

Review

Once again we find Terrlls-rr, up to his ears in trouble. *With Shadow and Thunder* plunges the reader into the corrupt world of diplomatic manoeuvring. This book is an astonishing display of craftsmanship, a must read. Stefan Vucak weaves a science fiction world of mystery and suspense. The numerous plots of the story are intricately woven together to make for a smooth and entertaining read.

Serial Science Fiction Reviews

2002 EPIC finalist

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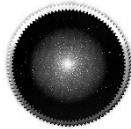
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WITH SHADOW AND THUNDER

By

Stefan Vucak



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Dedication

To my mother ... and her own life in shadow

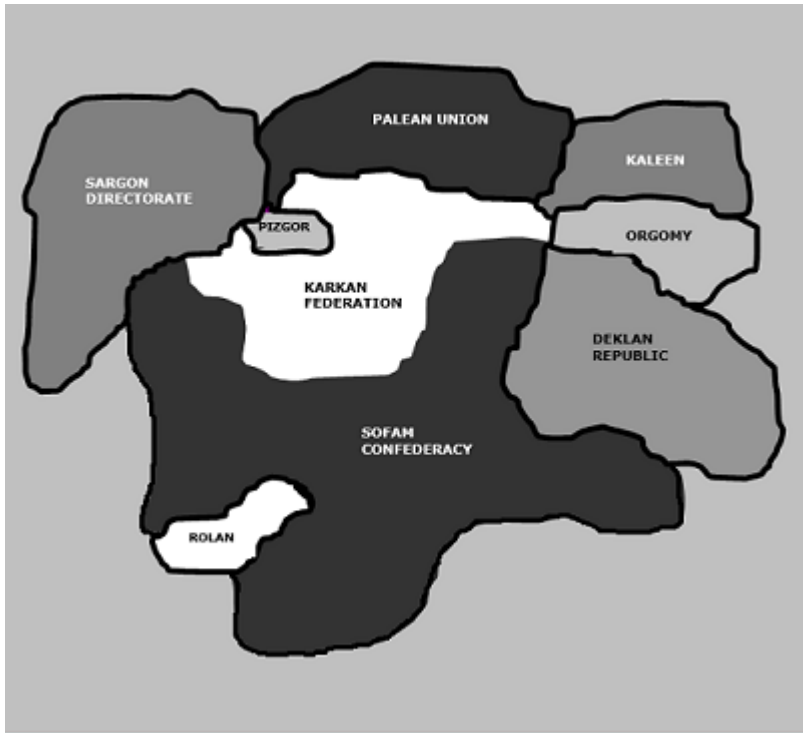
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Omega Swan Nebula (M17) – Credit: NASA, ESA, and J. Hester (ASU).

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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

At the Field, the shuttle waited.

Official gatherings always gave Terr a pain, and this one was no exception. He attached himself to a tight little group, staked out a bit of floor space and tried to appear attentive. It wasn't working. Surrounded by a throng of beribboned uniforms, thinly clad female forms, friendly chatter and lots of laughter, he suddenly felt alone.

Ornate chandeliers hung from heavy chains beneath a sculptured dome. Frescos of past deeds and valor helped fill the ceiling spaces. Tall black-veined marble columns hugged the walls. They provided a measure of relative seclusion from prying eyes. Each small group, hands waving and ample bellies heaving, claimed one. Intruders were discouraged. A surprising amount of business got done behind such pillars. Terr should know, about to conclude a deal of his own.

At the far end of the hall a band toiled gamely on strands of reedy music, thin and scratchy. It drifted forlornly above the noise of the party and did little to perk him up, but that was the kind of stuff they went for around here. He nodded sagely at some witty crack and made the usual crappy responses that went with small talk on occasions such as these. Things could have been worse. He'd had his choice; this or fill out reports.

There were all kinds of uniforms on display: dark green of the assault forces, dress blacks of the Scout Fleet, and a sprinkling of parade whites. Terr noted with a nod the conspicuous absence of any working grays. Its appearance would probably have earned the unfortunate a terminal career gasper. The brass knobs from Captal wore what they damn well pleased. The local female community added color—in eye-popping fashion. For the occasion, Terr squeezed himself into a full-decked white Scout uniform. His left breast held a bordered gold oval full of little colored pins—decorations fruit salad. A thin yellow stripe ran down the seam of his trousers, denoting a field grade officer. He looked the part, but it made him uncomfortable—a dressed-up cadet!

After an urbane smile and a mumbled excuse, he disengaged himself from the tableau and pushed his way through clearly defined demarcation lines that marked flag officer territories, senior diplomats and the

rest, trying to hang some enthusiasm on his face and not making it. He figured this whole job was a case of Anabb's twisted sense of humor, a way of getting even for past sins. Dirty, rotten old fart.

Well, the only way to beat the game, he could slosh his brain or go cruising for some female action. On this occasion, he couldn't do either. He owed it to Teena not to mess around, not that he would ever betray her trust. Which was a damned shame, for there were enough willing ladies on the prowl to add interest to the hunt. He shook his head and grunted. Time to do some paid work.

He snagged a frosted tumbler off a passing tray wielded by one of the unobtrusive drifting waiters and took a sip. The stuff burned on its way down and his eyes unfocused a bit. He blinked at the cloying yellow liquid and shrugged.

Life in the Diplomatic Branch was hell.

He'd been told this was a small gathering as functions usually go. The cavernous Trillian Assembly reception hall had seen bigger. Then again, this was supposed to be a formal occasion, strictly by invitation only. Looking around, he couldn't really tell the difference. Only a speck in Sargon space, the Trillian locals figured any excuse to hold a blowout should not be missed. Tonight, the political knives were sheathed and the vitriol forgotten. Probably diluted by a drink or two, he thought moodily.

Trillian's diplomatic community were toasting the Controller's first year in office. Seen as a rising star, the local Servatory Party branch went all out. Terr got picked, among other things, to represent Captal's Bureau of Cultural Affairs. After all, the Controller being one of government's own, nobody could say afterward the government didn't take care of its own.

He swallowed the last of his drink and concluded that Anabb would have fitted right in with all the other starched shirts. This would definitely be his macabre idea of a good time.

He absently touched a ragged scar above his left eyebrow, a close encounter with a raider. Not quite bored, he looked around, counting the gun handlers. Easy to spot, they were guys wearing wooden smiles, cold eyes and suspicious stares. The Controller they were guarding chatted busily with a demurely provocative female dressed in a shimmering wisp of blue nothing. She wore a sultry destructive look that always

meant trouble for someone. In a moment, the Controller would have more trouble than he could handle. Around them, hovering like a cloud, clustered the usual swarm of foreign dignitaries and hangers-on.

