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LIFELINERS

By

Stefan Vučak



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Dedication

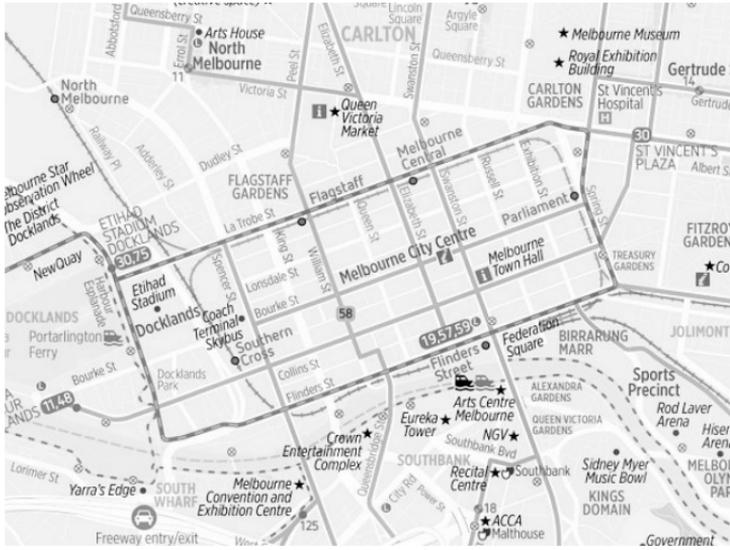
To Gloria ... with a life full of promise

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Chapter One

Dawn burst over Melbourne's jagged skyline, bathing the city's towers with gauzy golden light, and the stars fled. Lit from within, the cluster of skyscrapers made an enchanting contrast against the strips of low painted clouds. Cars meandered along St. Kilda Road, mostly heading toward the city, their red taillights sharp and the noise of engines a muffled hum. Overhead, Nash could see several skycars making their way to landing pads built on roofs of taller buildings.

He took two deep breaths to steady himself after running up the steps to the top landing of the Shrine of Remembrance, the huge stone war memorial with its towering colonnades looming before him. He turned and gazed at the city's sprawl spread before him. This early the air still had a crisp bite and his skin tingled after a brisk four-kilometer run through the Kings Domain Park. Everything felt fresh and new. Colors were bright and hard, and sounds seemed to carry forever. Later, as the sun burned its way through a layer of shredded clouds, the air would become heavy and hot, another typical summer's day.

Nash preferred to do his running in the morning before the city fully wakened, before the streets filled with indifferent, self-absorbed pedestrians oblivious to those around them, hurrying to reach their particular destination. Rivers of people clogging the city's arteries, life flowing endlessly. He often speculated on the purpose of it all, and was still to find a satisfactory answer. It could not be simply a blind march to merely further procreation, although it sometimes seemed that way.

A dark change was sweeping the world and he feared that he and others like him might not survive it. Humans as a species would not die easily.

Standing there, gazing at the city stirring from slumber, he

wondered if the people down there really knew what was happening around them, or even cared? He suspected that most did not, and wouldn't, until prodded into action, turned into a mindless tide in a futile attempt to stem the change whose ripples were already being felt. He had not felt them personally, but riots, protests, and demands for action were becoming more frequent and vehement, leaving the silent majority puzzled and concerned, uncertain of a future they did not fully understand, but feared it nonetheless. That uncertainty generated dread, something easily fanned into flaming waves of retaliation, since no one knew any alternatives, especially the government. What action they had already taken was disturbing enough.

Seeing the painted clouds, the flowing red and orange streamers could be portents of things to come.

But it did not have to be.

He shook his head to dispel the angels of death. Tomorrow was a blank page still to be written...perhaps in blood.

Sweaty T-shirt cool against his skin, he exhaled softly, then ambled down the steps to the broad walkway that lead to the memorial, past the large metal bowl holding the eternal flame, and picked up his pace as he made his way across the grassed slope toward the sidewalk. The pervading stink of an occasional petrol engine exhaust made him wrinkle his nose with distaste. Two trams clanged their bells as they passed each other. A tall girl dressed in navy shorts and a blue singlet, long ponytail swaying from side to side, nodded to him in passing, then she was gone, leaving a trace of lavender in the air, her padded footfalls fading behind him.

