

Review

Through the Valley of Shadow is a powerful story that pulls you deep into its depths as Terr learns to accept what he is and what he has become, and the powers that work against him. The struggle that Terr faces and the political machinations that pulls the series together are brilliant. Stefan is a gifted writer with the ability to draw you into his world.

Millennium Science Fiction & Fantasy

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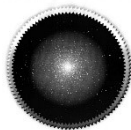
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THROUGH THE VALLEY OF SHADOW

By

Stefan Vučak



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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 Helena... and her voyage of self-discovery

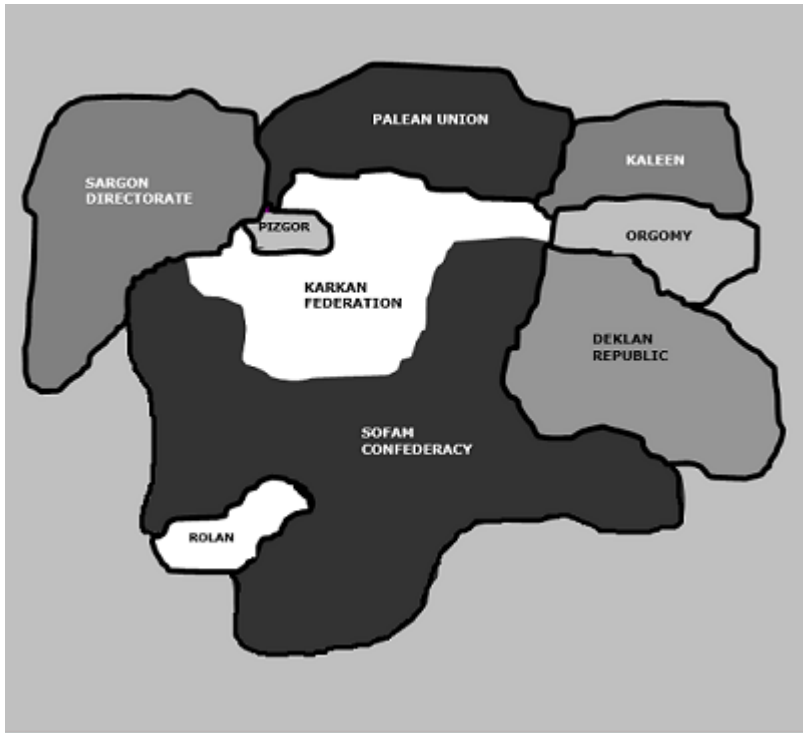
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Orion Nebula – Credit: C.R. O'Dell (Rice University), and NASA.

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Map of the Serrll Combine



Composition of the Serrll Combine

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

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

Principal political blocks:

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

Composition of the Executive Council

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

Chapter One

“Teena!” Terr cried in torn agony, arms upraised as he reached toward a turbulent sky.

Jagged and stark, lightning touched the hills and made the dwellings along the skyline flare and dance with cold white fire. With a pealing crash, thunder ripped the heavens apart. The ground cringed and shuddered. Cold and biting, the rain came down in slanting sheets, pursued by the mournful thin wailing of the wind.

He stood there and allowed the power of the wind and the rain wash over him in a vain hope of replenishing something that had been drained, torn from his very soul. He lowered his arms and gripped the ramp railing until his fingers ached from the strain. A strangled sob escaped from somewhere deep within him. He buried his face in his hands and felt the hot wetness in his eyes leak between his fingers. He wasn’t crying, just wiping the rain off his cheeks.

The hurt he felt was an agonizing throb deep inside him, of loss and betrayal and shattered faith. A feeling of being soiled, something the rain could not wash away. The pressure in his chest generated an exquisite sharp pain that probed and cut, threatening to burst through him. He clenched his fists and exhaled with a shudder. Mouth set in a rigid grimace, he tilted back his head.

“Nooooo!”

Defiance to hell sent with hate and forlorn longing. A cry of shattered innocence and lost dreams, but there was no one to hear his torment in the storm. Only the sound of rushing wind and hissing rain shared his anguish. He wrung his hands and swallowed. It went down lumpy and hard.

Shoulders hunched, he turned and stumbled back into the house. The door sighed shut behind him. His footsteps were heavy and loud in the empty corridor. Flat echoes surrounded him like a cloak, a reminder of all his yesterdays and of what might have been—fool’s dreams. Now the echoes mocked him with each step he made. A wet rivulet slid down the back of his head and icy tendrils touched his neck. He leaned against a wall, weary and lost, wishing for oblivion and its peace.

Absently, he reached into his pocket and clutched her scarf, deriving a measure of comfort from its soft touch. The liquor bar lit up as he approached. He punched in something, not really caring what, simply to stop the hurt for a while. The frosted tumbler slid out and he held it with hands that shook with coiled tension. He drank the bitter mixture in hurried gulps. He breathed out the pungent fumes with a shuddering grunt.

“Anabb ought to try this,” he mumbled and stared at the glass.

Rit!

Anger and hate boiled within him, burning with a consuming flame. That was one name he didn't care to think about. With a snarl of revulsion, he hurled the tumbler against the wall. The tinkle of broken crystal was a window into the fires of his mind, a glimpse into the chaos of his thoughts.

“Damn you,” he whispered with hissing intensity. “Damn you to hell!”

Blinking rapidly, he stared at the scarf in his hand. He extended his arm and looked at the clinging material, hanging limp and lifeless. He opened his hand and tilted it slightly. The sheer piece of precious cloth slithered with a rush and fell without a sound to make an insignificant pile on the carpet. That's how easy it was to snuff out two lives. He regarded the material and his eyes misted.

“I'm sorry, Teena...sorry...”

He didn't know how much he drank, but it must have been a lot. His eyes felt gummy and his mouth dry, tasting like rotting lawn clippings. The Wall cycled through random color patterns and he could not remember having switched it on. He finally decided it didn't matter worth a damn.

He didn't remember getting into the cable-tube and the upper level. Clutching the walls, he staggered toward the bedroom. The door slid out of his way and he blinked as pale blue light touched the walls. The wide bed appeared in front of him. He fell across it with a heartfelt groan and the lights went out, leaving only the faint green safety strip along the bottom of the walls. Her smell lingered everywhere, on blankets, pillows, everything. The very air held her presence and he could not see her. Moaning, he clutched the sheets as something hot broke within him and flowed, cutting deep as it went.

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“Teena,” he sobbed brokenly and twisted with the pain, willing her to be there. Her form shimmered beside him, pale and transparent and he reached for her. He thought she smiled. Then she was gone, leaving behind her the heat and smell of burnt desert sands. He cursed feebly as darkness descended over him like a film of gossamer.

* * *

Darkness still reigned when he woke.

