world even in summer, which this was not. Its only redeeming quality being its strategic location, sited almost on the Deklan/Karkan border. To Terr, the strategists on Capital didn’t have comfort in mind when they picked the place, the planet only one of nine moons circling Cordia-Prime, a blue-green gas giant. Drawbacks or not, it made for lovely night skies.

On his left, a floor-to-ceiling full-dimensional Wall display station cycled through random color patterns. Uneven levels of transparent shelving crowded the opposite wall and held an assortment of campaign memorabilia; scalps more likely, he thought. He hoped his scalp wouldn’t be joining the collection.

Anabb tapped a pad on the reactive surface of his desk. A plate lit up in the lower right corner. He studied the boy’s record and only glanced at the display, then turned to scrutinize Terr sitting rigidly before him. The boy had firm, strong features, matured by the burden of command. The shock of brown-black hair needed some cutting, he mused wryly, telling him something of Terr’s character. The face finely molded without appearing chiseled. A ragged scar above the left temple near the eyebrow added a touch of rakishness. With a hint of a chin cleft, his pink skin looked somewhat pale and drawn, as with all Kaplans. Cold gray eyes stared back at Anabb above an aquiline nose.

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Handsome young rogue, he decided. With a pang of memory, he realized how much the boy looked like his father, an officer he was proud to have served with. What a loss. Not only a personal one, but for the Fleet as well. He cleared his throat, annoyed at allowing himself this lapse of sentimentality.

“I’ve been going over your record,” he said heavily. “You’re young to be commanding an M-3. Mmm, only twenty-eight. I’m glad to see it wasn’t gained through your uncle’s influence. Enlls-rr is a friend, but nepotism is a disease. You’ve been busy enough, I note. Two single ship actions against Palean smugglers, a survey flight beyond the Rolan group and a stint at the Serrll Moon Base, Sol. Mentioned in dispatches twice with decorations. You’re independent and a low opinion you have of high command. Well, at your age that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Provided you keep it in check. How do you like command?” he demanded suddenly.

“I prefer making the decisions that count, sir,” Terr said cautiously, not sure where all this was leading to.

The mention of his uncle had thrown him. Enlls ran the Bureau of Cultural Affairs on Captal, Serrll’s central intelligence organization and a very senior posting in the Security Council. They were family, but Terr hadn’t seen any of his relatives for some time. The Fleet was a demanding mistress.

Impertinent young scamp, Anabb reflected, holding back a smile. He liked his officers to have spirit, and the boy certainly seemed to be full of it, but was that attitude hollow bravado or competence borne of hard experience? He needed to find out.

“So I’ve heard. You remind me of my own first command. A converted M-2, it was. I learned a lot then, about men and ships; what makes them and what breaks them. A long time ago that, before your father died, but I suppose your family has already told you everything?”

“They’ve talked about it.”

“You must have been just old enough to remember him. I was his commanding officer on an M-3, not all that different from yours. And like you, he had a low opinion of high command, but a good officer...and a friend.”

Terr was a boy of six when he learned of his father’s death, some sort of an undercover deal that went sour not very far from Talon when

still a bare rock. His family never told him the details and he never found out. Even with his Fleet clearance, the information was classified. If he believed the rumor, his father's ship was sabotaged and he augured into Anar'on when the secondary drive plasma impellers failed. Terr's memory of his father was of laughter and games and glittering uniforms. Even now, he had trouble recalling his father's face.

"Your family, they're well?"

"It's been some time since I had an opportunity to visit Kaplan, or to see them, sir, but they're all well, thank you."

"They forgiven you yet for joining the Fleet?"

"Resigned, if not forgiven," Terr said with a trace of bitterness and a rush of unpleasant memories. Parents cannot help managing their children's lives, he decided glumly.

Ever since his father's death, his mother tried to argue him out of his juvenile romance with the Fleet, as she called it. The House of Llss-rr was powerful, politicians and spacefarers all, and Kaplan needed her best at home. Although never voiced, he knew the underlying motive for her pressure. Instead of hunting for glory, he had a higher duty to continue the line. She never said it, but it was implied. The other thing, of course, his mother didn't want to lose him as well. The loss of his father had hit her hard. His stubbornness and refusal to bow to the family's wishes had been a source of ongoing acerbity ever since. In her eyes, he had no shadow. Despite the rejection, he reminded himself to call her sometime.

Then it hit him. The old fossil was setting him up, hoping to sidetrack him with sentimental family crap before jumping down his throat. Crafty old bastard.

"A different time it was," Anabb said moodily and nodded. "A better time, some would say, but enough reminiscing. Now, are you getting everything you need from Maintenance? I understand you're having problems with your phased array projector."

So that was it! Terr tried to keep his dismay from showing.