Gashkarali, Controller of Trillian, looked ordinary enough. Terr wondered what he did to deserve Death's wrath. A year in office didn't seem long enough to screw things up that much. He must have pissed off somebody real bad, though. During the mission brief, Anabb had given Terr the usual glib worm crap about factional plots and Capital secrets, that kind of stuff. The way he said it, the fate of the Serrll hung in the balance. Terr admitted it sounded good at the time. It almost got him all choked up and patriotic, but he managed to contain himself.

Still, Anabb's fancy tirade could not hide the blunt orders.

Gashkarali had to die.

Normally, that would have been enough for Terr. So far, he was happy leaving the whys to Anabb. That gambit had worked for almost two years—until his last mission, a General Assembly rep in her first term. She spoiled it all and got him thinking. Always a bad sign in his line of work. Her Servatory Party cell managed to execute a level two penetration of the Diplomatic Branch's comms center and compromised two of Anabb's best operatives. What he said to the security people hadn't been pretty, but nonetheless effective. The ensuing stink resulted in another operative suddenly enjoying an extended vacation on Cantor—counting rocks on the penal planet. She was returning to Capital when Terr caught up with her. The fact that the target was a female didn't faze him at all. There were as many bitches around as there were traitorous bastards.

Something she said before the lightnings struck her, looking at him with fierce defiance, challenging him, got him thinking. She died believing in the conviction of her cause. Where was the conviction of *his* cause, she demanded scornfully. Technically, he executed an untraceable termination mission, but could not get her words out of his mind. The rot had set in.

Afterward, he kept seeing the wrinkled features of his old master set in stern disapproval. He was not exactly using his gift for self-enlightenment. He remembered drinking quite a lot while waiting for the liner to touch down on the transit port to Taltair.

Looking around now at the glitter and pomp of the hall, his master

did not have to tell him the gods would not exactly approve the abuse of their gift. Terr allowed himself a brief frown of uncertainty. The last thing he needed right now was his conscience giving him a hard time. Anabb paid him to do a job, not to like it.

Rit!

As he studied the hired stiff, he clicked his tongue and shook his head. The security here was lousy. Lousy or not, he wasn't about to rush in and fumble it. There were plenty of other beginner's tricks he could fall for.

On a job, he always worked under his official persona. That precaution saved him more than once from a compromisingly sticky predicament. As Anabb pointed out the obvious on many occasions: any cover, no matter how elaborate, can be blown. A diplomatic attaché, Terr could move around without attracting more than his usual quota of hostile stares. If some dignitary should suddenly fade out of sight while he chanced to be around...well, it happened to the best of them.

Still, a possibility existed that some smart computer somewhere could build a correlation between his movements and a few untimely deaths. The result would undoubtedly cause someone in the Servatory Party machine to raise a speculative eyebrow. Not that he handled a body job every time he went out. He *did* do legitimate work on occasions, enough to keep below the statistical threshold. Nevertheless, he knew if he kept this up long enough, he was bound to fall for some terminal gag. Anabb didn't have to tell him that one. He sort of figured it out by himself.

Time perhaps for him to go into a new line of business. Like conning a ship again. Right now, he reflected wistfully, he would be quite happy herding his old M-3, anything that would take him away from Anabb. The craggy old face and grating humor had started to get on his nerves. *Psandra* had been a good ship to him...

The party getting kind of boring, people were beginning to drift away. The hall was too hot and the atmosphere cloying. The chatter a constant wash of noise, Terr longed for a moment of silence. Getting restless, he looked for an excuse to do a fade himself.

But if he wanted to catch that shuttle, he better finish with Gashkarali. He leaned against a convenient pillar, twirled his tumbler of cloying booze, and allowed the images come. The sounds of the party faded

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around him, the figures blurred, and he merged with the reality in his mind. Arms raised, cape fluttering behind him, he contemplated the rolling dunes and the shifting sands beneath a hot amber sky. He could almost feel the heat and the smells of desert sands wash over him. The words came to him easily. When Death settled on his shoulders, he found the burden heavy. The images faded and he felt a sharp pang of loss. He badly needed the solitude and vastness of the open sands to heal himself. Someone bumped into him and mumbled an apology. Terr didn't even notice him.

He gritted his teeth, primed the Death Messenger and moved in. The security guys never reacted when he approached Gashkarali. To them, he was only another minor flunkey. That was all right with him. Walking past the Controller, Terr hesitated, tempted to let him live, then brushed his arm as he went. A small blue spark jumped between them. Gashkarali merely twitched, not breaking his gushing tirade to the pretty thing hanging onto his every word. In eighteen hours, the hand of Death would collect him and no one would be able to connect it to this party, or to Terr.

He melted into the crowd, suddenly soured of the whole thing, but a bit late for second thoughts or regrets. Once loosed, Death had to feed. He pushed his way through the grouped guests, just wanting to get out of the damned place.

Outside, the air had a clean washed smell that comes after a shower and he breathed it in deeply. It helped to clean the stale odor he had picked up inside. The guard, crisp and regulation, his phase rifle vertical by his side, snapped to attention when Terr appeared in the doorway. The communal driver, looking bored and sleepy, brightened as Terr descended down polished stone steps. He quickly raised the bubble canopy and climbed out. He beamed as though Terr was his long lost son returned, sketched a brief salute and opened the door. Terr settled into the upholstery with a stifled grunt. He felt Death linger, then the power faded, leaving him empty and hollow.

"The Ambassador, sir?" the driver asked, rich with experience, used to carrying the movers and the powerful. The bubble snicked shut around them. Terr thumbed the mike pad and the driver's face glowed in the plate.

“Yeah,” he said impatiently. He touched another pad and the bubble became opaque. A thin ribbon of green, softly glowing around the bubble boundary, remained. The communal rose with a faint hum of power and he felt himself sag.

He must have dozed off, for the next thing he heard was the incessant buzz from the mike. Through the transparent bubble, he saw the combie approaching one of the landing ramps of the Ambassador hotel. The ramp protruded like a rude tongue near the top of the glittering column of ceramic and color-reactive panels. The communal hovered briefly, then settled to the spooling down sound of the power plant.

The charge pad glowed brown, pulsing gently as it waited. Terr pressed his palm against it and it changed to dull yellow. The door opened. The driver stood beside it, still beaming. Terr climbed out and the driver gave him another one of his homemade salutes. Terr nodded as the driver wished him a pleasant night. He waited while the communal took off, then followed it with his eyes as it disappeared into the traffic stream. Shoulders drooping, he walked slowly toward the entrance. Reaction had set in and he was beginning to feel fragile and moody. This job got him thinking again, and he didn't want to do any thinking just then.