He lay with his hands clasped behind his head, fingers locked, staring into the dusky depths of the ceiling, thinking of black and evil things. Through the window screen, blinking points filled the eastern sky where the canopy of stars met the somber dark hills. No wind disturbed the quiet stillness as night held its breath. The storm had washed the land and gone, its rage and anger spent. Somewhere in the night, his anger and rage also washed away, leaving behind emptiness and a coldness that surprised him. Disturbingly, he felt a hunger to reach with his hand and see Death walk again.

The words came to him unbidden. His skin tingled and he tensed as Death came and he stood in its shadow. The sands were hot beneath his feet and the sun a white hole burning through an amber sky. His cape fluttered behind him and he held his arms high. Thunder echoed among the dunes. The power flowed through him and he became one with the desert and the sky. He tilted back his head and laughed with the echoes.

But his laughter was a hollow and empty thing, a mocking memory. He felt the weight of his transgressions and knew himself unworthy of the power washing through him, tingling in his hands. The towering buttresses of Athal Than rising out of the sands of the Saffal were sharp in his mind. Perhaps it was destiny the call should come to him now when he contemplated killing a brother. He didn't believe it. The gods do not beckon without reason. He figured that taking another life now wouldn't make much of a difference anyway.

The images faded, leaving him in the blackness of his turbid thoughts.

Small noises filled the night and the air smelled wet and cold. With the shadow of Death upon him, he tried to still the turbulence of his

mind. To sleep meant to be at peace, and his soul knew no rest in the fires within which he burned. He wasn't feeling sorry for himself. That was someone else, someone in another life and another reality. Looking back, he could hardly believe how naive and stupid he'd been. The same questions tormented him over and over, but there were no new answers. A futile effort that only fanned the storm of hate raging within him. The peace he craved eluded him.

Among the murky shadows of political counterthrusts within which he and his brother worked, he could almost come to understand why Dhar may have wanted to eliminate him. Why didn't Dhar just kill him and be done with it instead of letting him crash on Earth? If he lived, Dhar must have known he would come after him. And Teena. Why take her? She had nothing to do with his missions. Was it because they were partners? That made sense, but why take her to Anar'on, of all places? He found the whole thing maddening.

Nightwings, my brother of the night...

Terr gave a heavy sigh and threw back the covers.

Rit!

Outside, stillness waited between his breaths, a silence he could feel: thick, heavy and comforting. The air crisp and invigorating, yet, as he walked toward the railing, he did not feel the cold. The moment had a timeless magical quality, and he remembered all the nights Teena and he spent beneath the veil of stars. Cloaked by their light, the two of them would sit and talk while the hills around them slept. A crazy madness where they used to explore and discover each other, becoming one. It seemed all so simple then.

My only love, to have you beside me now...

He turned and she stood there, a phosphorescent shadow that smiled at him. Her pale green eyes set slightly too far apart were big and soft, filled with compassion and love. Her small delicate mouth opened to reveal even white teeth. Long black hair stirred as in a wind. He could smell the desert sands around her.

"Teena," he murmured breathlessly and reached with a faltering hand to brush her face, aching for her touch. Her eyes never left his as she leaned against his hand. He felt the heat of her skin and his heart hammered loud in his ears.

'I love you,' she mouthed the words and her form began to blur.

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“Don’t go!” he moaned with tragic longing as she vanished, leaving behind but a burning memory.

He dropped his arm and stared at the spot where she faded, wishing her to be there. There was only silence and darkness to keep him company. His power can do a lot of things, but it cannot bring her to him. As he stared through the curtain of night, his thoughts wandered through the dusty corridors of his memories. Lost in another time and another world from which she was now gone. He leaned against the railing and gazed at the cold and cruel indifference of the stars.

Even now it all seemed almost unreal. He could hardly believe that his life could be ripped apart like this and so swiftly. Everything was gone at a stroke, a nightmare from which he longed to wake and find her beside him. He chuckled with bitter irony at the fates that led him down this road. What was really funny last night after all the things he said to Anabb, he couldn’t even bring himself to kill the cold, scheming, evil old fart, him and his fancy speeches and world-saving missions. May the canal worm crap on him, his missions, the Orieli and anyone else who got in the way. Besides, what in the pits was so damned important about the Orieli or Earth worth being slugged, shot, hunted...being away from Teena. Because of the Krans? He had never even *seen* a Kran. Probably only a slick con job spun by the Orieli for the benefit of simpleminded locals.

Like the man said, it was all high politics stuff.

Anabb even said as much, cursed be his shadow. Terr could understand the twisted workings of that evil mind, the plots and counterplots hatched in some dark corner of Anabb’s brain. That’s how the Capital movers and shakers did business. It was a game played by the powerful everywhere. Terr was not so naive that he failed to recognize it. And for what? To save them all from the Karkan Federation and the bad old Servatory Party? By all the ten gods! Was the hand of the Revisionists any cleaner? If it meant his honor, pride and self-respect, they can all go and screw themselves.

It might have been a game, but the results were just as deadly.

But why you, Nightwings, my brother?

Could Dhar really be working for the Servatory Party and Terchran, and the Karkan was trying to get even because of the Gashkarali hit? He admitted knowing about the mission. Terr stiffened and a shiver ran

down his spine. He felt the fine hairs on the back of his neck rise in faint alarm. He remembered as though it were yesterday. After the Salina conference, back on Taltair, Enllss invited both of them to a reception. An occasion to pour oil between the Servatory Party and Revisionist waters.

He cleared his mind and saw Dhar's face before him as they sat with Enllss in Anabb's office. His brother looked calm, but reproving, almost uncomfortable at the thought of meeting Terchran. A subtle reaction and anyone else would have missed it. Then again, Terr wasn't anyone. What was Terchran to him? If Dhar actively collaborated with the Servatory Party, Terr could not understand what possible motive his brother would have to get involved with them, and with Terchran, of all people. As Enllss said, the guy was a big cog in the Servatory Party wheel: a seat on the Executive Council and head of the Bureau of Technology and Development. A very heavy mover.

He simply could not believe that his brother would actually support the Servatory Party. He knew Nightwings better than that, or so he thought. He told himself that his brother was using the Servatory Party to gather intelligence for the Unified Independent Front. Dhar never made a secret of his clandestine work. If true, what threat did that pose to force him to engineer the dart crash? No, it had to be something more personal than mere intelligence gathering. Playing both ends against the middle?

In frustration, he abandoned that line of thought. It wasn't getting him anywhere. His facts were painfully skimpy and he needed to do some homework if he planned to mix it with the likes of Terchran.

