

Review

Naiveté and dreams of fame are quickly dashed in this exciting anthropological mystery by Stefan Vučak. *Towers of Darkness* is an exposé style story, questioning the ethics of the ivory towers of the most respected academic institutions. Fighting for his career and even his life, Larry Krafter does not back down and the action builds steadily as the plot plays out. This is truly an amazing look at how greed and position affect people in all professions at all levels! Well written with strong characters, plenty of action, and a wide net of law enforcement closing in on the culprits, *Towers of Darkness* is sure to please as you can't wait to see what happens next. Great story!

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TOWERS OF DARKNESS

By

Stefan Vučak



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Note:

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Stefan Vučak ©2011
ISBN-10: 0987601490
ISBN-13: 978-0-9876014-9-0

Dedication

To Boz ... and his own struggle to achieve

Acknowledgments

My thanks to: Greg Durocher from the U.S. Geological Survey; Nick Jones from the Wyoming State Geological Survey, for information on coal geology and mining. For information on fossil dating, particular thanks goes to Dr. Jeffrey D. Stilwell, Applied Paleontology and Basin Studies Group, Monash University, Melbourne.

Valuable information was sourced from *Forbidden Archeology*, Michael A. Cremo, Bhaktivedanta Book Publishing, Inc., 2005.

Note: The International Anthropological Society is fictitious and not a real body.

Cover art by Laura Shinn.
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Chapter One

Nothing could soften the sun's harsh glare. An occasional ragged cloud streamed high in the sky's blue deeps, and a whispering cool breeze sometimes drifted silently across the ugly black gash of the Karringa open cut mine. Neither helped hold back the eighty-four degree bite, and it was only eleven o'clock. Hands clasped behind his back, polarized shades over his eyes, Ferguson stood tall outside the drab, gray fibro prefab hut of the temporary admin office. With a black glazed meerschaum pipe locked firmly between his teeth, his steel gray eyes were fixed on the overburden wall that hung sixty feet above the freshly exposed bench some two hundred yards on his right.

The sub-bituminous coal layer he was after lay a farther forty feet below the bench. That's why he stood there, stoically sweating under his blue hardhat and open-neck white shirt, waiting for the cast blast that would heave a seventy-yard section of overburden into the pit floor now denuded of coal. Dozers would then push the remaining overburden and the thin lignite layer that sat atop the Upper Smith Seam, onto the resulting cast pile. The exposed coal bed would then be ready for extraction.

Opposite him, working in the shadow of the looming north-south overburden wall, two tracked bucket wheel excavators were chewing at the open coalface that fed coal to enormous Caterpillar 797B rear dump trucks with a capacity of 380 short tons, which they took to one of four storage silos for washing and blending before being flood loaded into rail cars from the loop silo, then transported to coking processors or ever-hungry power stations around the state. Ninety-five feet below the open seam, a dwarfed excavator worked the main prize, the Lower Smith Seam of anthracite, a dense, lustrous coal hard as rock; deep and costly to get at, but well worth the expense.

Karringa was a new mine in the Powder River Basin working the Fort Union Formation bed, already crowded by over a dozen operators of various sizes around Gillette. Ferguson had stood here, watching when the first group blast was drilled into the open plain. When the dust settled, the dozers moved in to clear the virgin soil, which made way for further, deeper blasts until they hit the Roland Seam, enabling

the excavators and trucks to take over while finishing touches were done to the holding silos and rail line. It was a tough eighteen months for everybody getting this far, but the sweat and curses were paying off. He didn't give a toss about the other mines, inasmuch as they were taking away coal that should properly belong to him, or at least his Relans Mining Corporation parent. He only cared about Karringa and his extraction quotas, always going up.

He often contemplated dragging Stanton from his comfortable Gillette office and show the hardboiled general manager what it took to meet his ridiculous quotas. He threatened, but never carried through on his promise. An old coal hand himself, Stanton knew very well what it took, and that's how the game was played. Ferguson grumbled and wouldn't have minded having Stanton on the receiving end of today's cast blast, but he went on with his job anyway. There were never enough men, equipment, time or money for either of them to satisfy the head office. Once the new sixty-five million-dollar dragline excavator was installed, its 120 cubic-yard bucket eliminating the slower dozer push key pass, it would enormously speed up pre-production. In two months the monster dragline would be assembled and ready to do some paid work—excavating virgin overburden, always the messiest part. Stanton might ease off then, however dubious the prospect. Probably issue another quota increase. Despite their squabbles, the two of them got along. While Stanton remained buried in his Gillette office worrying about capacity expansion and takeovers, Ferguson would keep Karringa producing.

Even with his ongoing operational problems, he had little to complain about. He might bitch about Stanton's unreasonable demands, but that was nothing compared to what the pitmen called him. 'Mustard' Ferguson, mustard the bastard, and he relished the accolade. Getting coal out of unforgiving ground not willing to give it up for the asking, took determination and tough, no-nonsense men who shunned all forms of subterfuge and obfuscation. Anyway, damn them, they got paid, and paid well for what they did. Too bad Katarina had not been as understanding, if only a little. Things might have been different then. But he was a miner who loved his job more than he loved her. At least that's how she put it. There was no way to explain the fire burning in

him when he worked his mine, not in words she would accept or understand. Then again, she had always been a big city girl, and he hoped New York would make her happy. The fire of love that burned for her within him still burned, but without her to fan it, he feared it would eventually smolder away. Life was shit.

He sucked on his pipe and puffed out a gray cloud of aromatic rum-flavored tobacco smoke. Anytime now, he thought comfortably. Strictly speaking, he shouldn't be out here at all, but this was a distraction from cold figures, charts and paperwork, a reminder of what the whole thing was about. He could never afford to lose that connection, or he would end up like Stanton. Besides, as mine manager, he could stand wherever he damn well pleased.

On cue, a wall of dust rose fifty feet directly behind the overburden bench face, followed by a sharp crack of high explosive core charges going off. In a ripple of blasts, dust and debris walked back along the bench toward the burgeoning overburden wall, the effect bodily heaved the bench layer onto the worked pit floor. He waited for the dust to clear, then nodded with satisfaction. A fair amount of overburden still showed, but it was mostly the useless soft Roland Seam lignite layer, a characteristic of this formation. It would not take the dozers long, two days at most, to clear the rubbish and expose the main seam. As usual, Cower had done a good job, but he expected nothing else. Blast casting was an art as much as it was a science, and Cower was one of the best. When he considered the time, effort and money consumed by a blast, this was not a job for an amateur.

Ferguson chewed on his pipe stem and walked into the prefab, nodded to Sandra clicking away on her keyboard, and strode toward his office tucked against the back wall. The faces behind the arrayed desks never looked up from their work. The administrative building next to the new car park near the mine entrance would not be ready for another two weeks at least, no matter how hard he badgered the construction project manager.

Inside his cramped office, he emptied the pipe into an ashtray, sat down and absently glanced at the wall-mounted air-conditioner, wondering what a properly equipped office looked. Getting out of this prefab would be a welcomed change, and not only for him. The men also

looked forward to having a proper canteen, relaxation and service facilities. Karringa was not a UMWA shop, thank God, something he and Stanton firmly agreed on, resisting any attempt by smooth talking greasy reps to make it into one; troublemakers, all of them. There would be no strikes, walkouts or protracted wrangling because the game room walls were painted beige rather than blue, or the cutlery wasn't the right shape. In his view, the best thing a union rep could do for the men and the mine was to stand in front of a cast blast.

* * *

Bruster revved the hundred-ton dozer and drove the angled blade into the broken thirty-foot lignite bed, separated from the sub-bituminous layer by ten feet of rock, shale and compacted sand. The huge Caterpillar D11 dozer-ripper hardly paused as it bit into the layer, pushing a fifty cubic yard bite of sandstone, shale, crystalline rock, rooted siltstones and brown coal toward the already cleared overburden spoil that now covered the pit floor. He reversed the dozer, swung it around and lowered the blade. A dozer on either side of his machine belched black diesel smoke as they worked to clear the overburden the cast blast had left behind. It was exacting work, but repetitive. Still, better than driving a dump truck. The only thing he had to worry about was driving his dozer over the lip of the bench. It wouldn't do anything for his bonus or Mustard's humor.