He didn't have much to pack. The hotel management was sorry to see him go—at least they pretended. A chorus of ‘Have a good flight, sir.’, and ‘We hope you will visit the Ambassador again, sir.’, and crap like that followed him to the cable-tube. He hated goodbyes!

The tube deposited him at the civilian end of the Field inter-star terminus. His footsteps echoed faintly on the hard polished floor as he strode through the crowded departure lounge toward the security gate. Trillian was not exactly on the beaten tourist path, but locals still traveled within the system. With his Diplomatic Branch ID, he cleared customs without having to wade through packed queues, snarling children and harassed parents. He gave silent thanks for that. Twenty minutes later the shuttle punched through the atmosphere bound for Karmal, where he would change flights for Taltair.

* * *

Anatol Keller simmered, his attention focused on the main

holoview plot as it followed the trace of the Orieli ship slowly moving toward him. Thick stubby fingers tapped the armrest of his command couch, the only evidence of his restlessness. Unconsciously, he pulled back his purple-red lips into a silent snarl of frustration.

Perdition on the aliens!

His skin deepest black, head perfectly round, covered by a faint oily sheen. Normally thin and pinched, his nostrils now flared as they tended to do in moments of tension. His thick heavy-set form shifted restlessly as he clutched the armrest.

Unwelcome or not, he had to deal with them.

“Plot? Talk to me,” he demanded without turning his head. His deep throaty voice reflected his heaviness.

“Target now showing two point-eight million talans indicated. No course deviations. No anomalous power emissions. Detecting primary interceptor net configuration only. Scan matches previously recorded ident curve. Profile confirmed,” the tactical plot officer announced briskly. His eyes flicked briefly at Anatol, not wishing to draw further attention from his irascible commander.

Profile confirmed. As though there was any doubt, Anatol mused bitterly.

In the plot display, the image of the Orieli cruiser rotated through various multi-dimensional position schematics. Columns of figures flashed and faded beside each image. The images and the figures did not tell Anatol anything he didn't already know. His eyes probed the plot officer.

“The other two M-4s maintaining relativity?”

“In position. Tandem link established and in standby mode. All systems read nominal. Tactical available on command.”

“Mmm.” Anatol gave a noncommittal grunt. At least the crew were with it.

The M-4 6/A Sofam-built main battle cruiser was the mainstay of the Serrll Scout Fleet, and a front-line presence of the General Assembly's authority. It had a better part of nine tetalans grade C composite armor on top of the four-tetalan-thick polymer hull construct. Even without the secondary shield grid, it could withstand several twenty-four-millisecond bursts of up to one hundred and twenty-eight TeV at close range. Hopefully, it gave it enough time to get away or press an

attack.

It mounted two Koyami 3/C phased array generators; their power channeled through a single projector dome beneath its belly. Capable of pouring almost continuous twenty-four-millisecond, 128 TeV bursts to a maximum range of 140,000 talans, an M-4 carried a crew of 240. Formed into a triad with two other ships, their fire control systems slaved to the command unit, the M-4 represented a formidable weapons platform.

Sofam Industries built them well, but they didn't have the Orieli in mind when they did it.

Unable to contain his irritation, Anatol slapped the armrest with the flat of his hand and sprang out of the formchair. Everyone suddenly found themselves preoccupied, conscious of Anatol's discomfort. He started pacing along the raised tactical platform overlooking the main control stations two steps down. He shot a withering glance at his executive officer, standing apparently unconcerned behind the tactical station console, hands clasped casually behind his back. It irritated him that the exec could be so unmoved by the irony of the situation. Then again, it wasn't *his* ass on the line. Anatol paced up and down, his eyes flicking from time to time at the main plot.

Beneath the transparent navigation bubble the darkened command deck was deceptively quiet. The silence distracted by the muted whisper of status reports, inter-deck comms and tactical computer readiness notices. Blocking a full quarter of the bubble, the Moon was a brilliant wedge of grays, whites and blacks; a smooth sickle that bordered a circle of darkness drilled through the stars. Above it, almost within touching distance, hung the blue and white of Earth.

The nav dome ringed the deck above them. Beneath it, display plates, sensor stations and touch-sensitive, color-reactive control panels arrayed the inward-sloping frame. A full-dimensional holograph node occupied the center of the deck. If necessary the tactical plot it now showed could be replicated on the bubble above them. Officers and crew unobtrusively monitored the largely automated operation of the warship.

Anatol paused in his stride and glowered at his executive officer.

"And what are you so damned smug about? Never mind, I don't want to know," he growled and jerked his head at the plot. "What do

you make of all this?”

Used to these bursts of vitriolic behavior from Anatol, the exec ignored them. He raised a quizzical eyebrow and pointed at the repeater plate beside them.

“They’re already in the inner system. Doctrine calls for a standard defensive posture.”

“A standard defensive posture, eh?” Anatol pierced his exec with eyes of ebony, expressionless buttons that reflected no light or the individual within. “Is that your recommendation?”

Sensitive to his commander’s frustration the exec shrugged. “Tactically, there is nothing to be gained by going farther out.”

Anatol planted his hands on his hips. “Who said this was a tactical situation, anyway?”

“It isn’t? Five years ago—”

“One of those damned things from the pit almost put three of my ships in the junkyard. I haven’t forgotten.”

“I didn’t mean it that way—”

“Hah!”

Anatol shook his head in disgust and stomped away. With a surly glance at the plot, he lowered himself stiffly into the command couch.

Silent rage kept his tall two-katalan-high frame coiled in his seat. The alien ship out there represented everything that had gone wrong with his career. With the precision of a well-planned campaign, he had positioned himself on track for Prima Scout rank and a coveted post at CAPFLTCOM, Captal’s Fleet Command headquarters. Tactical command never appealed to him. He saw himself as a strategist, a thinker, above the mundane minutiae of ship routine. With the cultivation of a few carefully chosen Servatory Party luminaries, his future seemed assured.

Like a cup from which he was about to drink, that future was dashed by a single encounter with a ship just like the one at whose plot he stared now. It might even be the very one. Even now the memory of that brief exchange made him cringe.

It all started innocently enough. After a routine mission on Earth to destroy an old C-32 scoutship the locals managed to dig up in a Mayan ruin, First Scout Terrlls-rr was returning to Taltair when he encountered the enigmatic Orieli. The alien survey ship came through the

Moanar Nebula, some two thousand light-years beyond Serrll space. They were about to head home when leakage from the Serrll Moon Base power core attracted them to Sol. The aliens invited Terr aboard their ship and, after a brief exchange of information, the Orieli proceeded to do a quick survey of Earth. Twenty days later, they made another unexpected appearance. With only an M-1, Terr was in no position to stop the Orieli, but with three M-4s around him, Anatol was not about to let them into the Sol system that easily. When the Orieli ship began to move, he fired at it.