In the end, he didn't care what Dhar's motive was. He only knew what he needed to do. On the way to Anar'on, he would make a small detour to Captal and check a few things out. Enllss was there and might be in a talkative mood, or open to persuasion, he mused grimly. He needed to remember that Enllss and Anabb were cast from the same scheming mold. A hell of an arrangement. Still, Enllss was family, not that it meant he trusted him. Then again, Karhide Zor-Ell would be there also, and he might have a few answers of his own.

The battle for dawn savage and short left the sky smeared with blood. With the dawn, he lost the last strands of innocence, trust and

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hope for any happiness. He did not know whether again a word or caress would ever heal his inner wounds, unless he walked the road of revenge. He knew the road he would walk was a dark shadow where Death lurked. It was also a trek of pain and misery. Each pebble a memory, each rock a word, a turning, a trial. At its end, Teena would be there waiting for him. She had to be there! If through the valley of shadow must he follow the path and face his brother with the horrors of his mind, so be it.

With a slash of a golden scimitar the sky parted. Fire splashed the hills and the shadows fled. He could feel the sun's heat and the silence of the dawn as it broke over him. Strung like crystal beads, dew hung from leaves, glistening with rainbow flashes. He watched a drop fall, almost pausing before it struck to shatter in a burst of diamond fire.

So he stood, his thoughts dark, colored with vengeance.

* * *

Terr slid the Service Special into the molded lining of his zip-jacket and brought the two ends together to seal it. Somehow, he had a feeling he would need it. In any case, the weapon was a comforting friend.

Earlier, he looked at a face and it was his. The firm features were tight and unsmiling. He brushed a hand through the slightly unruly brown-black hair, but the locks fell back into disorder. Worry lines creased his high flat forehead. The skin pale and drawn, somehow it wasn't him. Cold oval eyes mocked him above an aquiline nose. A faint scar ran down the left side of his temple above the eyebrow.

It took him a while to figure out what was wrong. The eyes, dark gray, remote and unforgiving, belonged to a stranger. Well, not quite. That part of him had been...sleeping. Now that it was awake, Terr decided the world from those eyes wasn't any damn different as seen from his. He pulled back his shoulders with a grimace and hoped that everyone better the hell be on the ball, for he was coming, ready or not.

The communal waited on the landing apron and he did not want to tarry. Somehow the rooms and the corridors felt cold and deserted, haunted with solitary memories lost in yesterday. Not a home anymore and he didn't belong now. He looked around one last time, not sure whether he would see his house again. On the rug lay Teena's scarf. Not

knowing why, he reached for it and touched the flowing material. A feeling of warmth spread through him, comforting and soothing away some of the hurt. He tucked it into his pocket, set his mouth into a tight line and took the cable-tube to the lower level.

The door closed behind him with a smooth hiss and part of his life ended. He told the house to reset security and walked briskly to the landing ramp.

The driver stood beside the communal, its bubble open and inviting. When Terr walked up to him, the driver touched his head with the tips of his fingers and opened the door. Short and wiry, he stood there, staring through myopic steel eyes.

“Morning, sir,” he growled, not caring. Just another fare to him. Well, that was all right with Terr also.

He looked through the driver, stepped in and settled himself into the upholstery. It smelled of cheap scent, unwashed bodies, and dirty socks, mixed with a hint of something sweet and tantalizingly familiar.

The communal rose smoothly. He glanced down where the house dwindled quickly, blending into the rolling landscape of the Tildera Estate. He kept his face pressed against the bubble and watched until the house vanished among the steep hills. The estates blurred together as the communal gained height, his residence becoming just one of many. Then he looked away. Hell, it was only a house.

“Tal Field, right?” The voice broke through his reverie and he looked at the back of the driver’s head. Greased and stringy the hair hid a purple welt along the neck.

He thumbed the mike pad, thinking about things and nothing in particular.

“Yeah, military strip.”

“Hey! You one of them Fleet guys, buddy?” The driver glanced at Terr in the front reflection strip, grinning hugely. The communal sagged to port as it swung past Barden toward the spaceport.

“Sort of,” Terr said. At least he thought he was. He remembered Anabb saying something about resignation from the Diplomatic Branch. But then, a lot of things were said last night, and some of them might even have been true.

“Been there myself. Second Powerman on an M-4. Spent most of

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my time in the Palean Union. Ever cruised around there?” The communal steadied into a smooth flight. Terr could see others in the flight pattern.

“Mmm.”

“Man, those Palean spotter chicks are the absolute end. Off the Wall.” The driver shook his head and chuckled fondly. “Why, I—”

“Look, pal, I’m only paying for the trip, not a reunion tour. So let’s cut the tourist crap. Copy that?”

“Just being sociable, buddy,” the driver mumbled and his shoulders sagged.

Terr muttered something uncharitable and stared at the scenery. On his right, the city towers glittered in morning light as they pierced the sky. He could almost hear its cry of agony. The southeastern suburban sprawl merged into an olive haze of low, distant hills. Directly ahead the mixed industrial complexes appeared out of the surrounding parkland. He glanced at the thick neck before him and shrugged. It was the driver’s bad luck to have picked him up this morning, is all.

The Field Administration building slowly reared itself against the city’s skyline and grew swiftly in size. The tower was a landmark feature of the terminus complex, a giant mushroom with two jutting flat platforms mounted a third of the way down. A flared base supported the round building. The lower larger platform served as a landing ramp for communals, combies, and cargo couriers. The upper level handled the business end of Taltair’s SC&C control.

The traffic around them began to fill as they neared the inter-star terminus. The landing field lay spread in a pattern of work hangars, aprons, and approach ramps. Ships lay scattered around the docking rings. The traffic lines slowly merged into the control network, giving the Admin tower a wide berth. His pal up front kept glancing at him from time to time, muttering to himself. Maybe just checking that Terr hadn’t walked out on him or something.

Tal Field was a busy place. In addition to civilian terminals the complex housed a major Scout Fleet service and refurbishment facility. The four civilian terminals, with their landing rings radiating out like spokes on a giant wheel were cluttered with all kinds of ships, from small scooters to giant Deklan passenger tubs. Connected by access tubes the ships looked like insects crowding the petals of a bright flower. Maintenance

trolleys and cargo platforms sped across the apron in seemingly unordered confusion. In contrast the two somber-painted military complexes exuded a more subdued atmosphere.

A Sargon liner drifted down in slow majesty, a flattened glowing cylinder clad in an orange shimmer of its nav screen. Terr watched as it disappeared behind the building complex of the terminus and wondered where it came from. He didn't really care. Just idle curiosity. The communal swung into the service ring of the passenger terminal, then rocked wildly as a combie flashed before them and cut them off.

"Did you see that?" the driver screamed in outrage. "Bastard should have his permit revoked. I don't know what the hell this crapped-out place is coming to," he snarled and jerked the communal out of the ring and slid sharply onto the military strip.