He wished for a cold beer and a smoke as he engaged the drive and the dozer lurched forward with a bellow from the powerful engine. He was about to push into the exposed lignite when a flash of light made him blink. He stepped on the brake and tilted his head, staring at the exposed face, but there was nothing there except a seam of soft coal and broken gravel. He stepped off the brake and something glinted again. Muttering an obscenity, he put the dozer into neutral and climbed out of the cabin. Bruster jumped off the thick metal track and walked toward the coalface.

He peered at the wall and quickly found what caused the flash of light. Imbedded in the coal three feet from top of the layer, protruded a black bone. Smudged, but still bright, a partially exposed ring of

twisted yellow metal formed a bracelet around the bone. He leaned forward and reached up to poke the fragment with a stiff forefinger. There was no give, of course, the bone lying solidly encased in the seam.

He placed his hands on his hips and shook his head.

“Well, if that don’t beat all.”

As he stared at the bone, he figured the thing had to be ancient, buried this deep below ground. The boys often came across curiosities, which they kept or sold at one of the Gillette curio shops, but a worked bracelet this deep? Maybe he should take the thing and sell it. It could be gold and the money would come in handy. But if he got caught, he would likely lose the bracelet, his job, and possibly end up with a fine or prison term for his trouble, not counting getting blacklisted. It simply wasn’t worth the hassle. Besides, he had a wife and family to think of to risk petty theft over a lousy few bucks. The curio shop owners always underpaid. His old lady wouldn’t be amused if he got caught either. No, better do this right. Maybe Mustard would give him an added bonus for the find; if the bastard was feeling generous, that is.

He tilted back his yellow hardhat and ear protectors, and pulled out a cellphone. Selecting a listed number from the menu, he pressed the call button. Dozers rumbled around him, but he hardly noticed them.

“What is it, Bruster?” Cower answered after two rings, his voice distracted. Bruster figured the man was probably evaluating the effectiveness of the last cast blast.

“I got something here you should see, chief.”

“I see you taking a break beside your dozer instead of clearing away that shit like you’re supposed to.”

Bruster’s mouth twitched with bleak humor. Cower wasn’t a bad guy to get along with, for a company staff puke, provided you did your job. He had little time for idlers, at least on mine time anyway, until you got him to Sanford’s Grub & Pub in Gillette. There, old Cower could tank up and mix it with the best of them. He wasn’t really old actually, but that’s what everybody called him. On the job, though, the man had no sense of humor at all.

“Ain’t taking no break and you really should see this.”

There was a moment of silence followed by a long sigh. “Okay, five minutes,” Cower said and the line went dead.

Bruster smiled, waved to Gulio working the dozer on his left and

started walking toward the belching machine. The dozer stopped.

“What’s up?” Gulio asked in a chesty voice, leaning out from his seat.

“Found something interesting and Cover is coming over for a look. Keep clear of this part of the bench, okay?”

“What you got? Blackbeard’s treasure?”

“Just a piece of bone.”

“Okay, I’ll keep clear. You flagging it?”

“You bet,” Bruster said and walked back to his dozer.

He climbed into the cabin, reached behind the thick padded seat and pulled out two three-foot yellow poles. Jumping down, he unfurled the little triangular red flags and planted the poles into the detritus in front of the buried bone. With the flags set, he climbed onto the dozer and went back to work. There was plenty of overburden still to clear.

A few minutes later, Cover drove up in his battered pickup and stopped at end of the makeshift road the dump trucks would be using to shift coal once the overburden was cleared. He waved a yellow flag to keep from being run down and approached Bruster’s dozer. The miner cut power, eased the machine to a stop and climbed down.

“Okay, Bruster, what’s the big deal?” demanded the burly mine engineer, clearly in no mood for games.

Bruster pointed at the flags hanging limp on the poles and walked toward the face without looking if the engineer followed. When he reached the flags, he stopped and pointed at the seam.

“This isn’t another gag, is it?” Cover scowled at the miner and peered at the exposed coalface.

“Look up.”

Frowning, Cover searched the top of the brown lignite seam, his eyes invariably drawn to the glint of yellow metal. He saw the exposed bone and drew back with a start.

“Holy shit!”

Bruster knew exactly what Cover must be thinking: A bracelet on a bone sticking out of an Eocene lignite layer? The bracelet implied human bone, which was clearly not possible. The Fort Union Formation consisted of late Oligocene and early Eocene lignite over a Paleocene sub-bituminous bed that was mined, the lignite quality being too poor to be worth extracting, at least the stuff here was. If this piece

of bone was real, it had been buried for thirty or forty million years! The bone was one thing, but a bracelet meant intelligent workmanship.

Cower's shoulders sagged and he groaned. After a moment, he pushed back his red hardhat.

"Why me, Lord? Why today? As if I haven't got enough problems on my hands already."

"Is this trouble, chief?" Bruster asked. The engineer slowly looked at him.

"Trouble? I don't give a crap about that bone. I'm worried about delays and cost overruns, Ferguson ranting at me, blaming me for everything that goes wrong. A whipping boy, that's what I am. An unappreciated, underpaid whipping boy. I am sorely tempted to just tell you to bury the thing and forget it, but I'm not going to. Plant more flags twenty feet on either side and don't go near the thing. Stick some flags on top of the seam as well. I'm not going to thank you for calling me, by the way. You've just ruined a great day for me."

"Do I get a finder's reward?" Bruster ventured half jokingly.

"Yeah, you'll get a reward. You get to keep your job! Now get back into that dozer and start earning your pay."

Bruster grinned and walked off, not minding Cower's kill 'em on sight attitude.

* * *

With three dozers snarling around him, Cower stared at the piece of bone, shook his head in wonder and slowly made his way back to the pickup. He leaned against the hood and dragged out his cellphone. The mine manager had to know about this and he winced at the expected blast. It took a couple of rings before a deep, confident voice answered.

"Ferguson!"

"It's Jackson, boss. I'm at the new cast blast bench and you need to come down right now."

"What's the matter? A dozer run over your foot?"

"I wish, but I'm afraid it's a bit more serious. One of the guys found what looks like a human hand bone wearing a yellow metal bracelet stuck in the lignite seam."

"Ah, shit," Ferguson growled after a pause.

Cower sympathized. Both their days were shot.

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“You know what this is going to do to my schedule? Stanton will go orbital.”

“We still got four days before we’re ready to start shifting coal here, boss. The sub-bituminous bed will be exposed on time.”

“Except for your find,” Ferguson complained bitterly. “Right now, I’m not anxious to handle another headache, but you were right to call me. I know the company policy regarding anthropological items, but you could have been a pal and pretended not to see the thing. I could also pretend you never called, but I’m not going to. And you know? It started being such a great day too.”

“That’s what I told Bruster who found the thing,” Cower said.

“This isn’t a prank the guys pulled, is it?” Ferguson demanded. “If it is, I’m not going to be very amused.”

“Looks real to me, boss.”

“It would. All right, we’ll simply have to work around it. Flag the area, then wrap the bone in some plastic and place a tarp over the whole thing. Better post a security guard over there twenty-four seven until further notice.”

“Already flagged, boss, but are you sure about security?”

“What do you think? I’m on my way,” Ferguson snapped and switched off.

* * *

Larry Krafter reached the corner of 12th and Lewis Streets, and ambled confidently toward the broad entrance steps of the new Anthropology Building, so much more comfortable than the old place on Iverson Avenue. He looked around the almost deserted grounds, seeing an odd student making his way along narrow lanes between the campus buildings. They could be here for anything: remedial classes, summer courses, research or a wandering visitor. But at eight in the morning, he didn’t consider that likely.

Thick glass panels slid aside and he gave a small sigh of relief as he entered the air-conditioned interior. Although early, it already pushed seventy-five and promised another hot day. He enjoyed summer, and

August was always lovely, especially when winters in Laramie seemed to be getting longer each year. Climate change or merely a natural 100,000-year weather cycle linked to sun's increased magnetic activity? He couldn't say and didn't particularly care. It wasn't his department, but he did acknowledge that man's mounting industrial pollution output wasn't doing the atmosphere much good. Still, compared to the annual volume of gases ejected from Earth's 160 or so active volcanoes, to him, man's contribution seemed rather paltry. But climate scientists were on a roll, and why spoil a good thing by pointing out inconsistencies?