Refusing to withdraw, the Orieli ship simply stood there, taking everything Anatol could throw at it. Confident in his ability to interdict the alien, he hadn't bothered to slave in the firepower of his two supporting M-4s. That turned out to be a serious tactical mistake. When the alien finally tired of his game and fired back, its single burst crashed through his shield grids as though they were not there. It took the Orieli ship two more shots to disable his other ships. Three bursts, that is all it took to take out three front-line Serrll ships. That kind of firepower chilled him.

With the ships of his triad crippled, shields down, Anatol waited for the fire that would have reduced his M-4s to slag. It might have been better that way, but the Orieli ship did not fire. It just moved past his wallowing M-4s.

He survived the ensuing political furrow, but even his powerful Captal friends could not remove an official reprimand now blotting his record. CAPFLTCOM cited his action as an exemplary lack of command judgment. No matter what they called it, it was a career stopper. The reprimand ensured he would never make Prima Scout.

The knowledge galled him.

What in perdition was he supposed to do? Allow those Orieli sons of bitches to breach Serrll's territorial integrity? The Rules of Engagement left him little option. If he hadn't stood his ground, those bureaucratic bastards on Captal would've had him on charges of dereliction of duty, conduct unbecoming, even cowardice. To cover their embarrassment at having three line warships dismissed so easily, CAPFLTCOM looked around for someone to carry the fallout. It was his bad luck they decided to pick him.

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Since then, he'd had a series of dead-end assed commands. His current tour as commander of the Serrll Moon Base a case in point. The Sol system was considered the crappy end of nowhere. A posting for losers who could not otherwise make it. Still, no matter what the worm shitters at CAPFLTCOM might otherwise think, he executed his duty as he saw it.

To the pit with them all!

But his exec was right, of course. Whether he liked it or not, and he didn't, he must face the oncoming ship—and his nightmare.

And if the Orieli demurred?

Fuckers!

Against the backdrop of two worlds the alien ship slowed and stopped...and waited. Energy discharge lines barely flickered within the contours of its primary interceptor net.

"Better start telling me what's going on, Plot," Anatol growled.

"Target is outside our firing envelope, sir. Range now showing one-point six-three million talans," the plot operator said hastily. "No relative momentum. No weapons status indicated. Our secondary shield grid is still down. Their interceptor net is extended to twenty-two talans."

Not taking any chances with warm Serrll hospitality, eh? Anatol's features twisted into a grim smile.

Cloaked in black, running at half secondary boost, his M-4 blotted out the stars as it closed to intercept. The covering M-4s maintained relativity. One of them took a high port, the other a starboard low position in a classic triad maneuver, for all the good it did.

The exec strode up from the comms station, his round features grim. "We have a priority three message from Serrll Moon Base."

"Not now! Close to six hundred thousand talans and stop."

"Six hundred thousand talans indicated. Relativity in two point-three minutes."

"You need to look at this one," the exec insisted and Anatol bit off an angry retort.

"What in perdition do they want? Can't it wait—"

"They reported cascade failure on all distortion screens—"

"So?"

"That new survey bird Earth sent up the other day? It just happened

to be overhead at the time.”

Anatol took a few seconds to digest the information, then his face contorted in weary resignation.

“Oh great! That’s all we need now.”

“SMB thinks they might be compromised.”

The comms officer looked up. “Sir, the Orieli have opened a channel.”

“Just hold your water!” Torn between two problems, Anatol pulled at his chin. “That satellite. What kind of TLM has it got? Real-time or passive?”

“Real-time,” the exec said.

“That tears it, then. The damned thing probably dumped its data bank as soon as it got out of the Moon’s LOS zone. We should have vaporized that piece of junk before it achieved orbital insertion. Another example of Captal’s idiotic policy to pander to Earth’s primitive space efforts. Well, there is little we can do about it from here. Tell SMB to advise COMSAROPS. Let them deal with it. You know the form. Let’s go to tactical.”

“Full alert?” the exec queried, his face impassive, but his eyes twinkled.

“What’s the matter? You anxious to see the Orieli in action?” Anatol rasped, ignoring the implied impertinence.

Under increased readiness some of the sensitized control panels immediately changed from soft yellow to pulsing amber. Previously inactive action contact pads rippled to life in arrays of colored strips and squares. The cable-tube doors opened and two additional watch officers quietly took up their control stations.

In the engineering spaces below, almost directly above the projector dome, there wasn’t much to do except monitor procedures as the computer increased the level of energy management readiness. Stripped helium nuclei plasma powered the primary fusion chamber that fed the artificial antimatter convergence point and kept it from collapsing. The energy surge from particle annihilation then channeled through the containment field directly into the shield grid.

The M-4’s secondary shield grid extended to eight talans beyond the primary along almost spherical lines of force. With both shield grids in place, a cocoon of energy extending sixteen talans enclosed the M-4.

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In a separate reaction chamber, energy flooded the twin Koyami 3/C generators. Coils fully powered up, the computer waited for the command to synchronize the firing pulses with the shield management system and the ship would be ready to do business.

The M-4 slid to a stop. At six hundred thousand talans, sensors could just make out the flowing rectangular shape of the Orieli ship. Its edges curved down, tapered like drooping wings. The obsidian shape did not show any lights. Nothing about it suggested menace, but Anatol felt its palpable power.

He had forgotten the huge size of the bastard. According to plot the ship was over 800 katalans long—almost twice the size and mass of the M-4.

Anatol stared at the deceptive simplicity of the alien ship's design and slowly clenched his fists. This time, he wasn't about to repeat the mistake he made years ago. If the Orieli wanted Earth, they could have the damned place.

"Comms? Let's see what they have to say," he said, unaware his teeth were grinding.

* * *

READ ALL ABOUT IT! MOON AN ALIEN SPY STATION
NASA PROBE DISCOVERS EXTRATERRESTRIAL BASE
EXTRA! EARTH SCRUTINIZED BY LITTLE GREEN MEN
DO WE FACE AN INVASION FROM SPACE, PEOPLE ASK
MOON STORY A VIRTUAL REALITY GAME HOAX

"Jack Willison reporting from the CNN center in New York. This afternoon in building two-sixty-four of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, a routine press conference erupted into several minutes of total confusion, excitement, fear and disbelief. A live data feed from one of the two SIR-E, Spaceborne Imaging Radar satellites, revealed what appeared to be artificial structures nestled deep in the permanent shadow of the Moon's northern pole. From its almost circular twenty-six-kilometer orbit the satellite provided a definitive topographical and mineralogical survey of the Moon. One of a series of steps undertaken to define the site for the UN-sponsored permanently

manned base.