Terr hardly paid attention, his thoughts far away.

Being in the Fleet, he would not have to clear customs or fight through the inevitable throng of wild-eyed civilian passengers with squalling brats and assorted luggage in tow. Their bored, vacant, anxious faces as they waited for their flights were pathetic and depressing. He hated civilian ports. He wasn't comfortable surrounded by cloying, noisy, undisciplined masses. A personal weakness.

A security point barred the entrance to the military terminal. A bouncer type MP, slick in parade grays, white gloves, and black boots, a phase rifle slung at port arms, waited to greet him. Terr looked him over. The MP was all solid slabs of muscle and carried himself in a manner designed to intimidate and discourage. He decided to forget the jokes this time. The guy looked mean, like he didn't care for any visitors messing up his floor polish. Especially some dirt-hugging civilian. The communal settled gently. The MP stood to attention as a matter of form and the rifle casually slid down his side.

The bubble slid away. The driver stepped out and opened the door. Terr climbed out and stood beside the communal. The driver looked wistfully around the landing area, and then climbed back into the communal. Terr waited as it rose quickly and watched it vanish in the curve of the military strip. Seeing the well-used rifle beside the MP, he recognized the smell in the communal—sagoran leather oil, used for the care and feeding of military boots. Was the driver one of Anabb's shadowing agents? He shook his head and chuckled, not caring.

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“Ah, sir,” the MP growled menacingly, fingering the rifle. “This is a restricted area. I’ll have to ask you for some ID before I can let you go any farther.”

Terr looked at him and nodded.

At the booth, he stuck his hand against the sensor plate. After a moment, it lit up, showing his rank and insignia of the Diplomatic Branch. Then it flickered again and displayed a face he hardly recognized, a face that belonged to another time and another life. It was a younger version of himself, trusting and eager to right all the wrongs. He shook his head in wonder, bemused as he stared at the plate through his crusty shell of newly grown cynicism. Had he really been that naive?

A line at the bottom of the plate attracted his attention. It showed his status as ‘Detached’. He shrugged with indifference. Okay, it might make a few things easier, but detached or not, he would find Dhar. Afterward, there would be plenty of time to add ‘Permanent’ to that notation.

The MP stood to, his face wooden, but his eyes were alive and full of questions. Terr barely glanced at him. Without a word, he headed for the cable-tube. It took him down to the landing area flight line.

Outside, he squinted at the sky, then looked quickly around the apron. Two M-4s towered like black cliffs beside him, but failed to dwarf the terminal despite their imposing size. Beneath their curved bellies, he could see part of an M-6 hovering on the far side of the field. On its right, three monstrous assembly hangars cast a black shadow across the daunting warship. Inside one of the open hangars, scaffolding enclosed part of an M-3. Bright floodlights glared against its exposed hull frames. Maintenance and Fleet personnel filled some of the empty spaces.

But he wasn’t here for sightseeing. He took one of the parked sled-pads, punched in the landing bay number and the sled streaked across the apron.

His pulse quickened as the sled-pad neared the squat pebble shape of the M-1 scout. He felt mild anticipation at the prospect of getting away. In space, things were clean and simple, uncluttered by intrigue and deception. And right now, he needed to return to that basic simplicity. He needed a moment of peace and solitude to think things through. Rushing into danger and glory with projectors blazing might

sound romantic. That might have been enough when he thought it easy to tell right from wrong. Now, he wasn't so sure things were ever that simple. In that, he admitted grudgingly, Anabb could have been right. He was honest enough with himself to realize the threads making up the political tapestry held little interest for him, until now.

Like the guy said, it was all high politics stuff, sport.

The sled slowed and glided to a stop beneath *Sheeva's* curved hull. Terr jumped off, strode up the ramp and pressed his palm against the access plate. The plate stirred and the hatch slid open. Warm air spilled around him and brought with it machinery and lived-in smells. He walked in without a backward glance.

The tube brought him up one level to the command deck. The navigation bubble, running chest-high around the deck, cleared immediately. Sloping control panels hugged part of the curved hull. He lowered himself into the central couch and scanned the displays. A flight always made him feel renewed with zest and an eagerness to reach out and grasp the stars. This time, he felt nothing, only a desire to be off. Merely another body job like he'd done many times before.

It didn't take him long to preflight.

"Status?"

"Nominal," the computer responded.

"Secure for lift. Clear with SC&C for immediate departure and file a flight plan for Captal."

"Landing ramp retracted and all exterior connections secured." Terr felt a slight pressure surge when the hatch closed. "Navigation deflector grid activated."

Inactive panels began to glow soft amber and yellow in a mosaic of color-reactive contact pads.

"Surface Command and Control has cleared for lift. System check complete. Lift sequence enabled." The projected flight plan appeared as a bright line on the curve of the nav bubble above him. The main control plate before him glowed into life.

He was surprised that SC&C cleared him so quickly. Had he a suspicious and nasty nature, he might have suspected they were monitoring him. No matter. Out of habit, he scanned the status boards one more time.

"Proceed with lift."

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“Lift sequence active. Confirm.”

“Continue. Maximum boost.”

“Caution. Maximum boost is in violation—”

“Disregard. Proceed,” Terr said irritably.

Beneath the ship the landing skids retracted and *Sheeva* hovered. Free of an alien element, it lifted swiftly, accelerated and tore through the atmosphere. Thunder followed in its wake as air fell into a column of vacuum. He broke a stack of military and civilian regulations climbing out like this, but he simply didn't give a damn.

“I'm coming, Teena,” he murmured as the sky turned black.

Chapter Two

Anabb picked up the frosted tumbler and took an absent sip. Ice clinked in the glass, a sound loud in the silence that hung around him like a heavy cloak. A bit early in the day for a drink, but he found the mere act of playing with the ice comforting. He sat back in the formchair and twirled the tumbler between his hands as he followed the merging patterns of outside traffic—fleeting lines of anonymous lives, appearing and disappearing, carried toward unknown destinations and destinies.

As seemingly was his.

He allowed his gaze to drift around his temporary office. His luckless First Assistant gave up the rooms with reluctant grace, office space at a premium at any time. The cramped place with its subdued décor made him grimace. Not at all in the style of his old luxurious chambers. Well, each to his own taste, he decided graciously. Anyway, he would only be here a few days.

He frowned as his eyes flickered toward the awkwardly placed window screen. The only thing he could see were the towers of the Center, linked by a web of tubeways and the city beyond. On a wall to his left hung a modernist impression relief. The colors were harsh and the angles sharp, a mountain terrain of eye-twisting shapes. He tried to keep his eyes from wandering to it. Blinking, he consoled himself with the thought that he would have to endure this optical torture for a couple of more days only.