He took the broad stairway to the third floor and made directly for the Paleoanthropology Lab. The short summer break before the start of the fall semester gave him an opportunity to pursue one of his pet research programs. This one was somewhat outside his immediate field, as it dealt with geology, but as a biological paleoanthropologist, the extremely thick and extensive coal seams in the Powder River Basin and the south-eastern Montana beds, had puzzled him, and had sorely worried geologists all over for years.

Some of the seams were forty meters thick, most of it nearly pure. So, why did this basin have so much coal when similar basins in Wyoming hardly had any? Geologically, there simply should not have been enough organic feed material during the Eocene and Paleocene epochs to produce the volume of coal held there. Extensive crustal deformation during that period could have buried all the other coal beds. Nobody could account for it. Krafter hoped to find out one way or another by analyzing deep core drilling data from mining companies and the USGS, no matter how long it took. If necessary, he would do some drilling himself. It was an amusing diversion from his more serious work: establishing the facts behind population migration into the Americas.

Krafter bypassed the research labs and lecture rooms, and walked deliberately toward his small office half way down the wide corridor. A cramped six by eight foot cubicle with no window, he should be insulted, but as a very junior Assistant Professor on the university totem pole, he considered himself lucky to have it. He could have ended up with a corner desk in one of the senior faculty offices. Just the image of

being under such constant surveillance and condescending fatherly advice made him cringe. In his view, most of the old fuds on the faculty hung on by a thread and should have been pastured off long ago. He unlocked the drab off-white door, walked in, and flipped on the light switch. A double fluorescent strip flickered into life and Krafter immediately walked to his desk shoved hard against the far wall.

He pulled back a dark gray cloth ergonomic chair and pressed the power button on his tower computer. Ignoring the two metal filing cabinets behind him, the ceiling-high bookshelf fitted against the wall on his right, stuffed full of student files, magazines, binders and professional books—he ought to take time to weed out junk that invariably accumulated during an academic year before the fall semester started—and a corner cupboard, he waited for the 17” LED screen to finish displaying the startup sequence. Finally done, the cursor arrow blinked steadily beside columns of icons, waiting for him to do something, like logging on.

As part of his usual morning routine, the first thing he did was activate Outlook and check the email list. There were several from his students, but a red flag message from Dr. Perkins caught his attention. The subject line simply read ‘Come and see me’. He wondered what the old relic wanted, but despite the imperative, it couldn’t be anything too important or the man would have rung.

As Assistant Director, Perkins ran the Paleoanthropology Lab, its research programs, graduate and undergraduate classes, and of course, the grants system so badly needed by resident researchers, including Larry’s. Although he didn’t have the final say in everything, that privilege belonged to the Anthropology Department director, Krafter made it a policy not to antagonize Perkins unnecessarily. Besides, he kind of liked the forty-six-year-old codger. To him, being only twenty-six, anyone over forty was already half fossilized, in mind and body. But Perkins was tenured and could afford to be demanding, unreasonable, and a general pain when it suited him.

Krafter clicked on the email line and quickly scanned the message. A human bone unearthed in a Roland Seam at a Gillette coal mine? Perkins had to be kidding. Most of the Fort Union Formation was Paleocene, fifty million years or more! According to accepted evolutionary models, man did not walk this Earth until some 400,000 years

ago. At least *homo sapiens* did not. As for the ape-like creatures before then, it was all inference and guesswork. No one really knew, not definitively. The bone had to be someone's idea of an elaborate gag and a waste of university time. Perkins was probably having one of his little jokes and jerking his chain.

He clicked on the first JPG attachment and stared thoughtfully at the sharp image. A bone and a bracelet, all right, solidly imbedded in brown coal. If this was a gag, somebody went to an awful lot of trouble to make it look real. But how did they encase a piece of bone in coal strata? The second attachment showed a close-up of a partially crushed bracelet. Intricate fine lines and seemingly random geometric patterns clearly indicated sophisticated workmanship. It looked very real to him.

Skeptical and unable to accept what he was seeing, Krafter nonetheless felt a tug of curiosity and a desire to expose what had to be a case of elaborate intrusive burial, but buried under ninety feet or so of overburden? Of course, the overburden was no longer there, having been blasted away, and with it, any evidence of possible strata tampering. The blast made the integrity of the find highly questionable. Somebody *could* have planted the thing.

The last two attachments were an e-ticket with Great Lakes Airlines for a return flight to Gillette and a motel reservation. It wasn't hard to guess what Perkins wanted, but Krafter felt uncomfortable at the dubious honor accorded him. Well, the university was paying for this and a change of scenery would do him good. Then he noticed the departure time: 11:25 this morning! What the hell was the rush? He bit back his indignation when the perfectly obvious answer struck him.

Karringa Mine was an active working, and they were being more than generous to invite the University of Wyoming to look at the find *in situ*. They could simply have dug the thing up and handed him a cardboard box, thereby destroying any validity the find might have had, if it still had any. As a scientist, he respected the sacrifice Karringa was making, provided UW did not drag its ass, if *he* didn't drag his ass, or he *would* only get a box, if he were lucky.

Incredible as it seemed, what if the thing was real? As a progressive paleoanthropologist straining against shackles of orthodoxy and powerful personalities who dominated the field, he didn't have to have things spelled out. Human evolutionary theory would take a massive

hit, as would all those creationist nut groups, not that scientific evidence meant anything to them. His name could go down in history books alongside Leakey, or more likely, as a fraud like Professor von Zieten, if his detractors had their way. It would certainly get him noticed, something every academic craved, but would it be the right kind of exposure this early in his career? He was running ahead of himself and knew it. Get the facts first, then see what happens. But a little dreaming of glory did no harm.

He printed the email message and attachments, and walked quickly down the silent corridor toward Perkins' spacious office, his footsteps echoing on the hard linoleum floor. He would have to hustle if he wanted to catch that flight, and glory would have to wait a while longer. After a solid knock on the wood-veneered door, followed by a muffled 'Come in', he opened the door and stepped through. Wide windows splashed soft light against a deep gray carpet and turned the packed bookshelves beside him a rich amber. A broad pale beige executive desk fronted the door, behind which stood a row of five four-drawer steel cabinets.

In his usual summer outfit, a navy blue T-shirt with a UW logo on the left breast, Adam Perkins lifted his brown-cropped head from the computer screen and gave a noncommittal grunt.

Krafter did not need to be a mind reader to know what Perkins was thinking. It would be about his attire. Krafter preferred to dress casually. His scuffed black jeans, a purple open-neck shirt with rolled up sleeves, runners that were long past their use-by date, didn't project an image of a serious faculty member. But he rather enjoyed projecting an impression of a rebellious young scientist, regardless of the frowns this had earned him from some of the stuffy faculty. His students didn't mind his youth, and in these protest-marching times, that counted for more than being garroted by a tie.

"Ah, Larry, you obviously read my email," Perkins said. "If you'd had your cellphone on yesterday, we could have avoided this scurrying around."

Krafter winced slightly at the rebuke, only mildly disconcerted. He told Perkins on Monday that he was taking yesterday off and would be out of touch. Besides, the old duffer could have used his landline number if the thing was so important. Jerking his chain, that was it.

“I read the email, all right, but I don’t understand why the university is interested. You know my thinking on human evolution is considered somewhat radical, but finding a supposedly intact *ulno* or *radius* bone with an attached bracelet in an Eocene layer is preposterous. It’s got to be.”

Perkins lifted both eyebrows. “Somewhat radical? Extreme, would be more accurate. As I told you before, that kind of thinking will land you in trouble one dark day. You’re pushing the established envelope too hard and risking derailing a bright career. Be warned.”

“My papers are backed with solid evidence,” Krafter pointed out defiantly, somewhat tired of Perkins’ veiled conservatism. Anyway, the man was only a bureaucrat and simply didn’t understand. “Bollinger and Maddson are wedded to outmoded ideas and refuse to treat the evidence objectively.”