He had seen her a number of times and pondered who she was, what she did to fill her life. Did she also question what it was all about, the strife, the struggle, the emptiness, the shallow texture of living that swept everything before it in a singular pursuit to survive, to continue? Perhaps she did, although it was unlikely he would ever find out, short of stopping her and asking. The image made him smile.

What if he did stop her and asked? She would probably think

he was nuts, hitting on her, and she could be right.

He crossed the busy Domain Road and slowed to a walk as he approached Bromby Street and his apartment block. Cleared through a link with his Personal Identification Device, the entrance lock clicked and he waited for the heavy glass panels to slide back. The security guard at his round console station gave him a brief wave and returned to reading his book. As Nash walked toward the elevators, he heard a car whisper by. These days, in cities at least, most were electric, which over the last six years had largely removed the perpetual blanket of brown smog that used to cover them. There were still plenty of petrol guzzlers around, but increased registration charges and insurance premiums were seeing them slowly weeded out. Much to the lament and angst of their owners.

After a shower, he climbed into a business suit and knotted his tie. Tuesday mornings were always hectic, reserved for Telstra sob sessions where he got to hear how his project managers were running things. Yesterday, he held an in-depth recap with his PMs of all work done to date. Fair was fair. On Fridays, Telstra held status dissections with PMs from both sides. As an IBM program manager, he didn't have to attend, and did not. He had enough progress meetings already.

He thought about dropping into his office before going to Telstra and decided against it. Snoden would probably waylay him in the corridor—the man was always there by 7:30, a high-pressure achiever type—and Nash did not want to have a mini status session with the IBM program director, especially since a formal management one would be held tomorrow anyway. He *could* have done the Telstra meeting over the holoview wall virtual presence link in the comfort of his apartment, but some things required personal attendance. Besides, a clear, warm morning deserved appreciation from the outside.

He told Sally to play a selection of Brahms' chamber melodies, and the housekeeping computer flooded the apartment with full surround music. The percolator finished its bubbling and he fixed himself some coffee. Breakfast usually light, but filling—

mixed vegetable juice and homemade muesli with dried fruit, having bought the ingredients at the renovated Victoria Market, the stuff from supermarkets still containing a lot of sugar and salt. After years of pressure from the Australian Medical Association, the Food & Nutrition lobby and other organizations, Canberra finally imposed a sugar tax, refusing to bow to the powerful sugar industry group.

He also had a side dish of sliced tomato and capsicum, red or green. He alternated. This morning, he figured a shot of NutriBullet juice would be enough. Getting things sorted out around the table, he told Sally to switch on the ABC news channel. Humming to himself, he occasionally glanced at the holoview wall display showing the usual news staple: shootings, car wrecks—they still allowed manually controlled vehicles on the road despite growing protests—a hurricane building off Queensland, and latest political antics, local and international. Those were always good for a chuckle or two. He sometimes wondered why he bothered to watch, but like a junkie, he could not turn away from his morning news fix. Besides, he liked to eavesdrop on the more morbid side of human behavior. What did that say about him? Better not go there, he told himself.

He shook his head and sighed. Instead of shedding pheromones of gloom, he should be perky and elated, having secured another date with Cariana—a proper date. A Latin derivative for *beloved*, he could not think of a more perfect name. It was also a constellation in the southern sky. Fitting, he thought.

Tonight, they would be dining at the exclusive Box Seafood restaurant in Collins Street. An expensive outing, but worth it to glow in her sunny disposition and enjoy lively conversation. This would be their first night-out date and he pictured her corn colored hair piled high or left to flow across one shoulder. Her oval face appeared before him: large almond eyes, small mouth and pert nose, high cheekbones, she was enchanting. Nash liked her uninhibited personality ready to challenge established dogma and what she termed his cube opinions. When she laughed, she showed even teeth and a dimpled left cheek. A devastating

woman and he willingly placed himself in striking range of her charms. Living alone had its good points, but there were also enough reasons for him to want a permanent companion and partner. A conundrum he hoped she would help him resolve, which implied that he *wanted* a major change in his life. Was he ready for another relationship? However, knowing what Cariana wanted, and women in general a game of contradictions.

