

Preview of “The Shoals of Time” (opening scene)

It was night in Los Angeles, not that it mattered to Ernie Vacca. A sprinkling of stars punctuated the skyglow over the city, but Vacca’s idle gaze wasn’t attracted by any of them. Nor did he notice the distant exhaust flame of a shuttle arcing into space. In fact, his mind was on a star that wasn’t even visible from this latitude. He stood near the window of a high-rise apartment, waiting. He’d been doing a lot of that lately.

Vacca’s gaze drifted from what passed for a sky in Los Angeles to the rush and flow of the city’s airborne traffic and then to the city lights below. This apartment had the distinction of being at the same altitude as one of the airborne traffic patterns. Watching the lights of fliers at this height was like sighting along the edge of a shimmering energy field. The effect was almost hypnotic.

Something broke into his reverie and he turned his attention back to the job at hand. He focused his eyes first on his ghostly reflection in the glass, then on the image of the door directly behind him. Being translucent was jarring at first, but you got used to it after a while. Muffled footsteps rose above the hush of the air system and stopped just outside the apartment door. Vacca quietly turned around while the security system checked an ident card.

Vacca watched the apartment door slide open to admit Phil Mantee, one of the few remaining field agents of the Temporal Planning Commission. Lights came on as Mantee entered and the door slid shut behind him. He dropped his ident card on a nearby table and slipped off his jacket. As Mantee turned toward the closet, Vacca thumbed the smaller of the two devices he held. He had been using it to shield his presence from Mantee’s trained senses. Now, as his ethereal form phased to solidity, he hooked the device onto his belt and shifted his grip on the larger apparatus.

“Hello, Phil,” Vacca said quietly.

“What the —?” Phil exclaimed as he whirled to face the sound. His startled look changed first to recognition, then to astonishment. “Ernie Vacca? Where the hell have you been for the last two years? We thought you were dead.”

“Not yet,” Ernie smiled wryly, “I still have some business to take care of.”

Mantee gathered his wits. “What are you doing here, Ernie, and how did you get in?” he asked.

“Oh come on, Phil,” Ernie chided. “I’ve still got my synergizer.”

Phil grimaced. “So I see. What’s that other thing?”

“This, my friend, is a Tors Synergizer. It’s based on our illustrious founder’s original design.” Ernie looked down at the crude device in his hand. It was clumsier than the TPC’s standard issue, the kind that agents used to phase into the TimeStream to monitor and direct the course of events. Standard-issue synergizers were foolproof. They had safeties and interlocks. This one didn’t. It gave him complete control over the combination psychic shield and destabilizer whose synergy had given the device its name.

“The original design?” Phil asked, cocking an eyebrow. “But that’s not safe.”

“Depends who’s using it,” Ernie replied, his voice low and ominous. “And on whom.”

Phil’s face darkened in puzzlement. Then, as the pieces fell together, the light of angry understanding filled his eyes. He backed slowly away from Vacca. “All those comatose agents we’ve been monitoring! You’re behind that,” he accused, his words dripping with venom.

“Phil, listen to me,” Vacca pleaded, moving forward to maintain their proximity. “I had to do it. It was the only way to stop the TPC. It’s wrong. What we’ve been doing for the past 130 years is all wrong.”

“Wrong?” Mantee barked. “The TPC kept the peace all that time. How can that be wrong?”

“Oh, we kept the peace, all right,” Vacca agreed. “But there’s a price. What’s the human race accomplished since the Global Directorate took over? Nothing. It’s been stagnating. And we — you and me and every other agent of the TPC — are to blame.”

“Bullshit,” Phil snarled as he edged closer to the door “Admit it, Ernie, you’re just a damn traitor. What do you get out of it Ernie, huh? Is it power?”

“You don’t understand,” Vacca sighed, circling around to cut Mantee off. “We don’t enforce the

peace, we never did. We prevent conflict. And the growth it brings.”

“Oh I understand,” Phil said bitterly as he realized he would never make it to the door. “You want Stinner’s job.”

Vacca shook his head. “Maybe I did then. Who wouldn’t? But that was before I saw what’s been going on — what I’m trying to get you to see — the TPC is rotting the fabric of society.”

“The only rotten thing here is you, Ernie. You’ve got a god complex. You know what’s good for everybody. Anyone who stands in your way gets tossed into the TimeStream without a paddle. Isn’t that it, Ernie?”

Vacca sighed again. “I give up. You just won’t listen.” He raised the Tors Synergizer and pointed it at Mantee. “Good-bye, Phil.”

In a desperate last effort, Mantee lunged, only to collapse in a heap at Vacca’s feet as the destabilizing effect of the synergizer hit him and his consciousness was tossed into the TimeStream.

“We were friends once, Phil,” Ernie said to the body on the floor. “I wish we could’ve been on the same side.”

Vacca turned his thoughts to the future. Phil Mantee was out of the way, but he hadn’t been Vacca’s ultimate target. That honor was reserved for his old colleague, Lara Everett Stinner, now the Director of the Temporal Planning Commission. Stinner wasn’t as skilled as Vacca, but she could pull any string she wanted, and deception was her favorite game.

Vacca pulled a card out of his pocket and tossed it onto the small table by the door. He pivoted smartly and left.