“Of course they refuse to be objective!” Perkins snapped. “Accepting your findings would mean acknowledging that a lifetime of work was nonsense and would embarrass not only them, but the universities they represent.”

“But their position *is* nonsense!”

“Just because you’ve got evidence, doesn’t mean you cannot be discredited. You need thirty years of orthodoxy before you can be radical. Your problem is that you lack those years. Take it from me, I know. Even though Professor Walsh agrees with you and supports your theory, and he carries the weight of Oxford behind him, even he is cautious embracing your extrapolations on Pacific migratory patterns. Remember my warning,” Perkins said mildly and wagged a finger at him.

Krafter wasn’t convinced and it showed on his face. Perkins sighed in resignation.

“You simply don’t get it, do you? I don’t mind seeing your unshakable confidence, or display your sense of immortality and impatience with stuffy academic protocols. That’s healthy at this stage of your career, although others might not agree with me. But you need to temper your rashness or your career will wither. You need to learn prudence and wisdom in the crucible of experience.”

“Yes, sir,” Krafter said stoically. He’d had these father-knows-best speeches before, and he had seen that crucible close up.

Perkins cleared his throat. “As for the Karringa find being preposterous, that might be, but we have a responsibility to find out, and you’re one of my experts on Powder River Basin geology and anthropology. We’ll treat this with an open mind, examine the evidence by sticking to established scientific principles and ascertain the cold facts. There is no room in this laboratory for prejudicial indulgence. Isn’t that what you’ve been telling your undergrads?”

Stung by the admonishment, Krafter sat up. “I might be pushing the envelope, but Karringa is way outside it! It’s got to be.”

“That’s why you’re going up there to find out. Of course, if this is beneath you and you prefer to shuffle papers all summer, I can always give it to Wethermans.” Perkins said and a faint smile touched his mouth.

Krafter blanched at the very idea of Associate Professor Paul Wethermans in one of his impeccable London suits anywhere near the Karringa find, or any other find, for that matter. The two clashed and disagreed on almost everything, their ideas and objectives diametrically opposed. Wethermans was accepted old school anthropology and archaeology, whereas Krafter challenged recognized authorities. Wethermans valued his position and career, sucked up to powers that be and published regurgitated dogma comfortably regarded by his peers. Krafter doubted that the man ever had an original thought. He knew Wethermans saw him as a dangerous and provocative reactionary who should never been awarded a PhD. To frustrate the locked mind of his critic and other detractors, Krafter got even by producing flawlessly researched papers that *Science* and *Nature* peer reviews failed to discredit, regardless of their dislike for the content.

Perhaps it was the unstated snobbery that Wethermans oozed whenever he talked or moved that grated on Krafter. The man came from a moderately wealthy family—uranium mining somewhere in Crook County—and never let people forget it. He ought to have stuck with daddy’s business instead of becoming a hack academic. Krafter knew he shouldn’t be so thin-skinned and he had more powerful adversaries to deal with.

“That was cruel, Dr. Perkins,” Krafter said stiffly, and the lab head chuckled.

“Relax, Larry. I only wanted to see you squirm. You don’t have time

to argue this and I don't have time to indulge you. I suggest you go home, put something decent on—you're representing the university—pack a bag and catch that flight. I spoke to the mine manager yesterday and you're expected. We don't want to disappoint him because you're stuck in an ideological vacuum. When you get there, make sure you photograph everything, and I mean everything. Once the bones are removed, Karringa will have the site dug up and those photos and films will be the only corroborating evidence left to support stratigraphic dating. When you get the material here, we'll carry out a rigorous analysis and announce the find. Do it by the book."

"I get to publish the paper?" Krafter demanded, unwilling to be railroaded into doing all the grunt work and have Perkins reap the glory, controversy more probably. As a rising academic, and he liked to consider himself as one, getting published was everything. Any notoriety that came his way would merely be a bonus.

Perkins spread his hands in surrender. "The thing is all yours, but be careful what you wish for."

* * *

When Krafter left, Perkins leaned back in his chair and smiled with wry amusement. The boy had no respect for authority or the cultured image he was supposed to project. He had sponsored Krafter's PhD program and sat on his convocation, liking the seditious streak and a sharp, incisive mind the youngster displayed, although some did not. His thesis, *An analysis of early Pleistocene humans in the Americas*, caused an understandable stir in the paleoanthropological community around the world, but Krafter's research was solid and the evidence irrefutable.

Krafter contended that by the time the Beringia land bridge migrations across the Bering Strait took place, those people found North America already populated. Modern man not only inhabited the Americas 60,000 years ago, but did so originally by moving north from South America and left verifiable artifacts that biostratigraphic and radiometric dating had validated—however unpalatable the results for some and damaging to established dogma of the accepted human evolutionary path.

The fact that existing migratory theory was based on tenuous,

sweeping assumptions, and a pitiful handful of unearthed fragments and campfire campsites, meant no never mind to the establishment, whose view is that science only grows, it does not backtrack. If a new discovery showed that modern science had made a major mistake and massive backtracking is indeed required, the discovery must be wrong, and that's what Krafter's critics maintained.

If Krafter's migratory theory hadn't been enough, he really stirred the pot by announcing that the Clovis asteroid could not have wiped out the North American indigenous population 12,900 years ago as claimed by most researchers. Although significant portions of the continent and its wildlife were wiped out by the resulting firestorm, contrary to currently held belief, most inhabitants survived. Krafter maintained that this was largely due to an already established population base that took root 60,000 years ago. The continent's varied geography made it impossible for the catastrophe to wipe out everything, and his analysis of the Black Mat Layer seemed to support his theory.

If nothing else, his papers made for interesting reading.

The boy's problem was not his research or methodology, but lack of opportunities to expand himself and his horizons. Although a great institution, the University of Wyoming was simply inadequate for Krafter's inquiring mind, and Perkins intended shoving his protégé out of his comfortable nest at the earliest opportunity. The Karringa find could be exactly the opportunity he was looking for to make Krafter stretch his wings. But like Icarus, he needed to be mindful of the heat.

Perkins understood the workings of a rebel mind. He'd had several options along his own career path to become a pure scientist, but he found early that he wanted to run things, be an administrator, and he was very good at it. Rick Larson was retiring as department director and Perkins already had the nod from the university Trustees and the president to replace him. That would be good on a personal level, but his job was not only to look after university interests, but also nurture rising talent. If Krafter remained here, he would wither and die, which was something Perkins would make sure did not happen.

He understood completely the younger man's parochial position as he picked up his mug and stood up. A good cup of coffee would get his mind back into gear and off Krafter's bone.

* * *

Wings steady, the twin engine Beechcraft turbo-prop sank quickly toward the Gillette-Campbell County Airport's north-south runway. The pilot feathered the props and Krafter removed his earplugs. Shouldering the horizon on either side loomed the Bighorn Mountains in the west and the Black Hills in the east. Gillette itself lay four miles farther south from the airport on the gently rolling Powder River Basin plateau. As the aircraft came in, he noted the huge black gashes of open pit and strip mines, and marveled at the volume of coal here. He knew the raw numbers, but they lacked the visual impact. Most of northeastern Wyoming was one giant deposit. If they dug for another hundred years, there would still be coal left.

The aircraft touched down with a scrape of tires and the empty grassland on either side of the runway rushed by. The Beechcraft turned right onto a taxiway and bumped its way toward a small L shaped terminal building. A security guard met the passengers as they alighted, while baggage handlers pushed caged trolleys toward the idling aircraft. Carrying a black leather bag of toiletries and change of clothing, Krafter squinted at the bright blue sky, enjoying the pleasant warmth, and followed a ragged group of eight fellow passengers into the terminal, ending the comfortable fifty-minute flight.

He collected his tools suitcase and wheeled it through the double sliding glass panels, and raised a hand at the first cab waiting in a row of three. The yellow cab pulled up beside him and the driver stepped out, manhandling the suitcase into the trunk without being asked. Krafter got into the front seat and strapped in.

When he got in, the cabbie immediately pulled away and headed for the US-16 entrance.

"Where to, buddy?" he demanded, pausing to check the traffic before entering the highway.

"Americas Best Value Inn," Krafter told him and settled back, his ears still buzzing from propeller noise.