"A minor altercation—"

"A minor altercation?" Anabb exploded. "Is that what you call it? Let me list them for you. Haranguing Maintenance, you've been. Refusing compliance clearance. Insubordination. Conduct unbecoming. It goes on. The base commander bent my ear all morning. Is that what

you call making decisions that count, boy?”

Terr admitted getting into a shouting match with a Maintenance first scout might not have been exactly politic, but the guy was a button-pushing asshole. Still, he never expected to be hauled before the Old Man himself about it. The base commander must really be pissed, but if he was going to have his butt raked, exemplary in its severity, as it seemed, it might as well be for the right reason.

“In my opinion, sir,” he said forcefully, throwing caution out the lock, “Maintenance is more interested in paperwork and polishing the wheels of bureaucratic machinery than paying attention to my log reports. And they ignored two of them for my projector.”

Anabb grunted. “I gather you don’t approve of channels.”

“Well, sir, you know what they say runs down channels,” Terr said, his mouth doing his thinking.

Anabb bit his lip to stop himself from laughing. The boy had guts and confidence, something he wanted to confirm for himself. Fitness reports didn’t give the measure of a person behind them. Nevertheless, this was a matter of discipline. He could not dismiss Terr’s insubordination out of hand.

“I will not tolerate any impertinence from you, boy.” His eyebrows drew together into a thundercloud and he felt the burn on his cheek begin to color. “You don’t own that M-3, and you certainly don’t own this base. Yours isn’t the only ship Maintenance has to service. In case you weren’t certain, bitching about your problems is not exactly a career-enhancing move. An attitude adjustment would be more in order. You cut across channels again and more than crap you’ll find flowing down. Am I getting through to you, Second Scout?”

Terr squirmed in his seat. Maybe making that crack about channels hadn’t been such a great idea. Rit!

“Copy that, sir!”

“I should kick your butt. On the other hand, Maintenance exists to service my ships, and you cannot do your job unless they do theirs.” Anabb drummed his stubby fingers against the desk. “All right, son. Out with it. What’s your real gripe?”

The old father figure gambit now, is it? Confess all, fall at his feet and plead for mercy? Since he’d already stepped in it, he might as well go all the way. Well, *Ramora* had been good to him while it lasted, Terr

thought moodily.

“I know I shouldn’t have blown my pad with Maintenance, sir. But hell! They’ve been dragging their feet over my weapons pod ever since I got here. I’m not about to lift off this damned...I mean—”

“You meant damned rock, didn’t you?” Anabb grated, but his eyes twinkled.

“I meant Talon, sir,” Terr said with a straight face.

“I know what you meant, boy. It’s a damned rock, all right. Go on.”

“Well, sir, I’ll not accept clearance until my projector is in full operating mode. I would rather be ticked off for giving Maintenance a hard time than have my weaponry fail in some sticky situation.”

Anabb sat back and gave the boy a long stare. He did not doubt that Terr was prepared to be grounded rather than knuckle under. It was not the first time he’d heard complaints about Maintenance, but thunderation! There were procedures.

“Tell you what. I’ll see to it that the base commander tells Maintenance to read your logged incident reports. How about that?”

“That’s just great, sir. He’ll take it out on me in some other way and I’ll never get *Ramora* off this rock.”

“Don’t worry about repercussions. You can leave those details to me, but you’ll be counting rocks on Cantor if you’re insubordinate again. I don’t have patience for it. You read me, boy?”

“Aye, sir.”

Anabb nodded, making up his mind.

“Very well. However, I didn’t ask you here to chew over your problems with Maintenance. And I don’t want to hear again that you’ve been bitching, whatever the reason. Now, I want to show you something.”

He reached across the desk and tapped a panel on the inlaid console pad. The Wall cleared into a full-dimensional tactical grid of two binary systems, orbiting each other a scant tenth of a light-year apart.

“Recognize it?”

Terr should. It was part of his last patrol sector.

“It’s the Four Suns. Kapel Pen is the current Prime Director and Controller of Elexi. It’s one of four systems belonging to Deklan Republic’s Third Prefecture, ruled by Anall-Marr,” Terr told him crisply. He’d heard the Old Man expected his commanders to know their areas of patrol better than they knew their partners. More than one luckless

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officer had his head handed to him in a bucket because the unfortunate failed to do his homework.

“What else do you know about it?”

“Well, sir, Elexi is the major settled planet and contains the bulk of the Binary A system’s population. The place is somewhat backward even by Deklan standards, and specializes mostly in agricultural export commodities. Raman is the capital city and houses the Four Sun’s administrative center. Their culture is a matriarchy and, officially at least, is fully integrated into the Deklan Ecumenical Order. The religious dogma is enforced by priesthood guards who are accountable to the Controller and the city Proctors, not the Order, as is the norm in other systems of the Republic. That fact has been an ongoing source of irritation to the Ecumenical Synod on Deklan.”