She held a PhD in genetics and worked at The Alfred Hospital on a cooperative project with the CSIRO. She told him—must have been on their first lunch date—that she had an apartment in St. Kilda Road and did not socialize much, her research keeping her busy. He could relate to that. His own work often kept him chained to a desk for long hours. From their first encounter, Nash sensed a mutual attraction, but he still knew very little about her as a person. She had a page on Wikipedia, but apart from listing her academic record, publications, and professional credits, she was somewhat of a mystery, one he intended to resolve. Still, at twenty-eight, she had a broad footprint of achievements.

They met two weeks ago, also a Tuesday, at Southbank's La Asiago, an eatery Nash favored, being close to the IS building. He came out of a tough meeting with his six project managers and needed to stretch his legs and get some fresh air. Always the same thing: budgets, resources, and schedules. He didn't have much sympathy for any of his people. After all, they were the ones who set up their program of work, including project estimates and KPIs, admittedly after some hard negotiation with Telstra and strategic massaging by Nash. They would just have to tough it out, but he made it clear he would not swallow costs or schedule overruns, unless caused by changes in client requirements. In that case, he told them to get a signed contract variation.

Clients everywhere loved to make changes to signed-off requirements, hoping IBM would absorb costs and schedule creeps with a veiled promise of future business, and Telstra were experts at this game. As far as Nash was concerned, any change regardless how innocently small affected a project. A few little things

could and were regularly absorbed, but there were limits and all had to be properly costed and documented. A friendly business-based client relationship generated future revenues, not by taking on add-on freebies that might have unforeseen consequences. He fired one of his PMs before the others realized he wasn't fooling. Nash would be the one having to explain to IBM management why his program of work had blown out, which would cut into the corporate profit margin. He made sure his PMs never put him into that position. That made him a hardnosed bastard, but also earned him rueful admiration from IBM and Telstra.

He didn't push his project managers, provided they did their job. When he wore his business hat, everything they did counted. He admonished in private and fought with management for whatever they needed. After work, they shared an occasional beer or a glass of wine, but even then, he was the program manager, not a friend or drinking buddy. He wanted to be their friend, but if he crossed that line, he could no longer remain their boss.

Coffee cup in hand, memories chased each other as he remembered vividly walking out of the IBM building into a hot, but not oppressively so, day. A cooling breeze came off the Yarra River as he strode along the riverside promenade filled with restaurants and shops and people enjoying their lunch break. An occasional jogger—some girls wore very little, which only added to the interesting scenery—weaved through the throng. He could never figure out, and no one was able to explain to him, why girls could wear skimpy shorts, while guys had to saddle themselves with knee-length jobs. One of life's inexplicable fashion mysteries.

A tourist barge left a frothy trail in its wake as it made its way downriver toward the harbor. Kayaks and multi-scul boats played the brown waters. The Yarra still came in for its share of low jokes about being a sewer. Even though it looked dirty, it was quite clean and had a healthy ecology. Across the river, the city's jagged skyline reached into a hard, clear blue sky. A Virgin Air skycar drifted almost silently toward a landing pad next to the Aquarium. The airspace above the city full of them. He looked

up, feeling good soaking in the UVs.

He spotted her sitting alone at a small square table in the open part of La Asiago along the promenade and the world faded around him. Dressed in cream slacks and gray business jacket, flaxen hair spilling across her left shoulder, time stopped and he stared at this captivating woman alone in her shell, surrounded by chattering people, yet unreachable. He traced the lines of her delicate face, the fall of her hair, and a small frown creasing her forehead that made her perfect.

You don't want to become involved again, old son!

Probably not, but he could not see any harm in an interesting lunchtime diversion compared to the alternative of a lonely bench beside the river, warm sunshine notwithstanding. It might do him good to seek out some distracting company and wash out the unpleasant taste of his IBM meeting.

With the exterior section of the restaurant packed and no empty seats, he took a deep breath and weaved between the tables toward her. If she didn't like his approach, she could always tell him to buzz off. It had happened before. Some women didn't want to be bothered. Peace.