"Right. First time in Gillette?"

"First time."

"You a mining engineer or something? You don't look to me like a mine grunt."

“Actually, I am a professor at UW.”

“Laramie, eh? Not much action up here, doc, not unless you’re in the mining business.”

“Just doing a bit of archaeology.”

“A fossil hunter, eh? There are a couple of interesting curio shops in town, doc. You might care to take a look at one. Miners sometimes find a neat piece of something or other in a coal seam and the tourists, when one does show up, lap up the stuff.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

The driver nodded and Gillette’s sprawl grew larger, the engine making a drowsy hum to the whisper of tires. Nothing stirred on the lonely stretch of highway. The town had some light industry, coal and a bit of uranium mining, and that was it.

Krafter considered the idea of visiting one of those curio shops, but probably wouldn’t get a chance to do it. Whatever he bought might make a distracting item on his mantelpiece at home, but as a serious object of study, without an evidence trail or photographs where it was found, the thing would be useless. Still, his return flight wasn’t until 11:20 tomorrow and there might be time to look around, provided he finished his work at Karringa.

The cab crossed the rail line at E. Echeta Street gently curving left into E. 2nd Street, and pulled into the driveway of a blue and white double-story motel, stopping under the lobby portico. Two sedans stood parked in an otherwise empty lot. The driver got out and unloaded the suitcase.

Outside, Krafter stretched his arms and breathed deeply of the crisp air, a fine day for digging.

The cabbie slammed the trunk shut and walked up to him. “That’s fifteen-fifty, doc.”

Krafter handed over two tens. “If you’re not busy, can you wait ten minutes? I need to get to Karringa Mine.”

“Karringa, eh? I’ll wait for you, doc. You’ll want a ride back?”

“I will, but I don’t know how long I’ll be there.”

“No problem.” The cabbie dug out a business card and held it out. “Just call when you’re ready.”

“Say, that’s great...Markus,” Krafter said, reading the name on the card. “Thanks.”

The cabbie grinned. “Wouldn’t want a greenhorn like you getting lost. Bad for business.”

“It shows, eh?” Krafter said and pointed at his equipment bag. “Might as well put the suitcase back in. I’ll be needing it.”

“You got it.”

Inside the small but modern reception office, Krafter showed the young receptionist his booking printout. While she checked her computer, he filled in the registration card.

“Room 109, sir,” she chirped and slid a brass key held on a large fish-shaped metal plate. Stamped on it in bold gold letters was the room number and the Best Value Inn address, with the usual blurb to mail the key if found.

“Thanks.”

“Have a pleasant day,” she said mechanically and went back to her computer.

Krafter pocketed the key, picked up his black bag and walked toward the narrow stairs. In the orange-carpeted corridor, he checked which way the numbers went and turned left. Unlocking his room, he dropped the bag beside the small writing table pushed against a draped window, and reached for the phone. Checking the number and name he had written on a slip of paper at UW, he quickly dialed.

“Trantor Coal Company, Karringa Mine, Sandra speaking.”

“Hi, Sandra. This is Professor Larry Krafter from the University of Wyoming.”

“Professor Krafter! We’ve been expecting you, sir. Do you wish to speak to Mr. Ferguson?”

“No, thank you. I don’t want to disturb him, but if you could please tell him that I’ll be there in about twenty minutes, that would be great.”

“Of course, sir. I’ll let him know.”

Satisfied that Karringa had things organized, he locked up and hurried down the stairs, not bothering with the elevator. After handing in the key, he walked out quickly and got into the waiting cab.

Markus kept a running commentary of Gillette’s sterling attractions, such as the Heritage Center, Skatepark, Powder River Symphony and the like, all the way up US-16 and Wyoming 59 going north that linked every mine. They passed the small Dry Fork Mine and the cab slowed when a prominent green sign indicated the Karringa exit half a mile

ahead.

Krafter didn't mind the tourist info and hardly paid attention, his eyes fixed on glimpses of mine workings on his left. Half-mile long trains hauled loaded cars to Gillette and beyond. Seeing it from the air simply did not convey the emotional impact and overwhelming scale of what was going on here.

A uniformed security guard stepped out of his little fibro hut when the cab crossed the rail line and pulled up in front of the boom gate. Krafter got out and waited beside the cab.

"Can I help you, sir?" the guard inquired pleasantly, right hand hovering close to the holstered handgun.

"Professor Larry Krafter to see Mr. Ferguson."

"Ah, been expecting you, sir. If I can have some identification, please?"

Krafter pulled out his wallet and handed over the UW ID badge. The guard glanced at it and nodded.

"Please wait here, sir. Someone will be along shortly," he said and walked back into the hut.

When Krafter turned, Markus had already unloaded the suitcase. Krafter paid him off and Marcus climbed into the cab.

"Don't forget to call!"

The car reversed, turned around and sped toward W-59. As Krafter stood beside the suitcase, feeling conspicuous, he studied what he could see of the mine layout. A wide concrete road led toward a three-story building and two smaller single-story structures next to a full parking lot. Judging by the utility trucks and vans, the complex was still under construction. Some two hundred yards farther down stood four tall concrete silos. On their left a shorter silo fed coal into a rail car. Beyond the buildings, he could see a length of exposed overburden wall, excavators and moving trucks. The air had a distinctive smell of coal and raw oil.

A battered white Ford pickup came roaring up the road and squealed to a stop next to the security hut. A stocky, powerful man, clean-shaven, black hair disheveled, stepped out and walked toward the boom gate. The security guard came out and followed.

The man stopped before Krafter, grinned and stuck out his hand. "Jackson Cower. I'm the mine engineer," he said pleasantly and pointed

at the suitcase. "That's all you got?"

"Everything I need is in there, Mr. Cower," Krafter responded, liking the rugged-looking engineer.

"Call me Jack, Professor."

"And I'm Larry."

"Fine." Without turning, Cower held out his hand. The guard gave him a blue badge with an alligator clip and Cower offered it to Krafter. "Keep it pinned on at all times."

Krafter clipped the badge to his shirt pocket and reached for the heavy suitcase.

"Here, let me have that," Cower said, grabbed the suitcase, and with a grunt, heaved it into the pickup. "What's in there? Bricks?"

Krafter grinned as he walked toward the pickup. "Photo equipment and my toolkit."

"Could have fooled me. Okay, let's go. Thanks, George." Cower waved to the guard and got into the car. When Krafter got in, the car turned around and headed down the road.

"Quite a setup," Krafter commented, eyeing the workings.

"It'll be more comfortable once they finish all the construction," Cower growled. "We'll see Ferguson first, then I'll take you to the find. Afterward, you can decide what to do with the thing, but don't wait too long as we got to clear the seam."

The pickup rounded a gentle left bend and slowed as they approached a collection of four prefab huts beside a small makeshift parking lot full of all types of cars, most of them the worse for wear. Krafter gaped at the open strip mine spread before him.

"Wow," he said reverently and Cower grinned.

"They all say that, but compared to some of the more established workings up the road and south of Gillette, Karringa is still small cheese. Come back in two years and you'll really see something."

If this was small cheese, Krafter could only imagine what a couple of square miles of exposed coal seam looked like. Where was all that coal going?

Cower got out and walked toward the largest prefab. Krafter hurried after him. Inside, the open plan interior filled with half a dozen occupied office desks, computers, filing cabinets, a potted plant or two, seemed bigger than he expected. Some of the staff looked up and gave

him the usual examination one gave a stranger. Cower stopped before a wide desk and nodded to a pretty brunette.

“Sandra, please tell the boss that Professor Krafter is here.”

Krafter saw her looking at him with an appraising eye. He had seen such looks from some of his students: undergrads and master’s candidates. He knew his features were hard, his form tall, and his body muscled. He wasn’t attending aikido training for nothing. It was a vain thing, he knew, but he also knew that he was young enough for it to matter.

“Of course,” she said, picked up her phone and pressed a button on the multi-function keyboard. “They’re here...Right.” She replaced the phone and looked up. “You can go right in.”

Cower nodded and strode toward one of two offices tucked against the back of the prefab. Without bothering to knock, he opened the right door and walked in. When Krafter stepped in, Cower closed the door after him. The man behind the cluttered desk stood up, took a pipe out of his mouth and offered his hand.

