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# **NIGHT SIRENS**

By

**Stefan Vučak**



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# Dedication

*To Mirko ... when reaching for the stars*

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Chapter One

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Frank Hram waited for the brown tinted glass panels to slide aside, then stepped onto a crowded sidewalk. A wave of traffic noise along the always busy Collins Street made him wince with distaste. Funny, the endless footfalls of people were almost silent. He would ponder the mystery one day over a snifter of cognac, but not here, not now.

A lingering scent of acrid car exhausts produced a passing scowl...a problem seemingly without any solution, wanting to breathe crisp air laced with the scent of oily eucalyptus. This weekend perhaps, he'll drive into the Dandenong hills and indulge himself in nature to replenish what the city had drained from him.

Along the boulevard's median strip, golden elm branches swayed to the whisper of a light breeze. The leaves rustled in protest as a hot northerly gust suddenly raced up the canyon-like street, the effect created by towering buildings on both sides. They witnessed it all before, including the smog. He took it all in and exhaled softly.

Tempted to walk back to his empty air-conditioned apartment, devoid of warmth or somebody waiting for him, he turned left and merged with the flow of pedestrians pushing past him on their way toward the Southern Cross railway hub to catch a train to some suburb and faraway home. Others like him jostled up the street in search of a convenient bar to tank up before finishing the day. Endless rivers of people, and streets were arteries that channeled the never-ending streams. Blank faces, tired faces, animated faces, an anonymous tide ebbing out of the

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city. Tomorrow morning the flood would carry in those same faces. A treadmill stuck on fast with no off button.

Frank could have waited for the evening peak hour to subside before venturing out without having his senses battered. Unaccountably restless, not wanting to spend the evening alone, he gave into the urge to mingle. Weekend afternoons were best to be out, the central business district almost deserted, until evening when a minor surge of excitement seekers ventured out looking to forget reality for a while in a restaurant, theater, cinema, or some other place of earthy entertainment. Right now, he only saw suffering weariness of office slaves who faced a dull trip home by train or car along clogged highways, and they did it twice a day. Mentally exhausted by the time they came to work, and totally wrung out when they got home, some still had energy to go out someplace for distracting amusement. He shook his head, not understanding any of it.

A two-bedroom apartment in the same building as his business had lots of practical advantages, but silence, greenery, and a backyard were not one of them. It still beat the hell out of facing a twice-daily commuter crush, and made up for everything else. When he wanted silence, greenery, fresh air, he took a drive out of the city somewhere to connect with a saner world.

At the Queen Street intersection, a tram clattered through as he waited for the walk sign to turn green. Swept along by the throng, he made his way toward Bourke Street, past the corner Cbus Tower, and stopped in front of the Emporium Hotel, one of his favorite watering stops. After a relaxing drink, a dinner engagement at the fashionable uptown Ishizuka restaurant would cap a fine day. He loved the cuisine, subdued lighting, and waitresses tip-toeing around in traditional kimonos, smiling and bowing politely. Every décor detail and soft Japanese background music designed to promote an ambiance of tranquility for sophisticated patrons. Frank saw few young people there, the setting far removed from preferred Western-style gregarious

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establishments. For him, such places lacked cultural refinement, he decided phlegmatically. He always sought restaurants with character where he could immerse himself into their subtle atmosphere. As for discos, the image of gyrating, arm-waving couples thinking they were having fun made him shudder. Old-fashioned stylized mating rituals. A symphony to pluck at his emotions and make his mind soar, a tumbler of something in hand, made living worth enduring.

The Emporium dining room specialized in Mediterranean dishes, and he always enjoyed superb meals there. A little pricy, but as with Japanese diners, that little extra separated living from mere existence. Besides, someone once said indulgence filled the soul, or perhaps he made up the thing as a reflection of his own self. He strode into the lobby, glanced at the still mostly deserted restaurant with its brown paneled walls, square tables covered with genuine lace cloth, cut glass chandeliers, and turned left toward the noisy Blink's Bar, many of its small round tables already occupied. Apart from an odd snack, no meals served here, the tables did not have to be large. Like any bar, the place smelled of spilled beer and sharp spirits. It never ran short of lunchtime customers having a quick one before returning to the office grind. In the evening, after work suit types perhaps needed a badly needed alcohol fix to close off what might have been a stressful day, or maybe dreading tomorrow. Then again, a drink might fortify them for what waited at home.