"I don't mean to intrude, but you seem to have the only spare seat. May I?"

She glanced around, gave him an appraising look with eyes that cut and probed, and finally nodded.

"There are tables inside," she said softly, her clear voice sending an unexpected tingle down his spine. What the hell was going on? He reminded himself that this was only lunch—diverting as it might be—not a romantic encounter.

"Yes, but it's not the same thing, and it's too cold and crowded in there," he declared as he pulled back a chair.

Her eyebrows rose. "You prefer your own company?"

"Depends on the company," he said and eased himself down. "I never take chances I don't have to."

"You're taking a chance now, aren't you?"

"Sometimes you have to." He glanced at two David Jones store shopping bags beside her, and she smiled.

“I took advantage of a nice day to pick up a few things before returning to The Alfred,” she explained.

“You’re a doctor?”

The babble of voices around them created a shield of intimacy and a sense that time had stopped. Even the crowd strolling along the promenade faded from his view.

“Geneticist.”

“Fascinating line of work,” he said, genuinely interested.

When the waiter arrived, he ordered spiced ravioli and gnocchi and half a bottle of red Chianti. Shortly afterward, her spaghetti marinara arrived. Looking at her speculatively, he lifted the bottle. She frowned and brushed back a stray lock of golden hair.

“Is this your standard gambit when picking up women?”

She had slim, delicate fingers with a subdued red nail polish that complemented without being gaudy. He imagined fondling those hands, running his fingers over her smooth skin. Could he be getting infatuated with a woman he just met? No, this was merely an interesting meeting with someone attractive and sophisticated. Still, she possessed a magnetism he could feel and his soul reached out to her, warning bells clanging in his head. He clamped a lid on them, prepared to enjoy this moment.

“I don’t do casual pickups.”

She inclined her head in disbelief. “And I am...”

“A fortuitous and pleasant accident. No spare tables, remember? Besides, you looked so lonely...”

She lifted a finger. “Don’t push it.”

He grinned at her. “A peace offering, then. A glass of wine?”

“I shouldn’t—”

“It’s a very light Italian red. Won’t do anything to spoil your day.”

She bit her lower lip, then slid her glass toward him. “Only a little.”

“Great.”

He poured both of them half a glass. She lowered her fork and took a cautious sip. Her eyebrows arched and she nodded.

“Interesting flavor.”

“Glad you like it. By the way, I’m Nash Bannon.”

“Cariana Lambert, and I still think this is a pickup routine.”

Nash winced. “Now I’m hurt. I really—”

The waiter brought a bowl of steaming ravioli and gnocchi, cutting off whatever he was about to say. Nash thanked him, picked up his fork, stabbed one of the gnocchi and popped it into his mouth. It was nice and chewy the way he liked it and he relished the tangy mushroom sauce.

Cariana watched him with an amused expression. “That won’t do much for your waistline,” she remarked dryly.

“It’s my carbs day,” he explained between bites. “I usually have a mixed salad and fruit juice, but that’s not always enough to keep me fueled and beat off the sharks at work.”

She glanced at her bowl. “I know what you mean. Seeing you relishing your gnocchi eases my own guilt for being weak.” She dabbed her lips with a napkin and took another sip of wine. “And what fills your days, Mr. Bannon?”

“Nash. I do systems integration for IBM.”

“Weren’t they taken over by Facebook?”

“They certainly were. The IBM culture was getting stale and needed an infusion of new methodology and ideas. I have doubts that it worked, but they run some cutting-edge projects.”

“And what are you working on right now?”

“I’m currently managing a major Telstra network program where everybody is giving me a hard time.”

“Poor you.”

“Your sympathy is appreciated.”

She turned serious. “I did not mean to tease you, and I do understand, finding myself in a similar position. Doing research would be fun if it weren’t for the oversight protocols, although necessary.” She finished the last of her marinara and gathered her bags. “Thank you for the wine...Nash.”

Dismayed to see her about to leave, his mind raced. He could not let it end like this. “I enjoyed meeting you and I would enjoy it even more if we could do this again, taking more time.”