“Glad you could make it, Professor,” he boomed in a powerful voice accustomed to command. “Please sit down. You will have to excuse the primitive conditions, but we’re still setting things up as you might have seen.”

Krafter clasped the firm dry hand and squeezed lightly. “This is comfort compared to some of the digs I’ve been on, Mr. Ferguson.”

“Just, Amos, doc. I must say, you don’t look at all like my image of a distinguished professor,” Ferguson added, sat down and stuck the pipe into his mouth.

Krafter looked directly into the deep gray eyes, chiseled clean features, determined carriage, and wasn’t at all fooled. The mine manager was intelligent, worldly-wise, used to dealing with company politics and tough plain men. Krafter pulled back a dark blue cloth chair and made himself comfortable. Ferguson was clearly busy, but his genuine friendliness put Krafter at ease.

“Beard, flowing white hair and thick glasses?”

Ferguson laughed. “Something like that. No reflection on you, however. On the contrary, after Dr. Perkins told me you were coming, I did a bit of digging up on you.”

“And you’re still nice to me?”

Ferguson laughed again and Cower chuckled. “You seem to know

your business and that's all that matters to me. Given some of your controversial papers, which is again your business, what we have here should be right up your alley."

"I've seen the photographs you sent to Dr. Perkins, but I admit to being dubious about an apparent human bone dug up in an Eocene Roland Seam."

"I don't blame you, but this isn't a gag, doc, or I wouldn't have bothered calling the university. The thing might hold some interest for the academia, but it's a damned nuisance for me, and it's stopping scheduled work. But as you know, the whole Powder River Basin has yielded some interesting archaeological pieces from time to time. This one happens to be somewhat more interesting than most, and we have a policy to cooperate with UW."

"A forty-million-year-old human bone? I'll say it's more interesting. How much time will you give me to look things over?"

"You have twenty-four hours. After that, my dozers move in, ready or not."

"Fair enough. Once I see the site, I'll have a better idea what I am up against. I understand that Trantor Coal and your parent, Relans Mining Corporation, waive all rights to ownership?"

"That's right. Our legal position was made clear to Dr. Perkins."

"Fine. In that case—"

"Jack will take you down to the site. The area has been flagged off and make sure you stay there. There are dozers clearing the overburden and I don't want an industrial accident on my hands having you run over."

"I understand, sir, and I appreciate your cooperation," Krafter said and stood up.

"By the way, have you had lunch or anything? We have a canteen in one of the huts here that's pretty good, and runs all day."

"Thanks. I wouldn't mind taking you up on that a bit later, but I want to see the site first, if that's all right?"

"Not a problem. Take him away, Jack, and bring him back in one piece."

"You got it, boss."

Back in the pickup, Cower drove quickly along a narrow track toward the newly cleared overburden wall. Krafter could clearly hear the

throaty bellow of bulldozers at work.

“What we’re driving on now is old overburden spoilage,” Cower said without turning his head. “Once we clean out a section of seam, we cast blast a new section of overburden into the worked pit floor, exposing more seam which keeps us in business. We crab up and edge-wise all the time, and we’ll keep doing it until we’ve worked the entire lease or Relans manages to get us more.”

“What do you do to the land after all the coal’s been dug up?”

“We re-vegetate it; plant trees, grassland, and make ponds. There is no way to make the ground look exactly how we found it, not after all the tons of coal that’s already been removed. But that won’t happen for a while. I don’t know what other companies are doing, but here, we’ll rehabilitate the land as we go. Besides, trees will make the place smell better.” Cower smiled at some private joke Krafter didn’t get, and re-vegetation was environmentally a sound idea. The whole area now looked like something out of Dante’s *Inferno*.

A couple of hundred yards ahead, Krafter gaped at the towering dragline excavator and its monstrous arm that would maneuver the actual bucket. Temporary metal sheds presumably held parts and human facilities. Among parked cars and trucks, people walked about, antlike in the shadow of the metal giant. He glanced at Cower, who smiled.

“We’ve been waiting for that beast to be assembled for the last nine months. It should be up and running in about six to eight weeks. Once it’s up, its job will be clearing virgin overburden.”

As he stared at the machine, Krafter realized that in mining, everything was big.

The pickup stopped and Cower invited Krafter to get out. They walked about forty feet straight ahead until they reached a cliff face. Cower pointed across the worked pit floor below.

“On the other side is the new overburden bench being cleared and where we found the bone.”

Krafter peered at the three dozers pushing rock, shale, and lignite over the already blasted overburden, exposing the black coal bed, ready for extraction. Fifty yards or so farther back loomed a ninety-foot wall of rock and dirt, marked by clearly defined colored strata layers. Behind the dozers in the partially cleared bed, protruded a small island of rock and lignite, surrounded by little fluttering flags. In the clearing stood a

hut. A uniformed security guard walked casually within the flagged perimeter. Krafter was about to ask why the guard was there when the obvious answer presented itself. Ferguson was thorough and clearly understood the importance of the bone. On his left a bucket wheel excavator, looking huge despite the distance, worked the already exposed coalface, feeding a stream of enormous trucks. The very air hummed with power and machinery noises.

Cower walked back to the pickup, climbed onto the flat tray and opened a large steel chest. He lifted out a yellow coverall and heavy boots.

“Take off your shirt and pants, and put these on,” he ordered and threw down a yellow hardhat. “Don’t walk around without it.” He also held out a pair of orange ear protectors. “You might need them.”

Krafter changed, pinned on his visitor badge and donned the safety hat. The tough steel-capped boots were a size too large, but he wasn’t about to complain. Cower put on a hardhat and squeezed himself into a yellow vest with white vertical luminescent strips, then grabbed the heavy suitcase. He jumped down, heaved down the case and started walking toward the cliff face that angled slightly right along a narrow track that led to the cast bed.

It was a seventy-foot descent and Krafter was glad he didn’t have to lug the suitcase. The sound of working dozers was very loud and the air stank of diesel fumes. They were busy pushing soil way on his right and unless he deliberately walked out of the flagged area, he figured he would be okay. Krafter moved quickly over the uneven newly exposed coal bed as he followed the engineer to the fibro hut, clearly there to provide the guard some shelter.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Cower,” the heavy guard said politely and nodded, then looked curiously at Krafter.

The engineer put down the suitcase and flexed his fingers. “How’s it going, Marv?”

“No sweat, Mr. Cower.”

“This is Professor Krafter from the University of Wyoming. He’s here to look at our find.”

The guard touched his hat. “Pleased to meet you, sir.”

“Okay, doc. This way,” Cower said and walked behind the hut.

Pulse racing slightly, hands sweating, Krafter hurried after him. Not

many paleoanthropologists got to see a history-breaking discovery like this and he appreciated the unique opportunity. The sites he'd been to so far were caves, burial grounds and remnants of ancient campsites. Everything had to be inferred and extrapolated from scraps of cloth, pottery or bits of charcoal, akin to looking at history through a thick pane of frosted glass. What he would see now was not an extrapolation, but something real and tangible—he hoped. The idea that he was a victim of some practical gag still lingered at the back of his mind. When he rounded the corner, he stopped in shock and stared. Instead of an ancient revelation the only thing he saw was a large green tarpaulin draped over a broken nine-foot high lignite face.

Cower smiled at Krafter's startled reaction and started climbing the face along a narrow ledge. "We need to take that down. Care to give me a hand?"

Getting over his surprise, Krafter scrambled after him. Of course they would have the thing protected and covered. Cower removed two heavy steel H beams holding down the tarp and grabbed a corner. Krafter got the idea and took the other corner. They lifted the tarp and heaved it over the edge.

Krafter clambered to the bottom and hurried eagerly toward the plastic-wrapped object protruding slightly from the solid coalface. The bent bracelet, it had to be gold judging by the buttery color, shimmered and flowed under bright sunshine, and the dark gray bone seemed to beckon in a promise of further revelations. Impatient to get his hands on it, to touch it, to connect with impossible history, he turned to Cower and nodded approvingly.

"Excellent thinking, Jack, covering the thing," he said warmly, voice raw with emotion as time held open a bridge to him.