“Even as the sensational images were being flashed around the world, the White House spokesman refused to offer a comment. He said the President would be making a measured statement once the implications of a possible extraterrestrial presence on the Moon have been fully evaluated. Asked whether the administration will consider sending a manned mission to the Moon to further investigate the sighting, the response was a flat ‘No comment’. Meanwhile, NASA officials emphatically denied the transmission was nothing more than an elaborately staged publicity stunt, as has already been suggested by some commentators. Someone pointed out that the White House may get more than a ‘No comment’ from its Area 51 facility at Groom Lake in Nevada and the MJ-12 program. The remark earned the unfortunate a withering glance. We’ll flash you the latest developments in this electrifying event as they occur. Stay tuned.”

* * *

“In New York today, Archbishop Waller stated calmly that if extraterrestrials do exist, and he wasn’t postulating they didn’t, they too must be creatures of God. After all, He created the universe and everything in it. Asked whether that meant the aliens must look like us since God created man in his image, the cardinal paused and said he saw the image of God reflected in the soul and not necessarily in the physical vessel it inhabits. The remark, I’m sure, will raise a few theological eyebrows in the Vatican tonight.

“There is one question that all Christian denominations will have to come to grips with. If Christ is seen as man’s redeemer, has He repeated the passion, in all its unpleasant variations, on every alien world? In this respect the other major world religions feel comfortable with the notion of spreading their faith to the stars. On the other hand, what if the aliens sitting nonchalantly on our Moon are missionaries? Are our beliefs as outmoded as the ones held by the Africans or the great South American civilizations before the Europeans brought them enlightenment with fire and sword? This is Mark Rowan for NBC news.”

Chapter Two

“It’s not a request,” Enlls-rr corrected firmly, allowing a touch of irritation to creep into his voice.

“Then I assume, sir, this has been cleared by Commissioner Sill-Anais?” Dharaklin inquired gravely, his voice cavernous, rumbling like dying thunder.

“Assume? Now you listen to me.” Enlls pierced Dhar with eyes that suddenly turned frigid. “I’m having a real lousy day and it’s only morning. I’ve had junior Assemblymen jerking me off with their endless petitions and world-saving schemes. They mean well, and who knows? One of them just might have a germ of an idea that will make sense. So I’ve got to listen to them. Illeran has been pissing in my ear wanting to know what the blazes I’m doing about that damned Orieli ship hanging off Sol. He is an Executive Director and my boss, so I got to explain myself to him. Son, the only good thing about this day is that I don’t have to explain myself to junior Scout Fleet officers. While you’re detached to my Bureau, you take your orders from me. Without question. Do I make myself clear?”

Dhar held his sinewy two point-three katalan frame at attention. The vertical red slits of his large orange eyes betrayed nothing. The thin membranes, designed to protect the eyes from fine sand, were now slid shut in pique. His yellow skin dry, drawn tight over the bony ridges of his long face. His nose, broad and flat with flared nostrils, added to his skeletal appearance.

He felt the Commissioner’s intimidating presence crush his spirit and his righteous protest died stillborn. Enlls radiated an almost visible aura of authority and self-assurance. It may not have been the strength of the Discipline, but nonetheless, it emitted a force he could not ignore. Breathing deeply, he summoned the words from the *Saftara* that would calm him. In adversity, the spirit grows, he reminded himself.

He studied the bulky figure framed against a floor-to-ceiling window screen. The Captal sky dark and threatening, lit by an ugly furnace

glow from the west. Muscular and powerful, with a hint of a bulge around his middle, Enlls thrust out a square jaw, used to command and instant obedience. Dark gray eyes flared with opaque anger. Beneath the almost pure white hair, the aquiline nose stood out sharp above a firm, full mouth.

“It wasn’t a statement of personal concern, sir,” Dhar said without expression, betraying nothing of his inner turmoil.

Enlls gave an impatient flick of his hand. “I don’t give a crap about your concern, son. Personal or otherwise. The only thing I want from you is compliance.”

“When I exposed Gashkarali’s clandestine activities, I didn’t envisage that he would be sanctioned—”

“I wouldn’t be so damned sympathetic, if I were you. His antics have caused us a lot of grief...and lives. You better than anyone should know that.”

Dhar took a deep breath. “I still submit the Bureau of Administrative Affairs should have stripped him of his authority. He would have been neutralized just as effectively.”

Enlls slammed his fist against the desk. “Enough! I’m not here to debate this with you.”

“I meant no disrespect, Mr. Commissioner.”

“The blazes you didn’t. Parading your moral outrage may give you a measure of personal satisfaction, but don’t let your indignation blind you to the job at hand. Clear?”

Dhar could not keep his resentment bottled up any longer. “I would suggest, Mr. Commissioner, the job at hand has more to do with the one vote the Unified Independent Front will hold in the Executive Council than the threat posed by Gashkarali’s activities, or Sargon’s vision of another empire.”

Enlls looked startled, then laughed outright. “By damn, if you’re not right there. But I never doubted your capability, or your intelligence. You should know then why it’s so important that you continue to maintain your cover as a Servatory Party operative. Terchran already suspects your loyalty—”

“As you do, sir,” Dhar said flatly, his eyes impenetrable.

Enlls snorted and shook his head. Was the boy deliberately goading him? Dhar would be playing an extremely dangerous game if he

were. It would only take a word and Dhar would be counting worm fuzz for the rest of his career. No, the Wanderer wanted an out of a messy assignment.

Well, it's not going to be that easy. You started this, and now you've got to finish it.

Looking at him, Enllss could easily imagine Dhar clad in brown robes, cape flying behind him, standing on a dune with the desert as his only friend. He sensed power held in check behind those eyes. Eyes that could rip through a soul. He shuddered at the thought of Wanderers bursting from Anar'on, flooding the Serrll with death in one hand and their hellish Discipline in another. He was not ready to submit to that kind of justice.

"As a Scout Fleet officer, your loyalty to the Serrll is not in question," he said harshly. "However, as a Wanderer, I would be less than wise to ignore your allegiance to Anar'on and its formative influence on the Unified Independent Front. The Captal government supports the objectives of the UIF, and your actions will further its interests, however unclear that may seem to you at the moment."

"What is clear to me, sir, through my actions, my brother took a life and I have violated the teachings of the Discipline."

Enllss nodded, his eyes suddenly bleak. "Before this is over, my boy, more than one life will be taken. If that presents you with a problem, take your damned whining and get the blazes out of my sight!" he roared and pointed at the door.