When the cable-tube took him up that morning, he paused before his old office and looked in at the blackened walls, the splintered furniture and the charred hole where the window screen stood. The repair crew barely glanced at him. His skin crawled as he remembered yesterday. He didn't sleep well last night, reliving his encounter with Terr. Images of lightning tearing through him kept him awake, moaning, leaving him drenched in sweat. The boy's naked display of such awesome power had shaken him.

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After washing, he stared at the reflection in the mirror and wondered at the change that had overtaken him. His hair looked more faded and the streaks of white were getting broader. The amber flecks in his brown, close-set eyes, hidden beneath ridges of untidy white eyebrows, turned muddy and lifeless. The high cheekbones, covered with an olive parchment-like skin, stood out sharply on the narrow chiseled face. The ragged blue-veined burn on his left cheek looked like a piece of dead fish. His thin white lips, pressed into a questioning line, were still firm and challenging. Well, it was something.

Being Director of the Diplomatic Branch had its rewards and pains. Not for the first time did he wonder whether the price of Serrll security was worth the coin of disillusionment and shattered lives. For the greater good, was that the current party line? When he left the Fleet seven years ago to enter the General Assembly, he promised himself he would not allow his Branch to get caught in the web of Captal intrigues. He moved the Branch to Taltair to make certain, among other things. Could his reasoning have been flawed, given the purpose of the Branch was covert operations and intelligence gathering? By being away from the center of power, did that limit his ability to exercise the Branch's charter? Something to ponder on.

As he sat behind the wide expanse of the borrowed desk, he looked down at his chest. Colored pins and stars—awards and orders—filled a red-bordered oval. Visible recognition of bravery, achievement and loyalty gained under fire, duplicity, and treachery. As an ex-Fleet flag officer, he ought to wear them with pride.

The Fleet had rewarded him well and also exacted its toll in the process. His duty postings often meant long periods away from his family. When he made the decision to leave the Fleet for the Assembly, it broke the relationship. His partner declared flatly she shared him with one career for forty years and looked forward to some quality time together. She was not prepared to share him with another, not on Taltair of all places, then threw his bag out the front door. When he happened to visit Captal, she declared, he could see her. And that's how it had been for the last seven years. His son was on an expedition somewhere near the galaxy's core. He might as well be dead as far as Anabb was concerned. Even with a subspace transition drive, those ships would not be returning for years to come, if at all.

He absently stroked the oval with the side of his thumb. Yeah, he had a lot to be proud of. Getting too old for this crap, he decided. Sentimental certainly.

By the beard of the canal worm!

The comms alert beeped and flashed for attention. He carefully laid down the tumbler and reached across the desk. He touched a pad in the inlaid control array and turned toward the Wall.

“He’s gone, I presume?” he growled, watching the expressions fade and merge on the Tal Field Dispatcher’s pinched face.

“Yes, sir. Just cleared the control net.”

“What’s his flight plan?”

“Captal, sir, as you indicated. I must point out that Master Scout Terrlls-rr committed several serious air violations with his unorthodox lift—”

“Thank you, Dispatcher,” Anabb said and cut the connection, not really in the mood for the other’s tirade of Terr’s petty infringements. He had no time for such trivia. Let the dispatcher file a protest. The face wore a frustrated expression as it faded.

He touched another pad and the image of his personal aide swam into view. Her delicate high cheekbones accentuated the fragile beauty of full lips and long neck. Bald head narrow and oval, she looked delicate, which hid toughness that lay inside. Dedicated and extremely competent, she could have her pick of corporate positions. For reasons he could not discern, she somehow tolerated his crusty and sometimes bullying behavior. She’d been with him since his time on Captal, and he could not imagine a day without her being there.

“Ariane, get me Commissioner Enlls-rr, will you?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, her tight voice unable to hide the underlying tension and strain.

“You look terrible. Go home. You’re no good to me all wrung out,” he said gruffly, trying to hide genuine concern for his aide. It wouldn’t do at all if his staff felt he actually *cared*.

Thunderation!

“I’m still capable of carrying out my duties, sir,” she said sternly.

“So you say.”

“Sir,” she began reluctantly, wanting to share. “Terr...I mean, is he really a Wanderer?”

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She always took Terr for granted. Everyone in the Branch did. He was what was known as a romantic figure. Despite dashing away to assignments in exotic locations, she suspected there was probably very little glamour in what he did, as Teena sometimes confided during their chats. Last night came as a rude shock and a sobering reminder of what he really was, or had become since his transformation on Anar'on. The image of Anabb's shattered door and Terr standing there, cloaked in some terrible power, left her weak. She did not sleep well and suspected that Anabb hadn't either.

"I don't know what he is, Ariane."

"Last night—"

"Try and forget it."

Her image dissolved into random color patterns and he frowned. That was a stupid thing to say. How could she forget what happened when his mind swirled with nothing else. He picked up the tumbler and stood up. The window screen cleared and the city glared at him. Two short steps brought him to the screen. The towers of the Center looked stark and alien, somehow cold and impersonal. He hated that view. What he needed was to get back into space. Things were uncluttered out there, the decisions different, something he understood well and felt comfortable with.

There was no going back, ever, and sinking into nostalgia would not get the job done.

The comms alert beeped. He strode back to his desk and sat down heavily. When the Wall cleared, it showed a face not unlike his own. A face used to intrigue, command, and manipulation. Studying the face, he could not help noticing the close family resemblance to Terr. They both had the same strong features and firm jawline above a thick, powerful neck. Enlls's unruly hair almost all white showed the years.

In the background, Captal glared in a blaze of light. The time differential with Taltair had always presented a problem with communication. Something he did deliberately. When setting up the Branch, he wanted to make sure Captal's bureaucrats would not be haranguing his staff unnecessarily. It served to filter out all but the most important messages.

Sometimes it worked.

"Took you long enough to call," Enlls commented dryly. "I'm

about to pack it in for the day.”

“Consider yourself fortunate that I called at all.”

“Why the sarcasm? Had a bad day?”

“Bad night. Terr came to see me yesterday.”

“Ah. Wish I could have been there.”

“No, you don’t.”

“What happened?”

“He damn near killed me, that’s what,” Anabb snapped in exasperation. “You should see my office. It’s totaled. I’m beginning to understand his dislike for some of my capers, as he puts it. In the same way, I don’t like some of yours, Enlls.”

“Any particular one in mind?”

“Yes, the one we’re running right now. That *you’re* running!”

“You’ll get over it. Where is he now?”

“You just don’t want to listen, do you?”

“I only want to know where he is Anabb, not sit here having you pontificate on my policies or methods.”