"Well, we didn't want the boys pawing it," Cower growled, sensitive to what this moment meant for Krafter.

Krafter smiled, leaned forward and peered closely at the bone and bracelet, his mask of detached professionalism back in place. It looked exactly as the photographs showed. He could dismiss the photos easily enough, modern graphics software could fake anything, but they were detached, impersonal, nothing to connect with. Being here, looking at the real thing was altogether different and his guts tightened.

Lignite beds everywhere were natural plant fossil treasure troves. If

a piece of bone can be found here, he wondered what other priceless evidence was casually destroyed by lumbering machines in mines and excavations the world over. Whether he liked it or not, this find appeared genuine, however impossible. But modern humans walking the Earth millions of years ago? That took some swallowing. Hell, half a dozen evolutionary cycles could have come and gone in that period. But would successive cycles necessarily produce the same human form? Then again, man's skeletal engineering and appearance was dictated by adaptive function, not aesthetics. Why couldn't an ancient hand bone have the characteristics of a modern *radius*? They both served the same mechanical purpose.

He stepped back and studied the exposed overburden wall towering on his left, and squinted at the various strata. He would need samples, lots of them, and his stock of specimen flasks might not be enough.

"Will you be okay here, doc?" Cower ventured as he peered at Krafter's vacant, absorbed expression.

Already in a world all his own, Krafter turned. "It will take me a while to set myself up and film everything, but I'll need help to dig out the bone. That will have to be done as a solid block. I don't want it removed from its casing of coal. I could also use something like a cherry picker to get soil and rock samples off the main overburden wall strata."

"No problem. Get Marv to call me when you need someone."

"Thanks for everything, Jack. I mean it."

"My pleasure. Have fun."

They shook hands and Cower walked to the guard who stood there watching them. Cower said something to him, slapped his shoulder and hurried toward the trail leading up the cliff.

"Care for a soda or a drink of water, Professor?" Marv asked diffidently.

"Say, that would be great. Some water, please, and call me Larry."

"Yes, sir. Be a minute," Marv said and disappeared into the hut. A few moments later, he came out holding a glass of water.

Krafter took a long swallow and sighed. "You got a fridge in there?"

"Mr. Ferguson wanted us to be comfortable."

"Us?"

"There are six of us on four-hour shifts."

A twenty-four-hour watch? Krafter was impressed. He finished the

water and handed back the glass.

“Thanks. I needed that.”

Keen to start work, he moved to his suitcase, laid it down, opened it and pushed back the lid. Methodically, he started removing the contents. The first thing he did was to mount a JVC memory card camcorder on a small telescopic tripod. He then lifted two extendable metal measuring rods, followed by a 30cm by 30cm steel box that contained his glass flasks set in a foam cushion. He used glass exclusively to avoid contaminating the samples, other materials invariably leaving a molecular trace that could compromise sensitive dating techniques.

In this case, dating the overburden wall and the lignite would not be a problem. The U.S. Geological Survey and the Wyoming State Geological Survey offices had undisputed dating data for the entire area, but he was being thorough and wanted independent validation. He then took out a plastic box that had his working tools: small hammer, trowel, brushes and pegs. The last things were two meter-long graduated poles, each able to be extended in sections to five meters.

Done, he carried the camera tripod to the flagged perimeter. Switching on the camcorder, he slowly panned the entire site, taking plenty of close-up shots. Setting the camera to its photo mode, he took stills of everything. Glancing at Marv sipping a Sprite, the guard seemed to be watching the proceedings with interest.

Krafter took the graduated poles to the overburden wall, mindful of the roaring dozers, and stuck one into the ground. From his toolbox, he took out a hammer and two galvanized pegs, which he drove into the wall, then laid the other pole across them, making an inverted L. He shifted the camera closer to the face and took more shots, lingering over each strata layer as he panned up. Humming contentedly, unaware that he was doing it, he repeated the process with the lignite face holding the bone. He was in his element, buoyed by the discovery and eager to share it with the world, Perkins' warning forgotten. This was anthropology he loved and the reason he went into it.

Finished, he delicately removed the plastic wrap, careful not to touch the bone, totally absorbed in what he was doing. Using more pegs, he placed a metal measuring rod above and below the find, then took more film and pictures.

Glancing at his watch, he was surprised to see it was almost three

p.m. He had been at it for two hours. Happy with his work, he walked to the guard.

“Marv, please call Mr. Cower and ask him if I can have two men with drilling equipment. I also need a large padded packing box, approximately two feet a side.”

“Will do, Professor,” Marv said and reached for his cellphone.

As he waited for the men, Krafter went back to the overburden wall and started taking samples, diligently labeling each one, recording everything on film and his notepad. Samples from higher up, he would do after he got the bone out. After a few minutes, he heard a car and looked up. A white pickup appeared on top of the cliff and two men stepped out, looking small from the coal bench level. They opened the tray door and dragged out a small pneumatic drill and portable compressor. Between them, they lugged the stuff down.

“Where do you want to start digging, doc?” the shorter of the two demanded when they got to the hut and Krafter pointed to the top of the coal seam.

“We’ll start there. I want to go down above the bone and remove loose stuff as we go.”

“Okay. And this is for you,” the main said and held out a small brown paper bag. “Compliments of Mr. Cower.”

Puzzled, Krafter took the package and opened it. Wrapped in cling wrap was a thick sandwich. He looked at the man and laughed.

“That was very thoughtful of him.”

The small man shrugged. “He didn’t want you dying on us, doc.” With a glance at his partner, they manhandled the compressor and drill up the face.

Krafter unwrapped the sandwich and took a hungry bite, turkey and cheese by the taste. Munching, he climbed after them. While they set themselves up, he leaned over the edge to check the position of the bone. Sandwich in one hand, he used a rock to scratch lines in a rectangular U where he wanted the cuts. Not very technical, but it would do the job. After he scrambled back down, he wrapped the protruding bone with the original plastic wrap. Which was silly when he thought about it, as the thing could not get contaminated further from having more coal dust over it. But it was an instinctive reaction and he could

not ignore his training. Importantly, he didn't want the sample contaminated by touching it, leaving behind all sorts of fatty deposits and fluids, albeit in microscopic quantities. But it would be enough to potentially compromise the dating process.

The short man started the generator and the other picked up the drill. Krafter put on ear protectors he'd been given and waited.

"Go in six inches at a time!" Krafter yelled over the racket and the man nodded. He took two more hurried bites of the sandwich. From what he had seen, the cast blast shock had pretty much reduced the lignite seam to manageable rubble—for a bulldozer, but not loose enough to dig with a shovel. He hurried to get the camera and his toolbox, leaving the sandwich on the ground, and climbed to the top of the mound.

The drill made a horrendous pounding noise as it bit into the coal, but the stuff was soft and the drill bit went in with hardly any resistance. Replacing the bit with a broad spade attachment made short work of loosening the debris. Krafter turned off the camera, slid his index finger across his throat, and the compressor died. He took off the ear protectors and nodded.

After taking close-up shots, he used his hammer and trowel to lift out solid pieces of brown coal and fine debris. Two more drilling sessions produced a foot-deep cavity. Painstaking examination of excavated material revealed nothing but coal. He looked at the two men and pointed at the hole.

"What I want now is a groove along the edge of the hole a foot or so deep. We'll then cut beneath the bone fragment and lift out the whole thing. Can you do that?"

The two men exchanged glances and shrugged.

"Piece of cake, doc," the short man growled.

The groove done, the men brought down the equipment and quickly cut into the seam some eight inches below the bone, the job made slightly harder as the driller had to hold the heavy drill at shoulder level. Using the drill shovel bit, they levered the block of coal until it gave way with a crack and muffled groan as it was lifted slightly. Krafter filmed everything, watching anxiously as the men carefully extracted the block and placed it next to the hut. On the ground, the block of coal looked pathetically insignificant. At the same time, it also represented

professional danger and inevitable controversy. Krafter wondered whether getting to write the paper on the find, he had gotten the short end of the deal.

“Doc?”

Krafter looked up and swung his head to where the short man was pointing. At the back of the hole protruded a smooth convex shape.

“What’s that?” the man asked.