“That’s all you got?” Anabb demanded as he tapped the table with stubby fingers.

“As you know, sir, what makes the Four Suns invaluable is Anulus, the fourth planet. It has the most extensive mining and refining operations of strategic metals and minerals in the whole Republic. Elexi provides some of the more sophisticated post-processing and acts as a marketing and distribution arm. It’s a strategic and very lucrative economic asset for the Deklans. It also accounts for the Synod’s veiled tolerance of the local administration’s treatment of its priests. Two centuries ago, the Four Suns belonged to the Karkan Federation. At that time, of course, Anulus had nothing they wanted and they didn’t mind giving it up. A fact they bitterly regret now. Binary B has four rocky planets, the third currently ecoformed, and three gas giants. Selius, the fourth planet, is practically a water world and supports the Fours Suns fishing industry.”

“Not bad,” Anabb said grudgingly. The boy had given a pretty good thumbnail sketch of the system. “You’ve been there, of course?”

“Twice.”

“You’ll find it handy,” Anabb said and cleared his throat. Terr raised an eyebrow. “You must be aware that ever since the Deklans got hold of the Four Suns from the Karkan Federation, it’s been an open wound for them, and lately, it has begun to fester. Elexi’s ruling matriarchy has never acknowledged Deklan’s dominion and sees them as a foreign occupation. If they had a choice, they would revert to the Karkans. Kapel

Pen, the latest in her line, is particularly vocal in her opposition, to the extent of inciting other Deklan border systems to revolt. Without success, naturally. By all accounts, she hasn't given up her plan to see the Four Suns independent of Deklan rule.

"However, I wouldn't waste my sympathy on her. The matriarchy has kept the population in virtual serfdom despite the enormous wealth that Anulus brings in. Ordinarily, that would be an internal Deklan issue, but as you said, Anulus is a strategic asset and the Serrll government on Captal is wary of some of the things going on over there. What triggered Captal to act is that Elexi is engaged in slavery and the Bureau of Administrative Affairs has sent an Envoy to investigate."

"Under Ecumenical law, sir, slavery in the Deklan Republic is not illegal."

"Irrelevant." Anabb waved his hand in dismissal. "I'm not talking of expatriate or penal slaves. The problem, though, is that local Elexi citizens are being enslaved to meet the alleged labor needs of Anulus. That in itself is not our concern. Anulus has been a convenient penal colony for many Deklan systems. However, when supposedly free families are forcibly relocated, it smacks of corruption and possible sanction at official levels."

"Kapel Pen? Surely, sir, that's a local matter and should fall under Anall-Marr's jurisdiction. Or at most, handled by the Ecumenical Synod on Deklan."

"Ordinarily, that would be the case," Anabb agreed, pleased at Terr's perceptiveness. "Unfortunately for Elexi, the Deklans are more interested in maintaining output from Anulus than what happens to the local populace. They make a token protest and turn a blind eye."

"If I understand correctly, sir, Captal cannot act without a complaint from Anall-Marr or the Four Suns government. Why would Kapel Pen invite the Serrll government to rummage through her operation? Or did Anall-Marr make the complaint?"

Anabb gave Terr an appraising glance. "Some penetrating questions you ask, for a Second Scout, but not quite right. It wasn't Kapel, son, who made the complaint," he said with relish and grinned savagely, "but her own General Assembly rep, Relina Pen."

"Her own representative?"

"We need to shake loose some of that idealism. Don't think Relina

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was overcome with sudden remorse for the plight of her people. It means that someone on Captal brought pressure to bear on her.”

“I don’t get it, sir. Why has Captal developed a sudden rash about slavery in a backwater system like the Four Suns?”

“Ah, not so clever after all. You remember who owned the Four Suns?” Anabb tapped the inlaid console pad and turned to the Wall. The grid expanded to include the border between the Karkan Federation and the Deklan Republic. At a tangent, another line indicated the border with eight systems of the small independent nonaligned Kaleen group.

“Show the Four Suns,” Anabb ordered the computer.

In the Wall a bright blue dot began to flash near the Karkan border. “There you have it, the Four Suns. Caught between Deklan’s economic expansion and the covert territorial ambitions of the Karkans.”

Terr thought he understood it then. The Karkans wanted the Four Suns back, along with other border systems they were forced to give up in a political peace deal with the Deklans that had obviously not been to their liking. Gaining the Anulus mining concession was a major steppingstone in their campaign to regain control of the system. If they could not own the Four Suns politically, perhaps they sought to dominate it economically, but was the move entirely apolitical? Could the Karkan Federation be eyeing other border systems in some strategy to win them back? Destabilize the Deklan Republic and perhaps the Revisionist Party coalition itself? If successful, it could bring down the current Sofam-dominated government on Captal; something the Karkans have been working toward for centuries.

