

Review

I am a long-standing science fiction fan and grew up on a diet of Arthur C. Clarke, Patrick Moore, Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov, to name a few. I had not come across Stefan Vučak until *Fulfillment* caught my eye and I am delighted to have made the discovery. Stefan is an accomplished author, technically adept, and a consummate storyteller. His tales transport you to the farthest reaches of the universe or the darkest corners of the mind in a direct, uncomplicated style. I will certainly be reading more from this author, and if you are a fan of the science fiction genre, I would recommend *Fulfillment*, a first-class collection of tales for the most discerning of aficionados.

Readers' Favorite

Books by Stefan Vučak

General Fiction:

Cry of Eagles

All the Evils

Towers of Darkness

Strike for Honor

Proportional Response

Legitimate Power

Science Fiction:

In the Shadow of Death

Against the Gods of Shadow

A Whisper from Shadow

Shadow Masters

Immortal in Shadow

Walking in Shadow

With Shadow and Thunder

Through the Valley of Shadow

Guardians of Shadow

Science Fiction:

Fulfillment

Lifeliners

Non-Fiction:

Writing Tips for Authors

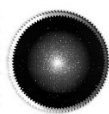
Contact at:

www.stefanvucak.com

FULFILLMENT

By

Stefan Vučak



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Note:

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and events are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is coincidental.

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Dedication

To Julian ... when wearing two faces

Acknowledgments

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<https://laurashinn.yolasite.com>

Foreword

The collection of stories in *Fulfillment* took many years to compile, because most of them were written a very long time ago when I decided that writing is something I wanted to, not realizing that once stepping on that road, there was no turning back. But we write because we must, we are driven, we are cursed, and it brings us joy. Let's leave it at that. In many respects, the first nine stories reflect my evolution as a writer, my training wheels, and I wanted to share them. I trust some of them will bring a measure of satisfaction.

These stories are also available on my website:
<https://www.stefanvucak.com/short-stories/>

Stefan Vučak
February, 2017

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Fulfillment

The eastern sky was a sheet of blood. Overhead, the moon glowed, full and pale in dawn's light. Shadows lay heavy in the valley, and the mist was a gray blanket that hugged the steep slopes. A bull elk strode out of the forest, his sides wet from morning dew. His front hooves minced delicately and he snorted impatiently, his breath sharp and steamy. He tossed back his spread of antlers and bellowed. The valley echoed his call. Satisfied, he turned and stomped back into the forest, the snapping of broken branches marked his path.

On the small plain below, the grass was tall, wide and spiky. It covered the gently sloping meadow in swaying sheets. The breeze reached out in tentative fingers through the whispering grass, keening across the field. The wide blades of grass exposed their silver bellies and bowed after it.

Tall trees that bordered the grassland rustled their yellowing leaves. Wisps of gold, red and orange drifted down among the branches to lay a thick carpet around the gnarled trunks. Deep in the forest, it was gloomy and cool, the stillness broken by an occasional creak of a branch or the sound of soft footfalls as something scampered hurriedly deeper into the darkness. In the forest, the wind did not intrude.

Nearby, bubbling water swirled around moss and algae-covered rocks, gurgled its greeting, then raced down the brook. A tiny green frog raised enormous black eyes above the surface of a small pool and blinked solemnly. Then it leaped. Crickets chattered, secure in their covering of lush grass. A bird, all gold and fire, perched on a twig and voiced its joy.

A shadow drifted slowly across the field. The wind soared, playing with the sunning clouds. It pushed and chased, drawing wispy streamers from the slumbering white masses.

He lay on the grass, hands behind his head, the sky mirroring itself in the blue depths of his clear eyes. The muted buzz of insects filled his ears with pleasant music. Chewing a blade of grass, he smiled at the antics of a butterfly. He peered around a branch as the sun caressed his body with fingers of warmth and pleasure. He chuckled, content with himself and the world.

With a smooth flow of rippling muscles, he rose and spread his arms, twisting his body as he stretched. He was tall and stood with confidence as he gazed around the meadow. He walked toward the brook, sensitive to the grass beneath his feet. The frog sunning itself on a moss-covered rock croaked and jumped into the water as he knelt. He pushed his face into the stream and drank in big gulps. He paused, shook the water off his face with a snort and drank again. Satisfied, he stood beside the brook and looked once again down the sloping meadow.