“Not sure,” Krafter murmured, walked to the face, frowned and bit his lip.

He recognized the thing and quickly unscrewed the camera from the tripod and stepped to the cavity. One of the vertical drill grooves had come dangerously close to the protrusion. Hardly able to contain himself, he carefully took shots from several angles. Using a trowel and brush, he delicately removed loose material, leaving no doubt in his mind. He had himself a skull. This was incontestable proof that even his most vitriolic critics could not refute. There was always a possibility that the hand bone could be something other than human, however unlikely—why put a bracelet on an animal—but no one could dismiss a skull, if it *was* human. It might be anything, but judging by the shape he could see, it definitely looked *sapien*.

Bollinger and Maddson, eat your heart out.

“More digging, doc?” the short man asked with a wry smile.

Krafter gave him a sheepish grin and nodded. “I’m afraid so. Cut a groove another six inches below the edge as deep as you can go. Okay?”

When the cut was done, he hammered out the pieces, checking for more bone fragments. Immensely satisfied, wanting to shout with glee at the discovery, he took the camera and his tools to the top again while the men heaved up the equipment. After marking out a square around the skull’s position, he ordered the men to start cutting. The work was done in minutes and Krafter had himself another block of coal.

Elated but weary, he checked his watch: 4:30. No wonder he felt tired...and still hungry. He picked up the remains of his sandwich and resumed munching. There could be more bones in the seam, but he’d had enough for the day. Even if he found nothing else, his reputation was made, one way or another. But would Perkins support him when it might mean the find could threaten his own position and tenure? He wanted to think that his superior was above such foolishness, but could

he bank on that? His critics were also supposed to be objective scientists, but it didn't stop them from being foolish. Could he expect *any* support from UW? This was the ugly side of academia, a side he only dimly understood, and liked even less. He didn't know anything right now and it was useless getting anxious.

Without being told, the two men went back to the pickup and returned with two packing cartons.

"You guys are mind readers," Krafter told them warmly, stuffing the sandwich wrapper and bag into his pocket.

"Mr. Cover always allows for contingencies," the short man said with a grin and opened his box. Krafter was pleasantly startled to see inside sheets of three-inch gray padding foam.

"Excellent!"

He picked up the box and brought it beside the skull block. After lining the bottom and sides with foam, he had the guys lower the block into the box. He squeezed more foam into the gaps, placed a layer on top and folded the flaps. The other block received the same treatment. Confident that the boxes would survive handling and a flight intact, he walked to Marv and pointed at the cartons.

"Do you mind if we leave them in the hut overnight?"

"Not a problem, Professor. They'll be secure here. Finished?"

"For the day," Krafter said and exhaled loudly. "I haven't worked this hard in a while."

"Doc, if you want to do more digging tomorrow," the short man pointed out, "we'll leave our stuff here also, if that's okay?"

"Good idea. And my thanks for everything."

"Part of the job, doc. If you're going back, we'll give you a lift. Your clothes are in the pickup."

"Great! Let me put my tools away and I'll be right with you."

Krafter left his tools suitcase in the hut, having removed the SanDisk memory card from the camcorder, not wanting to take any chances with it. He followed the two miners up the cliff. Standing beside the pickup, he changed and climbed into the cabin. He was grimy and his hands were streaked black, but a shower at the motel would fix that. When he sat down, he let out a long breath and the short man grinned at him as he started the engine.

Sandra looked up as Krafter walked into the prefab office and

beamed.

“Did you have a good day, sir?”

“Outstanding. Is Mr. Ferguson in?”

“I’ll let him know you’re here.” She picked up the phone and punched a button. “Mr. Ferguson? Dr. Krafter is here... Very well.” She nodded and gave him another sunny smile. “You can go right in.”

“Thanks.” He dug out Marcus’ card and gave it to her. “Can you please call this number and ask Marcus to pick me up? If he’s not available, any cab will do.”

“Of course. Will you be staying long in Gillette?”

“Afraid not. I’m flying back to Laramie tomorrow morning.”

“Oh. Will you be coming back?”

Krafter gave a short laugh, puzzled at what she was getting at, his mind totally distracted by the day’s events. “Not unless you locate another bone.”

“Well, good luck.”

He nodded to her, walked to the mine manager’s office, knocked once and opened the door.

“Ah, Professor! All done?” Ferguson extended a hand at a chair and Krafter gratefully sank into it, feeling as if he had been worked over. And he believed he was fit! His *sensei* would be disappointed.

“Almost, and we’ve unearthed another find, a possible human skull.”

“A skull? I imagine the thing is invaluable.”

“Priceless, but it might be a mixed blessing when I publish.”

“Your headache. I’m just glad that you had a successful day. What are your plans now?”

“Well, I thought that tomorrow, I would dig farther around the immediate site. There could be more bone fragments, but I’ll be out of your hair before ten regardless. I also need to take some strata samples off the overburden wall.”

“We run two eight-hour shifts here. If you want to come in early, someone will be here to help you.”

“You’re very generous, Mr. Ferguson, and thanks. I’ll do that.”

“It’s settled, then. I’ll inform security to expect you.”

About the author

Stefan Vučak has written eight Shadow Gods Saga sci-fi novels and six contemporary political drama books. He started writing science fiction while still in college, but didn't get published until 2001. His *Cry of Eagles* won the coveted 2011 Readers' Favorite silver medal award, and his *All the Evils* was the 2013 prestigious Eric Hoffer contest finalist and Readers' Favorite silver medal winner. *Strike for Honor* won the gold medal.

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

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Shadow Gods books by Stefan Vučak

In the Shadow of Death

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

Against the Gods of Shadow

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

A Whisper from Shadow

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

Shadow Masters

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

Immortal in Shadow

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

With Shadow and Thunder

The Orieli are caught in an interstellar war and now they are about to drag the Serrll Combine into it. Betrayed by his Wanderer brother Dharaklin, First Scout Terrllss-rr crashes to Earth in a sabotaged ship. He now has a whole world after the secrets he holds.

Through the Valley of Shadow

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

Guardians of Shadow

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

Other books by Stefan Vučak

Cry of Eagles

2011 Reader's Favorite silver medal winner

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

All the Evils

2013 Eric Hoffer finalist

2013 Readers' Favorite silver medal winner

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

Towers of Darkness

A Wyoming mineworker discovers a human hand bone embedded in a forty million year-old coal seam. An anthropologist, Larry Krafter is sent to recover the bone and unearths a human skull. Instead of receiving acclaim when he publishes his discovery, vested establishment interests seek to discredit him, using murder to do it.

Strike for Honor

2013 Readers' Favorite gold medal winner

In a joint exercise with the Korean navy, Admiral Pacino's son is one of the casualties from a North Korean missile strike. Enraged that the President is more interested in appeasing the North Koreans, forgetting the lost American lives, Pacino decides to make a statement by bombing military facilities in both Koreas. His court-martial puts American foreign policy under public scrutiny.

Proportional Response

2015 Readers' Favorite finalist

The Chinese populist faction, the Tuanpai, plan to trigger a global disaster that will devastate America. In the aftermath, the FBI identifies China as the culprit, but don't know if this was a rogue operation or a government plot. Fearful of American retaliation, China invites U.S. investigators to find that proof. Under a cloud of mutual suspicion, America readies itself for a military confrontation. A mind-bending expose of international politics!

Legitimate Power

What happens when a person living on the outskirts of Jerusalem digs up two ossuaries and finds a strange crystal the size of a smartphone able to repair itself when scratched and turns into a perfect mirror under laser light? When the crystal is put on the shadow gem market, suspecting that it is not natural, an American collector buys it, wanting to tap into its hidden potential. When the Israelis learn what it is, they want it back...as do the Chinese...as does the American government, which sets off a race to get it, no matter what the cost in shattered lives.

Lifeliners

When everybody is against them, it is tough being a lifeliner, as Nash Bannon found out. Lifeliners are ordinary people...almost. They can draw energy from another person; they live longer and are smarter. Scientists claim that Western high-pressure living and growing sterility in developed countries has triggered the rise of lifeliners, and *homo sapiens* will be replaced by *homo renata* within ten generations. So, what's not to like about lifeliners?