It probably wasn’t that simple and he likely over-dramatized, but he was sure it covered most of the facts. Unless Anabb held something out on him, of course.

“Anulus is being mined by Kunoid Minerals, isn’t it?”

“One of the most powerful mining conglomerates in the Karkan Federation,” Anabb agreed.

“I think I see it, then. Should the Karkan Federation win full control of Anulus, Captal is worried they’ll flood the Serrll Combine with cheap metals, destabilizing the entire market.”

Anabb gave a sour chuckle. “Economic blackmail is what I’d call it. However, Anall-Marr is too careful to allow any such thing, even

though he's cranking Anulus for all it's worth. At any rate, the political implications of a Karkan presence in Deklan space is not part of the Envoy's terms of reference, or yours, for that matter."

"Mine, sir?"

"That's right. We're handling the matter through other channels."

That meant the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Serrll's intelligence arm. Terr would rather have fights with Maintenance any day. Obviously the Serrll government on Captal did not relish the idea of Karkans muscling in on their territory, whatever the pretext. Was the envoy really looking for incidents of slavery, or something deeper lurked behind his mission? A shadow fell across the window screen. Dark clouds had gathered and soft rain blurred the Center's skyline.

Somewhat appropriate, he felt.

"As of now, you're temporarily relieved of your command and attached to the Envoy as one of his two military aides for the duration of his mission on Elexi," Anabb said heavily.

"But, sir!" Terr protested in dismay. "I have *Ramora* undergoing critical repairs."

"Your executive officer will handle it." Anabb dismissed the matter with a wave of his hand.

"I am a Fleet line officer, sir. Not some creepy intelligence spook."

"I know what you are, Second Scout," Anabb said sharply. "The Bureau of Administrative Affairs has requested that the Envoy be supported by two military aides. You're one of them."

Rit!

"And my duties?"

"That's up to the Envoy. Distract Kapel's own intelligence machinery while the Envoy gets on with his slavery investigation."

"The only way I can distract Kapel's machinery, sir, is by finding something I'm not supposed to. You can use up a lot of officers that way."

"And I'm about to lose one right now if he isn't careful!" Anabb said with plenty of snap and leaned forward. The power burn on his cheek began to color again. "Now you listen to me. The government's motives are not your concern. The Envoy has a mission and so have you. While you're a Fleet officer, and that might not be for much longer, given your impertinence, you carry out orders. Is that clear?"

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“Perfectly, sir.”

Anabb glared, then relented. “I know you feel uncomfortable and want to look after your ship. This may be outside your comfort zone, but it’s an important assignment and a great opportunity for you to gain valuable experience. It’s only a fifteen-day tour; plenty of time for you to get back and check up on *Ramora* and Maintenance. Besides, it’ll take you out of the base commander’s hair.”

Terr didn’t trust him. Anabb was smooth and glib like a Wall ad. Too many things can happen when you start digging into other people’s business—unpleasant things. At least he knew the ropes with Maintenance. In contrast, Elexi represented a dark hole full of traps for an innocent like him.

“When do I start?”

“Have started already. An M-1 has been made available to you for the duration. I don’t have to tell you not to bend it. Soft copy of your orders are in the ship’s computer. Study them on your way to Elexi. And, Terr?”

“Sir?”

“Do your homework, son. This may be routine, but I don’t want one of my officers getting caught by a low one because his head was stuck up his ass sightseeing. Stay focused.”

“I’ll take care of myself, sir,” Terr said with more conviction than he felt.

“I can spare you, but I cannot spare the M-1,” Anabb said gruffly.

For a minute there, Terr thought the heartless old bastard actually cared. He stalked out thinking evil black thoughts.

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.

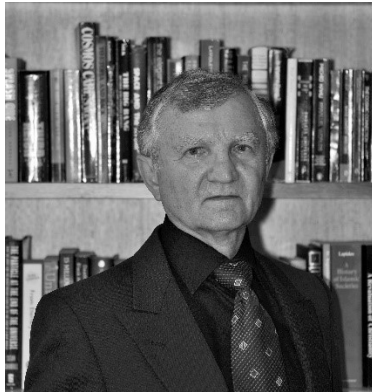
Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cellphone systems. He applied his IT discipline to create realistic storylines for his books. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends 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 Terrllss-rr is tasked to destroy the craft before international tension throws Earth into open conflict.

Against the Gods of Shadow

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

A Whisper from Shadow

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

Shadow Masters

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

Immortal in Shadow

On his way to a prison planet, Tanard, a renegade Fleet officer, escapes and vows vengeance. He is recruited by an extremist Palean group to raid Kaleen worlds. First Scout Terrllss-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?