It was the time of falling leaves and all the herds were moving toward the land of the setting sun. The forests and the plains behind them were already bare, waiting for the sleep that would come as snow started to fall. The older members of the herd like himself were becoming increasingly tense and restless. He would wake in the middle of the night, unaccountably afraid. Images of oddly dressed figures and strange flat shapes in the sky filled his mind with terror. This unease happened only during the time of falling leaves.

The rest of the herd was slowly moving through the forest, picking edible tidbits along the way. A youngster ran from the group and two more followed. They all ended up rolling through the tall grass, flattening it into irregular

clearings. Sounds of laughter and gleeful shrieks drifted toward him. He grunted with contentment, his fear forgotten. On the far side of the meadow a youngster ran screaming between trees in his play.

A shadow drifted over him and a chill crept through his body. He shivered and looked about quickly, getting increasingly nervous as the memories returned. Shouts were coming from the herd as they ran toward the forest, fear contorting their faces. He started breathing rapidly and looked up at the sky. He watched the flat shapes fly toward him and felt the hair on his neck stiffen.

In the hills beyond, a flicker of lightning slashed at the ground. Thunder rumbled in the distance, rolling across the hills. With a last glance at the descending flat shapes, he turned and sprinted toward the forest, his heart suddenly loud in his ears.

He did not know where he was running or why. He only knew that he had to get away. His legs, arms and chest was covered with raw lines, scratched by bushes and low branches. He stumbled and fell, sobbing as fatigued leg muscles throbbed with pain. He landed on rotting leaves and the smell of decaying vegetation was strong, but not unpleasant.

He rolled on his back and breathed deeply, shivering as fear rose and receded. The trees were around him, close and comforting. The forest was his. Behind the branches and the leaves, fire colored the sky. Thunder rolled over the forest, its deep voice making the ground tremble. Darkness settled quickly, drawing the shadows after it. The first drops of rain fell.

It was only then that he felt safe.

* * *

He awakened, turned his head and listened. The hushed wind whispered among the branches above him

and there was a crackling of leaves as some small creature scampered about. Frogs were conducting a concert nearby. A mosquito buzzed around his head and fled as he moved. He smelled water and dampness. A drop fell and touched his face with cold. He allowed his head to sink back into the leaves and closed his eyes.

A breath of wind stirred the leaf. Clear tears of dawn trembled and merged into one pure jewel. The teardrop slid down the leaf and hung at its tip. A fleeting ray of light, jumping from leaf to leaf, splashed itself against the drop. A rainbow flared in its depths as the drop fell toward the shadowy undergrowth.

He felt the drop hit his face and he opened his eyes. He smiled at the deep blue of a clear sky, the silent trees and the noises of life around him. The air was sharp and alive after the rain and he breathed deeply. Then he felt the pain of memory and hurriedly stood up.

Between the trees, he could see the meadow and the hills beyond. The herd would be there and he longed for the company of familiar faces.

He emerged out of the forest and ran through the dew-sprinkled grass. A white mist hung low over the field. Loose tendrils slowly reached toward the sky. He jogged to the top of a small hill and looked down, but there was no sign of the herd. He was puzzled, but not overly concerned. He knew where they were headed. Strange noises were coming from the other side of the rise and he stood, listening, undecided. Maybe it was the herd, but he could not recognize the sounds. Uncertainly, he walked across the meadow and scrambled up the small hill.

Four oval flat shapes were resting on the plain below. People like the herd, but all in red, walked about the flat shapes. One of the red creatures looked up and stopped. He was already turning away when he saw the eyes. His whole body tingled and he felt himself growing numb. His legs trembled as he stumbled and fell. He whimpered with

fear and struggled to his feet, feeling the staring eyes on his back. He screamed and ran over the crest toward the welcoming forest.

Some time later, he fell in gasping exhaustion beside a rotting tree trunk that lay sprawled on the forest floor. He could run no farther. His lungs felt filled with tiny thorns. It was agony to breathe and he ached everywhere. The scratches on his arms and legs stung painfully.

He lay there moaning, realizing he had trapped himself. After an aimless flight through the length of the forest, he discovered nothing but meadows and valleys all around. There was no way out and he did not dare venture into the open. The thought of those strangely clad creatures waiting for him out there made the fear cloud his mind. Those eyes! He was unbearably thirsty and he remembered the brook at the edge of the forest. He could not wait for darkness with his whole body demanding water.