What the hell made him say that! This was supposed to be a

simple lunch without sticky romantic overtones.

She stood and laughed. “Are you always this forthright?”

“I don’t go out much, and meeting someone like you is rare,” he said quickly and rose, figuring his pickup line could use some updating. “What do you say?”

Frowning prettily, her eyes searching for something and apparently finding it, she dug into her purse and held out a business card. With a nod, she made her way out and disappeared into the crowd ambling along the promenade, leaving behind her a fresh spring fragrance. Bemused, he sat down and studied the card, his gnocchi momentarily forgotten. Despite inner red flags, he found that he definitely wanted to see her again. If it led to something substantial, so be it. Going over her face in his mind, he picked up his fork and dug into the ravioli.

Except for one vivid time two years ago, and the memories still burned, he never had a serious relationship with a woman, the longest lasting three months. It began as a chance meeting, shallow with no expectations from either of them, which quickly progressed into something more serious. Open and vulnerable, he allowed himself to love her unreservedly...until that fateful night when they took her from him. Some of the light went out of his life then.

Sally...

Afterward, his job kept him consumed. Before that, university studies left little room for lasting encounters. At thirty-two, he had done well to be a senior program manager and strategic consultant groomed by IBM for higher things. They were a demanding taskmaster and rewarded top performance. The alternative was turning himself into another body shop contractor. Nash liked the organization’s passion and megaprojects they handled, but disliked intensely the stifling procedures and endless reporting requirements that in his view only added unnecessary overheads. Overheads in cost, manpower and time—deadly for any project. One of the things he did to get himself noticed was streamline the lifecycle process in his program of work that elim-

inated what he saw as bureaucratic redundancy, which incidentally saved Telstra two-and-a-half million dollars and shaved the delivery schedule by nine months. He encountered a lot of opposition from older entrenched managers when he proposed to apply those changes across all programs, but a vigorous discussion with a visiting Senior VP for Software Solutions from New York saw his procedures implemented across IBM worldwide and earned him promotion and a hefty bonus.

Professional success came at a price. He lacked personal fulfillment, someone to share his life with, be his companion and confidant. Someone with whom he could live out his hopes and dreams and overcome disappointments. He wondered if Cariana could be that someone. Could he actually share *everything* with her? Being what he was, could he do that with anyone?

Cariana...

As the news clips washed over him, he took an occasional sip of juice and his thoughts drifted to having something more substantial than a smoothie, but his body did not crave being stuffed with bacon and eggs. Even as children, he and his twin brother Mark never ate much red meat, although he did like fatty foods, preferring vegetables and fruit, shunning takeaway snacks, which set them apart from other kids and got them talked about amid snickers. These days, Nash didn't see Mark all that much, his brother's work keeping him busy in Canberra. They kept in touch with emails and cellphone/holoview calls, and Mark visited a few times, but Nash missed the sober talks they used to have while studying at Melbourne University.

His sister Natalie, three years younger, had a precocious six-year-old daughter who wound both uncles around her little finger with giggling ease. Adriana a demanding handful, but when Sandra and Kevin suddenly came along as a boy/girl package, she had to adjust, no longer the focus of the family. From what Nash could tell when he visited their tastefully renovated North Melbourne terrace house, they were a happy bunch, and Shaun Mills an attentive husband.

Shaun had a quiet, strong-willed personality and a good listener when they talked. An IT manager at the National Australia Bank, his revelations into the inner workings of international banking—his own area of expertise—made Nash sit up and blink. Shaun often said that all the major banks wanted to concentrate their business on the corporate sector. That's where the money lay. Retail business was a hindrance, having to maintain branch networks to support small business and mom and dad customers. They had to put up with it, though, as they could not get around government legislation.

Nat could eat anything and burned it off without any problems, much to the dismay and envy of her friends struggling with waistlines, and she had never taken a shine to meat either. Even now, married, she kept her fine, trim figure. Nash and Mark were also slim, both 181 cm, muscular without being bulgy, light brown hair, black eyes, and always full of energy. The whole Bannon brood had a happy and carefree childhood, but when the boys turned thirteen, something happened that shattered their care-free, innocent lives. A secret only the boys and their parents knew. A secret he fervently could not reveal to anyone, one that had grown into a terrible, weary burden.