“Can’t take it, eh? He left Tal Field a few minutes ago. You can expect him on Captal in five days.”

“You’re sure he’s coming here?”

“Sure I’m not,” Anabb said testily, his ill humor thinly veiled. “But that’s the flight plan he filed.”

“I’ll be ready.”

“What are you going to tell him?”

“I’ll deal with it when he gets here.”

“Deal with it now, or your office could end up like mine.”

“I gather he must have been more than a little upset.”

“Upset? Thunderation! How would you feel after returning from a mission which almost killed him, only to find your partner gone and a brother he thinks betrayed him gone with her?”

“Pissed, I guess,” Enlls said and laughed. Anabb glared at him.

“I don’t see anything particularly funny here. Your high-power plotting may have cost me two valuable agents.” He felt smoldering anger at Enlls’ callousness, obviously enjoying the situation at his expense. Then he realized Enlls only tried to relieve the situational tension.

“I shouldn’t be snapping at you, but the boy was hurt and he hit back. I’m not particularly proud of what I had to do,” he allowed to

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himself. He took a pull from the tumbler, only to find it empty. He banged the thing on the desk in irritation.

Enllss pursed his lips and thrust out his jaw. "It needed to be done and you know it."

"I wonder."

"You don't really mean that?"

"No, I guess not," Anabb said evenly, but felt the years on his shoulders a real burden. "But they're both Wanderers and you've set forces in motion over which you may not have much control."

"Crap happens sometimes. The trick is not to be around when it does."

"Don't underestimate him, Enllss. Terr is smart, very smart. Should he find out that all this was done through your hand, he could take out more than your office."

"You think I don't know that? As I said. I'll deal with it when he gets here. Not to change the subject, is anything new on the Independent Representatives Conference?"

Anabb shook his head. "Marrakan isn't interfering with my agents, or Illeran's. I should pull them back for all the good they're doing. If someone wanted to disrupt the proceedings, I doubt they'll do it on Anar'on."

"Where then?"

"Salina."

"Salina? Now, that's an interesting thought. Why there? It's just a stopover."

"Exactly my point. All the delegates from the Rolan group and the surrounding nonaligned systems will gather there before proceeding to Anar'on. Each is either head of his respective system or some equivalent knob. Could be a perfect opportunity for Illeran to rid himself of irksome troublemakers. At least that's how he sees them."

"Not exactly a novel theory, Anabb. The Paleans tried that gag five years ago with the Naklanor Unified Independent Front plenary meeting, remember?"

"All too well, but it's more serious this time."

"Okay, let's kick it around a bit. Why would Illeran be looking for trouble this time around?"

"Illeran isn't going to implicate himself or the Servatory Party by

doing anything directly to compromise the Unified Independent Front. He might not love them, but he's not a fool. However, there are plenty of other factions who'd be willing to do his bidding. Think of the consequences. If they succeed in silencing some of the delegates, it could disrupt the entire Conference. It could also delay the ratification of the Unified Independent Front, maybe beyond the coming General Assembly elections. The whole movement could founder, unlikely as that might be, and Illeran wouldn't mind it at all."

"You're right. He wouldn't mind it at all," Enllss said, pleased he never had cause to regret sponsoring Anabb into the Assembly or to his post as head of the Diplomatic Branch. It cost him some favors, but it had been worth it. As always, Anabb's analyses were sharp and dead center. "Did anybody ever tell you that you have a suspicious and distrusting nature?"

"After fighting Captal bureaucrats for twenty years, you'd also have a suspicious nature," Anabb remarked darkly.

Enllss chuckled. "Point taken. It strikes me, though, if you're going to start looking for plots, make sure you blame it on the right man."

"Oh?"

"It could be worth keeping an eye on our Sargon friend."

"Ed-Kani Takao? I haven't thought of him."

"Think of him now. My guess is that he would also sleep a lot better if something unpleasant were to happen to those delegates, even if he had to arrange the help. Just because five years ago their scheme to absorb Pizgor failed, it doesn't mean he or the AUP Provisional Committee have given up. This is mere speculation, mind you. A useful item at a cocktail party—"

"You would know all about that," Anabb said with a straight face. Enllss ignored him.

"All this is a lot of wishful thinking. Like Illeran, Ed-Kani wouldn't dare attack a diplomatic mission, no matter what the payoff. If the operation ever surfaced the resulting stink would mean Sargon's end. The Assembly would demand punitive action and get it. Ed-Kani's supporters and the Committee would not enjoy that kind of exposure."

"You'd never be able to trace it to them, Enllss. Nevertheless, I won't tempt them. I'll order an M-4 to provide the delegates with suitable transportation—"

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“And protection?”

“I don’t want any incidents. I’ve had enough already.”

“Frankly, I think you’re overreacting. After what happened at Italan, they’d be dumb to pull another stunt like that. I must admit the media aren’t helping any either. They have blown this thing into endless rounds of analyses and dissections. The whole mess is giving me the craps.”

“What did you expect? It isn’t every day you get to see the formation of a new interstellar power block. And the Unified Independent Front is today’s news.”

“Maybe you’re right. What about Marrakan? We would look damn foolish with our thumbs stuck up our asses watching everybody else while he got sanded.”

Anabb waved his hand in dismissal. “I wouldn’t worry about him. He seems well able to take care of his own.”

Ever since Terr started working for the Diplomatic Branch, Anabb took it upon himself to study the Wanderers, the *Saftara*, and their enigmatic tribal leader in particular; Marrakan, Controller of Anar’on and Prime Director of the Kaleen group. His name meant Sword of the Wind. Sowing a swathe of confusion through Captal, the name was rather apt, he felt.

Steeped in the mysticism of the Discipline and the deserts of his world, Marrakan’s was the life of every Wanderer on that desert planet. He also breathed life into the Unified Independent Front. As its most powerful advocate, Marrakan’s personal magnetism convinced Orgomy to unite with Kaleen’s group of systems to form what would become for some a very unwelcome new political force within the Serrll Combine.

“If we’re covering everybody on the list, what about Tarim Alai Kamara? He’s on Captal now, isn’t he? Being Prime Director of the Orgomy group, he would be worth taking out of the picture.”

“I doubt that,” Anabb disagreed. “Orgomy is fully committed to the UIF, with or without Kamara. At any rate, Marrakan will see to it that Kamara gets old enough to enjoy his coming retirement. You know, of course, that sooner or later, Marrakan will notice the leaching of UIF operatives from sensitive Captal positions. It could be embarrassing.”

“The government will not be implicated.”

“What about you, my friend? If you’re expecting a nomination to the Executive Council, an internal security scandal is the last thing you need.”

“Your concern is laudable, Anabb, but unwarranted. I made sure I wouldn’t be the one hanging on that proverbial limb. No matter what happens.”