The forest was something he thought he understood. As he walked toward the brook, he kept glancing at the shadows around him. The trees were shifting strangely and shapes formed in the gloom. He was on the verge of panic barely controlled. There was no safety anywhere. Dry leaves rustled behind him and he yelled in panic and ran. After a while, he stopped and looked back. There was nothing.

The trees thinned and he could see the swaying grass beyond. Slowly, he moved closer to the forest edge. There was nothing threatening out there. Haltingly, he emerged into the open, soaking in the warmth of the sun. He knelt beside the brook and glanced around before plunging his face into the water. It was icy and tasted delicious. After washing himself, he drank again. Then he laughed, his skin tingling with the radiant feeling of life.

The breeze played with his hair as he listened to the whispering grass and the nodding, rustling branches. A dry twig snapped and he whirled, looking into the forest. A

slim red figure stepped away from behind a tree. The figure was in shadow, yet the eyes burned with inner fire. They seemed to grow, pulling at him.

* * *

He tried to look away, but his body refused to obey. He felt something snap and tear in his head and long forgotten memories struggled to rise. And it hurt. He was screaming inside his mind, trying to hide from those compelling eyes.

Musical sounds came from the creature as it walked slowly toward him. The sounds were soft and soothing, calming him. It was very confusing. The creature looked like one of the herd, yet it was smaller and thinner. The red covering ended at the neck and wrists and did not look like skin. The creature stopped before him at arm's length. He watched with interest as the wind played with its streaming yellow hair. The pleasant face that looked at him was smiling.

Slowly, it lifted a slender hand to the top of its red covering. The hand moved down the center of the body and he could see white skin beneath as the covering parted. The creature stepped out of its false skin and more soothing noises came from its mouth. He was fascinated by the false skin lying crumpled on the grass, but the eyes pulled at him and he could not look away from the compelling curves of the creature's body.

Its skin was very light and delicate, the body rounded with no rippling muscles. Two upraised mounds of flesh stirred on its chest as it breathed and he stared at them in fascination. Then the creature stopped smiling, reached out with its hand and touched his cheek. A tingle, not unpleasant, ran down his spine and he shuddered. Strange sensations raced through his body. He felt hot and cold as images of sunlight, sky and trees burst in his mind and faded.

He felt his body slowly sink into the grass. The creature stood looking down at him and smiled. Its eyes flared, boring into his. A gurgle rose in his throat as an ancient memory surfaced. A memory of silver towers, the sky filled with flying disks. A memory of a past long ago. The creature knelt beside him and stroked his skin, gently caressing his body. He felt himself respond and reached out with a trembling hand to touch the rosy tip on one of the fleshy mounds. The creature smiled broadly, murmured something softly and moved its legs to straddle his body.

With the climax of pleasure, he felt something rip in his head and the eyes staring at him flared unbearably. He sobbed and reached for the woman above him, for he now knew what she was. His mind screamed as he tried to form the strange words he suddenly knew, just as darkness covered his eyes.

* * *

The flat shapes flew low over the forest, glinting as light skidded over polished metal. A young male child ran from behind a tree where he was hiding and watched the shapes grow smaller and vanish into afternoon haze. He shrugged and ran toward the others. He wondered briefly why some of the older ones were not there, but it was warm and laughter made him forget.

Beside the brook, the figure of a prone man began to change in the grass, became translucent. A leaf detached itself from an overhanging branch, fluttered toward the brook, hovered above the semi-transparent form before it settled on the ghostly outline of a face. The outline blurred like a patch of mist, and slowly, the form faded.

The leaf hesitated, then settled gently where the figure had lain. The flattened grass slowly straightened around it.

About the Author

Stefan Vučak has written nine 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.

To learn more about Stefan, visit his:

Website: <https://www.stefanvucak.com>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/StefanVucakAuthor>

Twitter: @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 Terrlls-rr is tasked to destroy the craft before international tension throws Earth into open conflict.

Against the Gods of Shadow

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

A Whisper from Shadow

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

Shadow Masters

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

Immortal in Shadow

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

Terrlls-rr must find the secret base that is supporting him before the Wanderers rise up and unleash Death's wrath on the Serrll.

With Shadow and Thunder

2002 EPPIE finalist

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 Terrlls-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, 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 Readers' Favorite silver medal winner

Iran's nuclear capability represents a clear national threat to Israel, but the United States and Europe do nothing. A Mosad 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 Mosad 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

2017 Book Excellence Awards finalist

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?