Glass of juice halfway to his mouth, he paused and stared at the holoview.

“Last night, Senator Holt Ryner, leader of the Australian Greens, with support of all Senate crossbench members, vowed to block legislation by the federal government to introduce its controversial Personal Identification Device tracking feature, which according to Ryner is designed to further erode individual freedoms under the tired old argument to broaden protection and safety for all citizens, but in reality is a blatant violation of human rights and would only serve to promote unwarranted monitoring of the population at large. The opposition leader, Macey Gardner, remains noncommittal, saying the Labor Party will make its decision once it sees the legislation. Introduction of a tracking feature does have merit, he claims, provided individuals are able to deactivate the function at will. Governments do not have a mandate to monitor an individual's movements and activities in the name of national security. Law enforcement agencies already had adequate mechanisms

to safeguard people, he added.”

Nash frowned. The coverage troubled him on several fronts. Not the enhanced PID tracking function *per se*, but its application to monitor lifeliners, which he suspected was its real purpose. If the authorities wanted to find someone, they can track a person’s smartphone even when switched off, and *everybody* carried a cell. Admittedly, that only provided location of the phone, but most of the time, it’s a safe bet that locating the cell will also locate the person carrying it. However, tracking a person’s PID would be a sure thing every time, and would reveal much more than merely his location. Besides, there were enough face recognition cameras plastered all over the place, the images used by authorities to build vast surveillance databases. Another public safety measure.

The announcement may have come from the Liberal Party, but everybody knew their far-right Australian Conservatives partner engineered the policy. It takes eighty-two seats in the federal parliament’s 160-seat Lower House to form a one-seat majority government. The government of the day having to provide the Speaker of the House who usually does not vote unless there is a tie. At the 2030 election, not able to form government in their own right even with the support of their traditional allies, the Liberal National Party—who absorbed the Nationals and Country Liberals parties years back—the Coalition was six seats short and left with a bitter-sweet choice: embrace the Conservatives or sit on the opposition benches. They figured sleeping with the enemy they knew was better than allowing the Labor Party to rule, but that pragmatic decision came at a steep price. Although a strong leader, the Prime Minister had hamstrung herself with single-issue interests of her coalition partners who sidetracked much of the government’s legislative agenda. The Labor Party cynically announced that they would never stoop so low as to embrace the crossbench members or the Conservatives’ ten seats for the chance to govern. The pragmatic federal parliamentary wing might entertain the idea, but the Labor National Executive would run them out of the party first.

The upcoming general election will prove interesting on many

fronts.

To Nash, it did not matter which party held government. The declaration to track PIDs nothing less than another step in the escalating war against lifeliners, despite a major UN statement and numerous court rulings in many countries that guaranteed their rights.

In March 2027—it took three years for them to make the announcement—the full session of the UN General Assembly finally reaffirmed that Article 2 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 applied with equal force to lifeliners, which stated, *‘Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status’*.

Unfortunately, the announcement had little effect on world opinion from an organization that had for a long time lost much of its credibility as a global policeman, the main reason for creating it. Tired of propping it up with more than a quarter of its annual budget, meaningful action too often blocked by a veto from one of the permanent Security Council members, in 2022 the U.S. dropped its contribution to a paltry five billion, which it maintained ever since. This left the bureaucratic rump with humanitarian, health, and economic programs, and the Security Council a gentleman’s club, although everybody pretended it still had relevance.

Another problem, many governments questioned the validity of the Declaration, asserting that lifeliners were not human, notwithstanding overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary, which opened the door to witch hunts, vigilante activists, and general unrest, with people not really comprehending what went on, but not liking the growing social dislocation. When the U.S., seen as a bastion of freedom and human rights, opened internment camps and set up secret laboratories to conduct experiments on lifeliners, it was not hard to understand why the more extreme regimes carried out what amounted to open pogroms. Muslim radicals labeled them agents of Satan, and the Vatican

continued to vacillate, still to release a positional papal bull, which only fueled confusion among the faithful. Everybody else pretended the problem did not even exist, hoping to wake tomorrow to a saner world.