“Well, you’re old enough to know how the game is played.”

“Quite.” Enlls cut contact.

Anabb gave a small smile. The day was looking up.

* * *

“Asshole,” Enlls muttered, piqued at Anabb’s flippant attitude.

The Wall faded. He reached across the desk and savagely tapped instructions into the inlaid console pad that shut down access to his office system.

What in blazes was wrong with everybody these days, anyway? Just because he openly declared his ambitions, everyone wanted to sand him down. Either because of political rivalry, jealousy, or revenge for pissing off some lobby group. Bastards, all of them, he decided in the end.

To hell with it. He’d had a long and weary day. Time to get out of the damn office. He stood and swept the office with one quick look. Satisfied, he strode briskly toward the milky translucent panels. They hissed as they slid out of his way.

His aide looked up, her delicate eyebrows arched in a questioning frown.

“Where is Tariq? He should have been waiting for me, his nose pressed against those doors,” he grated, thumb hooked over his shoulder.

“The First Assistant is working on the Orieli brief you requested,” she said primly, obviously upset with something. Right now, he had no time for office politics or handholding. Did they consider him a father figure? Let her talk to a mindbender.

“When he’s through, remind him that I’ll want his presentation first thing in the morning.”

“He’ll be spending most of the night—”

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“Another thing,” he said, not hearing her. “I’ll want his update on our ecoforming operations in the Palean Union. He already slipped a day on that one. I better have that update on my desk as I walk in tomorrow or I’ll get upset. He won’t like it if I get upset so early in the day.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Anything else I should know?”

“Commissioner Sill-Anais from the Bureau of Cultural Affairs called a few moments ago,” she said with a hint of disapproval. “He’s waiting for you in the Executive Lounge.”

“By damn! I forgot all about him. Call and tell him that I’m on my way up.”

“Very well. Good night, sir.”

Just because it was night, the Center and the rest of Captal hardly slowed down. As the political heart of the Serrll, Captal could not afford to sleep. For senior executives it sometimes made for a long working day—and night. Not all found the arrangement to their liking. Just one of the smaller prices they paid for power.

Enllss stepped into the cable-tube. The image of luxurious interior paneling immediately rippled and became transparent. The city around him blazed with light and activity. His gaze absent, he mulled over various issues he dealt with during the day or remained to be done. Some problems were personal, like Terr’s. Despite what he told Anabb, he didn’t exactly relish the prospect of confronting the boy, but some things just had to be faced.

The cable-tube slowed and the outside scenery faded. The doors opened and slid into the walls. He paused before stepping out. Not crowded, the Executive Lounge had a sprinkle of faces he recognized. A pleasant buzz of subdued voices filled the plush dining room. Most of the tables around the edge of the softly lit dome were filled, which left an awkward emptiness in the middle. Everybody wanted a city view. High above the transparent dome, lines of commuter and commercial traffic, stacked at various levels, moved in orderly rows.

A discrete cough brought him back to reality.

“Mr. Commissioner?” The short waiter bowed, his bald head gleaming. Enllss smiled fondly at the frail bent figure, old when he was still a moist, fresh-caught Assembly representative.

“Mallaway, how are you tonight?”

“Tolerable. Thank you for asking, sir,” Mallaway answered gravely. Wrinkled skin sagged on his sad, bony face.

“I understand your granddaughter will graduate from the Center for Political Studies soon.”

Pleased that the commissioner remembered, Mallaway nodded. “With honors, sir,” he said with obvious pride as they threaded their way between the tables. Faces turned and some smiled. Enllss nodded in acknowledgment.

“Don’t forget my offer. If she wants to join any of the Bureaus, let me know.”

“She’s considering applying and I’ll tell her. Your table, sir.”

Sill looked up as Enllss approached. He waited until Mallaway seated him.

“Didn’t mean to be late, Sill,” Enllss said by way of an apology as he lowered himself into the yielding formchair.

“Ach! You’ve been avoiding me,” Sill piped, his massive barrel chest producing a surprisingly high voice.

Twin bands of dark gray streaked Sill’s long white hair, worn in traditional Deklan fashion. Thin white eyebrows outlined large, liquid wide-set gray eyes. Pinched and dry beneath an olive complexion, the face had deep lines of responsibility. Most commissioners and executive directors had them. Tall and wiry, his movements were delicate and precisely measured.

“Hardly that,” Enllss snorted.

Unobtrusively, Mallaway brought their favorite drinks and a tray of edible tidbits. They hardly noticed as he crept around the table. Mallaway prided himself on being unobtrusive. Enllss hated to think of all the plots and schemes the old waiter had overheard during his years of service in the Lounge.

“I wouldn’t have to resort to secret dinners if you would condescend to see me during the day,” Sill commented dryly.

“Secret dinners?” Enllss raised an eyebrow and looked around. “Seems crowded enough to me.”

“Ach! You know what I mean.”

“Relax, Sill,” Enllss said and picked up a canapé. He scrutinized it for a moment, then popped it into his mouth. He chewed, swallowed

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and licked his lips. “The government won’t fold because I didn’t get around to seeing you.”

“Ach! That’s just it. It could.”

“Oh?”

“Have you seen Illeran lately? It seems he’s been keeping himself pretty busy. His office has more people coming and going than an inter-star terminus.”

“I suspect he’s positioning the Servatory Party to challenge the Sofam Confederacy’s right to our fourth seat on the Executive,” Enllss said casually, enjoying the look of surprise on Sill’s face.

“Okay. How did you figure that?”

Enllss took a pull from his tumbler and nodded in appreciation. “Not bad. Must be new stock. Tried yours?”

“Ach! Who the crud cares—”

“Such language from a priest of the Path,” Enllss admonished with an upraised finger.

“Damn the Path! This is serious.”

Enllss laughed. “Take it easy, Sill. Leave the office closed for a change, will you?”

“Unfortunately, once you strap it on, it’s for keeps.”

“You’ve got that right. How is the family?”

“My partner is making a pilgrimage to Deklan.”

“Ah, the Kalkoon festival,” Enllss said and Sill shook his head sadly.

“It’s the Kall-oon, you heretic.”

“Whatever.”

“Have you heard from Anabb?” Sill asked casually as he played with his tumbler. Enllss chuckled.

“As a matter of fact, I just spoke to him. He told me to expect Terr in five days. You can consider that part of the mission successfully concluded.”

“Ach! Hardly the term I would use. You’ve not only compromised Dharaklin and the Servatory Party cell he ran on Taltair, you also alienated Agent Terr. Was that really necessary? As it is, I might lose both if there is a confrontation between them.”

“Their ability to support the Unified Independent Front cause is neutralized,” Enllss said flatly. “That’s all that matters.”