Dhar blanched, shaken by the strength of emotions churning around Enllss like coiled lightning. Confused, he sought comfort in the words of his master, and found them strangely unhelpful. Everything he knew, everything his master taught him, protested at the taking of any life; even one of his enemy.

That, however, framed a two-dimensional perspective.

Faced with the multi-faceted environment of Serrll politics, his precepts were taking a severe beating. He saw himself drawn inexorably into a web of action whose end offered no clarity. No, that wasn't quite true. He frowned, not prepared to face the brutal reality.

He knew all too well where his actions would lead. Back on Anar'on, did the Rahtir Council count the cost of shattered lives while they coldly plotted the formation of the Unified Independent Front? Could they

afford to care? The cause had no room for an individual's feelings. He did not believe it. The Rahtir and the UIF faced that very dilemma five years ago when they tried to recruit Terr. The individual always mattered, but he had to be prepared to bury his misgivings for the greater goal. Right then, he could not say he could.

He set his mouth and lifted his head. He tensed, forcing himself to say the words.

"I apologize, sir."

"Humph! Then shut your mouth and stop pissing in my ear," Enllss said gruffly and shifted in the formchair. "As I was saying, Terchran suspects your loyalty. You're going to allay his suspicions by revealing to him Terr's mission."

Dhar stared, taken completely by surprise. "Has Sankri completed it?"

"He should be on his way to Taltair right now."

"But... Terchran will retaliate!"

"I'm counting on it."

"He will want Sankri killed. And it's probable that he will order me to do it."

"If he doesn't, suggest it. Report to Terchran, then take an M-1 to Taltair. I have one waiting for you at Sal Field. Get the details from my assistant."

"Sankri is my bond brother!" Dhar protested in outrage.

"Do you want someone else to get the job, and possibly succeed? This way, you can control the situation. One more thing," Enllss went on remorselessly. "Whatever your relationship with Terr, you're not to discuss any of this with him. Is that clearly understood?"

Dhar looked helplessly at Enllss, realizing how cleverly he'd been manipulated.

"For my actions to be credible, Sankri will have to believe that I really intend to kill him. Mr. Commissioner, you are asking me to deliberately destroy his trust in me. I urge you to reconsider."

Enllss thrust out his jaw. "You have your orders. Carry them out."

Left with few choices, Dhar seemed to sag. His soul heavy, he walked out. The translucent panels closed behind him with a soft click.

Enllss stared at the panels, swore, pushed back the formchair, and stood up. He clasped his hands behind his back and turned. Dark, bleak

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clouds smeared the sky, matching his mood. The rain fell heavily. Lightning strikes ripped the sky into jagged tears. A watery haze obscured the towers of the Center. Endless lines of communals, combies, and private sled-pads crossed above the city in controlled patterns. The tubeways linking the towers were blurred outlines of pearly light. Far below, the avenues were alive with the throng from nameless worlds of the Serrll Combine.

He stood there and watched the rain.

Raw power radiated from the city, almost tangible in its substance. After more than two decades learning how to wield that power, Enlls harbored few illusions as to its use. Power got things done. To hold it, he needed to dominate. In comparison, Dhar's moral misgivings hardly merited consideration.

Or did they?

He sighed and sank back into the formchair. With the smooth leather molded around him, he rubbed the ache behind his eyes. He needed to get away for a while. He needed to get back to Kaplan and touch base with some of the more influential constituency groups and the Party machinery. He badly needed some quiet time with his partner. His job consumed too much of his time. Could it be that he did not have a strong enough reason to spend more time at home? No, Rhea had been the only woman he had ever deeply loved. Without her quiet, uncomplaining support, he would have given up long ago. The simple truth, he liked his work too much. It...*consumed* him.

In the gathering gloom the ceiling automatically compensated, turning brighter blue. The walls of his spacious office glowed subdued orange. Before him, a full-dimensional holographic Wall communications extension took up a whole wall, cycling through random color gyrations, pooling into each other in complex patterns. On his right, in a little L-shaped alcove, stood an oval table. Its patterned wooden surface lovingly hand-polished into hues of deep reds. Elaborately carved matching padded chairs were arranged around the table with mathematical precision.

A thin-necked rock vase occupied the center of the table. Dry flowers arched from its neck. They gave off a subtle mixture of redolent scents, reminding him of deep forests and rolling fields of his native Kaplan.

He leaned back and ordered his special blend of herbal tea. Waiting, he told the computer to dim the lights. A panel slid away in his desk from which rose the tea set. Steam snaked lazily from the fragile delicacy of the porcelain. He inhaled deeply of the aroma and closed his eyes. After a moment, he poured himself a cup and sipped, savoring the tangy flavor. He held the cup in both hands, allowing its warmth to seep through his hands.

The comms alert beeped, flashing for attention. The lighting flared to full intensity. Muttering, he laid the cup down with a click. He reached across the desk and touched a pad on the inlaid console array.

“Yes, what is it?” he demanded as the image of his personal aide cleared in the Wall.

“Commissioner Sill-Anais is here to see you, sir,” she said breathlessly in a low contralto deliberately designed to disturb. Now, it only irritated.

His previous aide had lasted three years, something of a record. With his backing, she now held a director’s post of one of the branches in the Bureau of Administrative Affairs. This one, on the other hand, if she didn’t stop her amorous advances, would probably end up as Warden on Cantor. He knew his office staff were running a pool on how long she would last. Absently, he wondered what the odds were.

“Very well, show him in, will you?”

The door panels slid away with a hiss and Sill walked through. He carried himself with ease, moving with quick short strides. Tall and thin, Sill wore a dry, pinched face beneath an olive complexion traced with lines of age and responsibility. Wiry white eyebrows outlined large, liquid wide-set eyes, now dark with hidden humor.

Sill managed an easy grin and slid one hand quickly down the side of his head, hair streaked with twin bands of dark gray of a mature male, worn in traditional Deklan fashion. Running the Bureau of Cultural Affairs under Bakral, Sofam’s senior Executive Director, Sill had grown into power and carried it well.

He bowed quickly and inclined his head at the door. “I saw agent Dharaklin a moment ago,” he piped in high treble and thrust out a massive barrel chest. “He looked very unhappy. Your doing?”

“Being happy is not part of his job description,” Enlls said calmly. He raised his cup and took a sip. “Want some?”

Sill twisted his face into a grimace. "Ach! I cannot stand watching you drink those dried lawn clippings."

Enllss shrugged. "Suit yourself." He stood and extended his hand at the soft cushions. Sill sprawled down with a grunt and cast a speculative eye over the office. The trappings of power may appear flashy to the uninitiated, but in their respective positions neither he nor Enllss had time to wallow in the luxury. Responsibility far outweighed the privileges.