For Nash, the problem was personal and manifestly real. Since their emergence, he wondered whether lifeliners had achieved any meaningful recognition and acceptance under laws seldom enforced. Current events pointed to a gloomy future.

“Politicians! Assholes, all of them,” he muttered. “Rats!”

“Voters savaged Labor for its lack of a coherent policy on lifeliners, the latest Morgan Poll showing the Opposition slipping an additional three points behind the Liberal-led coalition, 32 to 48. Some in the Labor Caucus are questioning Mr. Gardner’s leadership, troubled by this slip in confidence and the effect it could have on the October election.

“The Prime Minister, Atarah Readman, dismissed concerns raised by Senator Ryner, saying that provision of a tracking function is merely a by-product of an integrated PID system already in place as outlined by Neil Travers, Minister for the Department of Human Services, and has nothing to do with invading personal privacy, access subject to strict legislation. Asked if the federal government recognized lifeliners having the same rights and privileges as ordinary citizens, the Prime Minister failed to provide a coherent response, saying that emergence of lifeliners represented a major social challenge facing governments around the world, and Australia needed to deal with the issue responsibly for the welfare of all its citizens, which suggests that the Coalition government, particularly its Australian Conservatives partner, does not consider lifeliners to be citizens, something the Prime Minister nimbly sidestepped.

“Much to public consternation, the police released without charge several People First Party far-right extremists arrested during a march in Canberra last Sunday where they demanded that all lifeliners be interned permanently, sterilized and their citizenship revoked. The march coincided with picketing of the Lifeliner Party headquarters in Carlton Place, Melbourne, and the firebombing of Sydney’s North Shore Lifeliner Help Center. Outraged civil liberty groups are urging the federal Director of Public Prosecutions to intervene and indict the perpetrators.

“In Berlin, a twenty-two-year-old man, allegedly a lifeliner, was badly

beaten by three neo-Nazis as he walked out of a popular nightclub. Police arrested the assailants and the victim taken to a hospital with non-life-threatening injuries."

Nash ground his teeth in disgust, alarmed at the growing trend of lifeliner persecutions and apparent unwillingness by politicians of all persuasions to address the matter. Forceful sterilization already used by some totalitarian regimes and, according to rumors, even in the United States and Europe. The suggestion that Australia should adopt such a vile practice as a solution, he found particularly disturbing. Didn't governments realize that simply entertaining this option could tear democracies apart? After an uneasy truce over the last five years, civil unrest was growing, and extremists were becoming more vocal, emboldened by lack of firm action from lawmakers and the courts. Instead of addressing the lifeliner issue in a meaningful way, the government appeared more interested in milking the politics angle.

Last Wednesday night, a gang of four youths attacked a seventeen-year-old teenager outside the Flinders Street train station, claiming he was a lifeliner. The kid lost an eye, suffered a broken arm and numerous lacerations. By the time the dobers arrived, the youths had fled...and nobody saw a thing. The irony? Tests, primitive as they were, showed the kid wasn't even a lifeliner. Disturbingly, such incidents were becoming more common everywhere. Reaction to such attacks generated a natural and predictable response. Lifeliner teenagers tended to group for mutual protection, which inevitably led to clashes and vandalism, creating a vicious cycle that defied sanity.

New Zealanders seemed to have escaped this cancerous madness, accepting lifeliners without fear or prejudice. When lifeliners emerged, they were simply another group in the multicultural mix. Sociologists talked learnedly about seamless integration of indigenous Maori and Asians into the social fabric, but a clear explanation why the country remained so stable eluded them. If their cousins across the Tasman could make the adjustment without violence, Nash wondered why Aussies, who had an even more diverse population mix, couldn't do the same. The Kiwis

were simply different, he decided.

“Last night, the Senate failed to pass the controversial Superannuation amendment bill for the second time, giving the government a double dissolution trigger for an early election. Given the current polling numbers, it is doubtful the Prime Minister would risk facing the voters before she had to. The bill is intended to change how the Consumer Price Index is calculated, which would have helped recipients of government benefits, including pensioners. Commentators criticized Labor’s failure to support a worthwhile social initiative.