Sill stared at his friend in dismay. “I cannot believe you said that.

Has your preoccupation with Sofam's political survival so clouded your judgment that individuals have become irrelevant? Your nephew—"

"Sill—"

"Ach! If either of them gets hurt, friend or not, I'll take you before the Bureau of Administrative Affairs. I mean it."

Enllss could see that Sill took this seriously, but was his indignation genuine or a twinge of a guilty conscience? He decided it might not be either.

"I wouldn't have thought it of you. Busy covering your ass when so much is at stake."

"I warned you—"

"Let's leave it, okay? I'm hungry. You want to order?"

Mallaway appeared silently without being summoned, a minimum skill in the Executive Lounge. He waited for them to make their orders, then departed just as unobtrusively.

Sill appeared relieved by the distraction. "About Illeran—"

"Forget him, and I'm not understating the gravity of their challenge—"

"The difference this time is that they could pull it off."

"This time, we don't care," Enllss told him.

"Careful what you say, my friend. Ach! They lock people up for less than that. Your fourth Executive seat is vital if the Revisionists want to hold the government majority, you know that."

"Between you and me, Sill, I never did like this practice of sharing power based on a percentage of held systems. Executive policy tends to be colored by expansionist schemes of the participating power blocks."

"Or thoughts of conquest. Yes, I know. Consider Sargon and the Paleans."

"My point exactly. I console myself with the comforting fact that in two years' time they will all be gone. Illeran, Terchran, Ed-Kani Takao and their schemes with them."

"Ach! Only to be replaced by someone else with a new set of schemes," Sill pointed out and Enllss laughed.

"Of course. As for that fourth seat, we have it secured."

"By giving some protectorates independent status and getting them to join the Sofam Confederacy? It's the only way you can boost your

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percentage of held systems to warrant that fourth seat.”

“That is *exactly* what we plan to do. And there is not a damn thing Illeran or the Servatory Party can do about it. By the way, we already have the systems and their agreements,” Enllss said smugly, enjoying the stricken look on Sill’s face.

“Ach! You’ve got to be kidding.”

Enllss smiled and pointed at Sill’s tumbler. “Drink up before your chin hits the table.”

Sill ignored him. “When did Sofam manage to pull this off? Deklan never had any indication that you’ve taken such steps.”

“I know. If your intelligence hasn’t picked it up, then maybe Illeran’s hasn’t either. At any rate, it doesn’t matter whether he knows or not. The agreement will be announced at the next Executive Council meeting.”

“As coalition partners we should have been informed,” Sill pointed out petulantly.

“What are you sore about, anyway? Because we didn’t keep our nose pressed against the Ecumenical Synod’s butt?”

“That’s blasphemy!”

“You make me tired, Sill. Two years before the general elections, you come trotting in with dire warnings about that infernal fourth seat. What did you expect? That I would fall at your feet in gratitude for pointing out the obvious? If you were so concerned about the health of our coalition, I would like to know what in blazes the Synod was doing for the last seven years to help us solve the problem. I’ll tell you. They were sitting on their hands practicing Deklan’s particular version of coalition loyalty.”

“Ach! That’s unfair.”

“Unfair? We’ve known each other a long time. So let’s cut out the worm crap, okay? The Deklan Republic is feeling its religious muscle. The way you look at things, there isn’t all that much to pick from between Sofam and the Karkans. Both are sinful, decadent, and lacking in moral fiber.”

Sill sat back and chuckled, a high-pitched cackle. “Both of you *are* decadent. And your feeble attempt to provoke me will not work. We only want to bring the light of the Path—”

“Spare me! It’s all about influence. Let’s face it. It always has been.

The difference with Deklan is that you disguise it as evangelism.”

Sill stared hard at Enlls. “The Revisionists rule because of our support. Don’t forget that, my irreverent friend.”

“The unspoken threat being, should that support be withdrawn, Sofam would find itself in an unenviable position, right?”

“Ach! With Sargon wooing the Paleans, your dancing around the Unified Independent Front suddenly takes on another dimension, doesn’t it? With two years to go before the next elections, Sofam cannot be certain that those independent systems you’ve signed on will keep their agreement.”

“True. So?”

“You’re actually worried, aren’t you? You must know that Deklan would not withdraw its support.”

“I know no such thing,” Enlls said bluntly. Sill ignored him.

“However, if we were to consider it, hypothetically speaking, of course—”

“Of course.”

“We would have you over that well-known barrel.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about the UIF. They’ll support us, all right,” Enlls said comfortably.

Too shrewd to ask why Sofam was so confident, Sill figured they had something on the UIF, or Marrakan, or both.

“The problem with Deklan and the Synod,” Enlls went on, “is that you have never forgiven us for blocking your attempt to annex the Kaleen group, have you?”

“It was our right! They are nothing but heathen savages.”

“With delusions of godhood to boot,” Enlls prompted and smiled broadly.

“Sacriligious crap. Ach!”

“Not fit to hold an Executive seat at all, are they?”

“Exactly!” Sill snapped, then paled at the enormity of his blunder. “Ah, what I meant—”

“I know what you meant,” Enlls said with dark satisfaction. “Converted into political coin, religious fervor can be a powerful influence. The rub is, you can only spend it once. If I had any influence with the Ecumenical Synod, Sill, I would tell them to do their shopping carefully. Changing allegiances might not turn out to be such a bargain after all.”

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Sill regarded Enllss for a long moment before raising his tumbler in a salute.

“Ach! You and your breed are indeed dangerous.”

“Don’t tempt us to prove it,” Enllss said, his smile predatory and his threat clear. Sill reached across the table to touch Enllss’ hand.

“My friend, the Deklan Republic has no intention of threatening the Revisionist coalition. Every now and then it is useful to remind your partner that you cannot be taken for granted.”

“Sill, I never take *anything* for granted,” Enllss said with a straight face and a cold shiver ran down Sill’s spine.

It hadn’t turned into one of his best evenings.

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.

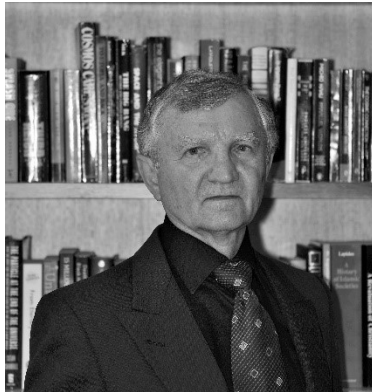
Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cellphone systems. He applied his IT discipline to create realistic storylines for his books. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends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

To learn more about Stefan, visit his:

Website: www.stefanvucak.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/StefanVucakAuthor

Twitter: [@stefanvucak](https://twitter.com/stefanvucak)



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?