On his left the wall was lined with uneven shelves crowded with memorabilia, data cubes, hand-tooled leather books and oddly carved objects; probably gifts from innumerable diplomatic missions. Battle honors, he mused. Beneath his feet, etched into the carpet, lay a yellow-orange circle containing the crest of the Bureau for Colonial and Protectorate Affairs, symbol of Enllss' bureaucratic empire.

For a moment, Sill contemplated the storm clouds outside.

"Winter is early in Captal and I miss the still, drowsy days of Deklan," he said musingly. "It's been over a year since I last set foot there. Can you believe it?"

"There is nothing there you want to see, anyway," Enllss quipped. "I heard that one of your boys made Second Scout grade three."

"Ach! Off on an M-4 somewhere in the Sargon Directorate."

"And the other one? Still in the Diplomatic Corps?"

Sill's eyes lit up. "He is a Senior Councilor in Anall-Marr's administrative department."

"Not bad for someone so young."

"Sinful, but you will allow some father's pride. Pride in both of them, despite the fact my eldest chose the Fleet. He tells me I don't understand him," Sill added plaintively.

"Truncated and out of sync," Enllss agreed.

Sill shook a finger at him. "Ach! Just be glad you don't have my problems."

"I'm sympathizing, not criticizing. And who says I don't?"

"Ah, your nephew. I heard the funeral made quite a spectacle. Got everybody on Trillian all sentimental."

"Gashkarali was a fool," Enllss said and snorted. "With Terchran as his mentor, his career in the Servatory Party made, he wanted more. He got involved with Sargon's grand unification scheme."

“So why is Dhar pissed? I would have thought he’d be glad to see Gashkarali gone. The man gave all of us enough grief.”

Enllss took a sip, eyeing Sill above the rim of the cup. “I ordered him to expose Terr.”

Sill’s thin eyebrows converged in a frown and his eyes turned cold. “I don’t like this operation, Enllss. And I like it less the longer it continues. You’re not running the Bureau of Cultural Affairs anymore, you know. And I don’t like your interference in my department or my men,” he said, annoyed the situation threatened to get out of hand.

“Bit late for second thoughts, isn’t it?” Enllss said easily, looking at his friend with amusement.

Sill pursed his lips and glared. “Ach! Your preoccupation with the Unified Independent Front is turning into a fixation.”

“You sanctimonious son of a bitch! You’re actually enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“If you mean whether it would be nice to see the Servatory Party and the Revisionists come crawling cap in hand to the UIF for support, then you can say that I’m enjoying this.”

“Enjoy yourself, then,” Enllss grunted and sipped his tea.

“Face it, Enllss. Ach! In two short years, come the next elections, the Unified Independent Front will hold more than five percent of all systems in the Serrll Combine, allowing them to take a seat in the Executive. The irony is that we’ve only ourselves to blame for this mess. We always treated the independent nonaligned systems with irritation and indifference. The only reason why we haven’t absorbed them is that neither major block is prepared to make the first move for fear what the other would do in retaliation.”

“Maybe. But the UIF will never hold that seat if Sargon and the Paleans pull off their merger,” Enllss pointed out meditatively.

Sill shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. The Paleans were seriously embarrassed five years ago when the raider bases on Lemos and Italan were uncovered. The illegal Alikan Union Party operation at Khimarra three years ago has not helped their cause either. Ach! But the reason I think the merger *might* succeed now is that under Karkan dominance, the Servatory Party has been more preoccupied with gaining the government majority than meeting the coalition’s needs. Sargon is getting more than a little impatient.”

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“You don’t know how much I appreciate your in-depth analysis of the situation,” Enllss said with heavy irony.

“Ach! Screw yourself, Mr. Commissioner.”

“It’s been tried.”

“The problem with you and me, my friend, we’ve been fighting the same old weary battles for too long. Our political enemies are now almost friends. It is time for new challenges.”

“I have enough challenges, thank you. Until I know what the UIF will do, I’ll sleep better knowing that every Wanderer has been removed from an intelligence-sensitive area.”

“Like Dhar and your nephew?”

“Damn right.”

Sill stood up and walked to the window screen. The rain still drove hard under a sullen, heavy sky. He turned and folded his hands before his chest.

“I hate it when it rains. Ach! But I didn’t come here to talk about the cursed Unified Independent Front or your grand policy schemes.”

“Then why the blazes *did* you come?”

“Temper. It’s about that infernal Orieli ship.”

Enllss nodded, looking glum. “Don’t tell me Anatol has jumped them again?”

Sill smiled. “The last I heard, he got orders to escort them to Salina with his M-4s. They should arrive in eight days.”

“Hah! Fat lot of good that’ll do him if the Orieli decide to simply brush him aside. I presume someone updated Trianon? Who is heading the formal Mission?”

“Anabb.”

Enllss nodded. “Good enough,” he said and pointed a finger at Sill. “If Trianon even *thinks* of talking to them, I’ll have his butt.”

“Don’t worry. He’s been given the word. There is something else, though. The cover on our Moon Base may have been compromised,” Sill said and Enllss looked at him sharply.

“Compromised? How?”

“Its distortion screens collapsed for about six minutes just as one of Earth’s survey birds happened to be overhead.”

“How could they collapse? The system is supposed to be foolproof, layered backups.”

“Just one of those unpleasant coincidences, I guess. Bound to happen sooner or later.”

“By damn! And you think the base was scanned?”

“The satellite was over twenty-three talans high and carried no direct imaging hardware. At least we don’t think it did. There is no way it could have seen the base.”

“Unless that probe held a payload of packed sensor arrays,” Enlls mused.

“Count on it. Still, even if they detected anomalous energy readings, their imaging would need to be pretty fancy to generate a visible resolution. The point is; what are you going to do about it? Earth is a protectorate and this falls under your jurisdiction.”

Enlls winced as if in pain. “Nothing much that I *can* do. If they’ve seen us, they’ve seen us.”

“Any word from the American government?”

“Nothing. The PLATO and SIGMA channels are silent. They’re probably resigned to the situation as we are. I would expect them to send up a special bird and do a low orbital to get a visual to make sure. Maybe even a manned mission. Despite the screens, they’ll see the surface installations. No way to hide that. After all the centuries...”

“Ach! That means we may have to go down to Earth and formally reveal ourselves. It would cause hell. Here *and* on Earth.”

Enlls spent a few seconds in silent musing. When he looked up, his eyes were mischievous.

“Maybe not. Not for a while, at least.”