“In partnership with Blue Origin, an aerospace company set up by Jeff Bezos, chairman of Amazon, SpaceX successfully launched a third unmanned supply mission from their Texas Boca Chica facility aimed at the northern rim of Peary crater, close to the Lunar north pole. SpaceX claims that its manned mission in August will finally establish a semi-permanent Moon base. Elon Musk, the founder of Space Exploration Technologies Corp. stated that private industry can operate profitably in space without reliance on a bureaucracy-hampered government.”

That’s what he should do...emigrate to the Moon, Nash told himself.

“Sally...”

“Yes, Nash?” the house computer queried in pleasant contralto.

“Switch off...one a moment.”

“Beijing announced the final phase of its withdrawal from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, to be completed by June this year after its occupation of the rogue state in 2020 following the U.S. bombing of the Mansudae Assembly Hall in Pyongyang, which killed Kim Jong-un and most of the Supreme People’s Assembly, effectively neutralizing the nuclear threat to the region and the free world. The attack ordered by a former president after North Korea launched an advanced ballistic missile armed with a thermonuclear warhead that detonated at an altitude of 200 kilometers off the Oregon coast. The White House Press Secretary said that President Elliott Mackay welcomed the announcement and looked forward to the upcoming meeting with the Chinese president Cheng Hung in May, to discuss normalization of the Korean peninsula and a common approach to resolve the lifeline problem. You can see a special ABC Four Corners coverage of events leading to the U.S. strike and analysis of its impact next Monday at 8:30

pm.

“You are watching ABC Breakfast on Tuesday, January 20, 2032. Recapping our other headlines...Prime Minister Atarah Readman continues to push for a referendum to extend the federal term for both Houses to a fixed four years—”

Not interested in other headlines, he told Sally to kill the holoview, took the glass carafe of coffee to the balcony table and pulled back a wooden chair. South Korea won't mind seeing the Chinese withdraw from the peninsula, and neither will the North Koreans. The United States had left only a token force in ROK after a popular pullout in 2026, which freed badly needed billions to repair a fractured U.S. deficit. The pullout didn't catch anyone by surprise, especially when in 2023 the U.S. reduced its NATO role to observer status, part of a layered policy to untangle itself from its role as the global policeman whom nobody wanted. Understandably, the Europeans were not overly impressed, having to shoulder their own defense budget for a change, which left American voters unmoved. It takes troops to hold conquered ground, but Russia wasn't the red menace of old. Awash with natural resources, economy growing steadily, they did not have a tactical or strategic reason to contemplate invading NATO countries, particularly after Turkey pulled out of the alliance in 2021 and aligned itself with Russia, which gave it unrestricted access into the Mediterranean.

Nash gazed absently at the broad St. Kilda Road thoroughfare three floors down and sipped the fragrant brew, not paying any real attention to the building traffic noise and pedestrians striding purposefully to catch a tram into the city and vanish in one of its towers, the day absorbed with work. Tomorrow, everyone would wearily repeat it all again. Endless days of seemingly endless labor. It did not surprise him that many teenagers found the prospect of such a life repellant. Repellant or not, that was the price society demanded for the benefits and privileges it delivered.

Delivered for some, he reminded himself.

Nevertheless, the social contract had many holes through which people could fall, and life on the edges cold and dark. Nash

had never experienced the harsher side of life, although he had seen it revealed in the bleak, vacant faces of the unemployed sleeping in streets and alleyways, their jobs taken over by robots or AI systems. As automation increased in absence of political will to integrate technology with people's needs, a social dilemma seemingly beyond resolution.

What did *he* want out of the social contract? To leave something behind other than memories did not seem to be enough.

Breakfast done, he cleaned up, told Sally to set security, and walked briskly out of the apartment.

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 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 cell-phone 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:

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Shadow Gods books by Stefan Vučak

In the Shadow of Death

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

Against the Gods of Shadow

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

A Whisper from Shadow

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

Shadow Masters

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

Immortal in Shadow

On his way to a prison planet, Tanard, a renegade Fleet officer, escapes and vows vengeance. He is recruited by an extremist Pa-lean 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 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

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.