“Enlls, you know as well as I do, no matter what kind of government Earth’s got, they won’t be able to keep the lid on a thing like this. We were lucky five years ago with that C-32 at Comalcalco. This time, we’ll have Earth crawling all over that base within a year, and we’ll blow our clandestine deals with them.”

“Can’t see how we can avoid it.”

“From unfounded speculation, the general population will be faced with hard evidence of alien presence. It could cause massive cultural dislocation.”

“They’ve had enough time to get used to the idea of extraterrestrials. On the other hand, why not let the Orieli take the heat for us?” Enlls mused and pulled at his chin.

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* * *

Low in the sky, the sun painted torn clouds with fire. Bathed in an eerie orange glow the towers of the Center stood cold and tall.

Diplomatic Branch Director Anabb Karr squared his powerful shoulders and moved away from the window screen. The comms alert beeped. He reached across the polished expanse of his desk and touched a pad in the inlaid console.

“Commissioner Enlls-rr, sir,” his aide announced.

Anabb’s unruly white eyebrows climbed and the amber flecks in his brown eyes suddenly brightened. He wondered what the old devil wanted now.

“Thank you, Ariane. Hold all calls.”

He eased himself into the formchair with a grunt, tapped another pad and turned toward the Wall as the image in it began to form. The square face staring at him from the full-dimensional display projected power, a face used to authority and command. Dark gray eyes looked at him intently through the Wall.

“Anabb, you old space pirate! Haven’t heard from you for some time,” Enlls boomed, all smiles. Anabb did not share his good humor.

“Ever since Sill-Anais called, I’ve had chills running down my spine, Commissioner. When you get involved with the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, my orderly peaceful life gets shot to hell.”

Enlls smiled and pointed a long finger at him. “You’ve been too long in the Diplomatic Branch, that’s your problem. You should be back here on Captal where things happen.”

“Then I’d be just another nut in that fruitcake,” Anabb grumbled and Enlls laughed.

“With that disrespectful attitude, maybe it’s better that you remain on Taltair. You tend to rub people the wrong way. Captal isn’t used to straight shooters; tends to throw them off.”

“What you mean to say is, I’m not polished enough for Captal’s high society.”

Enlls shrugged and grinned disarmingly. “It’s better this way. Anyway, as much as I would love to chat, this is not a social call.”

“I knew that.”

“Did you get the latest update on the Orieli?”

“Couple of hours ago. I was all set to leave for Salina when Sill called. I figured you wouldn’t be far behind. What is going on, Enllss?”

“I want you to suspend the formal Mission until Terr gets back from Trillian.”

“Suspend the Mission?”

“Your other protégé, Second Scout Dharaklin, will shortly be on his way to Taltair. He has specific orders relating to Terr’s Trillian assignment. He will accompany you to Salina.”

Anabb stared at him. “You can’t be serious. I won’t do it. For one thing, Terr is not a diplomat and neither is that young pup Dhar. More importantly, I cannot hang around waiting for Terr to show up. Delaying the Mission and keeping the Orieli waiting on a couple of amateurs is not my idea of good diplomacy. And besides, who knows what Trianon might decide to do in the meantime. He could screw up everything.”

“Trianon won’t be screwing up anything. He has been straightened out,” Enllss said icily and thrust out his jaw. “This is important, you know.”

Anabb snorted in disgust. “I don’t care how important it is. You cannot order me to suspend a formal Mission. This matter doesn’t fall under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Colonial and Protectorate Affairs.”

Enllss tsked and shook a finger at him. “That’s treasonous talk, Anabb. Earth is a protectorate, or have you forgotten?”

“But Salina is not!” Anabb retorted in triumph.

“This is still an alien contact, Anabb.”

“Thunderation! Just for once, you could keep things simple.”

“A matter of perspective, wouldn’t you say?”

“Screw you.”

“Funny, you’re the second one today to tell me that.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Enllss laughed as he watched Anabb’s internal struggle. Anabb could be hardnosed and an obstinate son of a bitch. As a former Fleet Prima Scout, he brought with him years of experience navigating through Capital’s labyrinthine corridors of power. Anabb would make a bad enemy if he were ever turned.

“Tell me one thing. Why?” Anabb demanded at length, resigning himself to the inevitable.

“To maintain his cover with the Servatory Party, I ordered Dhar to expose Terr’s Trillian mission to Terchran.”

“All this simply to keep Terchran from finding out that Gashkarali was working for the AUP Provisional Committee and those Palean worms?”

“More or less.”

“Terchran knows that already.”

Enllss shook his head. “He suspects. There is a big difference.”

“So?”

Enllss smiled thinly. “Let me say that although the Revisionists cannot stand idly by while Sargon indulges in fantasies of conquest and empire building, it’s another thing to extricate the Servatory Party from its political troubles. They’ll have to do that themselves.”

“Sounds convenient, but I don’t believe it. I’ll tell you what I *do* believe. You’re hatching all this to remove Dhar from the Bureau of Cultural Affairs on Captal where he won’t be nosing around for the Unified Independent Front,” Anabb said, his voice gravelly and thick with disapproval.

“And Terr from the Diplomatic Branch,” Enllss finished for him.

“I haven’t forgotten. Nephew or not, ever since he returned from that crash on Anar’on, you’ve looked at Terr as a Wanderer and you suspect his allegiance, which is idiotic. I don’t like it, Enllss. You’re spinning a complicated web and I’d hate to see those two get hurt.”

“If it’s a web, Anabb, I’m certainly not the one who is spinning it. But I cannot ignore the opportunity. Just send the request. One other thing. Don’t make any promises to the Orieli we cannot keep.” The Wall dissolved into shifting pools of color.

Anabb leaned back in the formchair and rubbed his temples. This he did not need. Bad enough having to worry about the Orieli and the possible compromise of the Serrll Moon Base without getting tangled up in one of Enllss’ grand schemes. With a snarl of frustration, he crashed his fist against the desk that sent the stationery jumping.

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 Readers' Favorite silver medal award, and his *All the Evils* was the prestigious Eric Hoffer contest finalist and Readers' Favorite silver medal winner. *Strike for Honor* won the gold medal.

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

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Shadow Gods books by Stefan Vučak

In the Shadow of Death

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

Against the Gods of Shadow

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

A Whisper from Shadow

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

Shadow Masters

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

Immortal in Shadow

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

Through the Valley of Shadow

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

Guardians of Shadow

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

Other books by Stefan Vučak

Cry of Eagles

2011 Reader's Favorite silver medal winner

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

All the Evils

2013 Eric Hoffer finalist

2013 Readers' Favorite silver medal winner

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

Towers of Darkness

A Wyoming mineworker discovers a human hand bone embedded in a forty million year-old coal seam. An anthropologist, Larry Krafte 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?