Frank did not give a toss why somebody came here. He liked to sit quietly, sip his mix, and watch people. They were funny, silly, solemn, depressed, and lots had all those attributes in one package. The problem with some, he decided, they took themselves too damn seriously. They lacked a sense of humor to laugh at themselves and everything around them. That's how he beat the game. The world still kept turning whether he worried or not.

He pushed through standing groups and strode toward an

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empty stool beside the bar. Soft music filled the background, the kind of stuff popular in the seventies and eighties. The drinks were not watered and the bartenders would talk to him if they had a spare minute. Cheaper than a session with a mind twister and delivered about the same level of service.

Maybe the slow pace and the square atmosphere attracted young up-and-coming executives. According to Walt, some came to enjoy the dated sounds, liked the mood, and became regulars, proud to have discovered a really cool place.

He sat down and Walt nodded to him from the other end of the bar. The portly bartender, laugh lines crinkling his eyes, bald head slick under the lights, a cleaning rag always in hand, ambled over. He could be fifty or sixty, unchanged in the eight years Frank knew him. The man must have seen and heard just about everything in his time, and laughed at it all. Somewhere in his checkered past, he also learned how to beat the game.

“How’s life, big guy?”

“If I wanted decent booze, I wouldn’t be here,” Frank told him amiably.

Walt shrugged. “There’s a pub down the street if you don’t like what I serve. The usual?”

“Make it a double.” Frank cast a quick glance at the mixed clientele. Easy to be picked up here by either sex, knowing from personal experience, but he wasn’t hunting this evening, and would not need to for a while yet. He simply wanted a drink with bodies around him.

“Hard day at the office?” Walt asked as he squirted a dash of ginger ale into a tumbler of bourbon, no ice. Casual chitchat came free with the drinks.

“It’s money coming in,” Frank said indifferently and dragged a bowl of mixed nuts toward him. “You know, figuring out how to invest a few spare bucks isn’t all that difficult. All it takes is some research and a bit of common sense.” He popped two roasted cashews into his mouth and chewed.

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“I hear ’ya.” Walt slid a cork coaster across the bar and placed the tumbler on it. “The thing is, buddy, if sense was really common, you wouldn’t be enjoying your fancy Collins Street pad.”

Frank picked up the tumbler and took a sip. “I guess.” He cocked an eyebrow at the bartender. “Are *you* looking to invest some spare cash?”

“Hah! If I had any spare cash, I’d be sunning my butt somewhere in Queensland. Too steamy this time of year, though,” Walt reflected. “Still alone? No good living alone. Take me. Married for twenty-four years and the fire hasn’t gone out. We’ve had our ups and downs like everybody, and Marica even left me once. Came back after a week at her mother’s. We talked it over and sealed the reunion with a romp in bed.” He chuckled at the memory and absently wiped the bar top. “That’s the trouble with kids these days. No patience. They have an argument and bam! The next day, they’re divorced.”

“Yeah, so I heard,” Frank agreed.

“Hey! How about some service here?” a bulky individual demanded from the other side of the bar.

Walt shrugged. “Catch you later or I’ll get beer thrown in my face.”

Frank smiled after the retreating figure. Pushing thirty-eight, he often wondered what it would be like to have a warm bundle beside him in bed to love, share secrets in midnight pillow talk, go places together, have kids, and be normal like everybody else, whatever the hell that meant. He missed his chance to have it all with Rainey. Memories bubbled to the surface and he spent a few moments raking over the more pleasant ones. After a couple of sips, they faded into yesterday’s scrapbook. That’s where he ought to be, in a scrapbook. Then again, Walt might be right. Time to let go and move on. Owen told him as much more than once. Happily married, his business partner dispensed marital advice like a gumball machine.

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He took another sip, letting the bar's ambiance wash over him, soaking it all in.

Someone gave a heavy grunt beside him and Frank turned. Perhaps in his mid-thirties, dressed in a dark gray suit, yellow tie pulled down, clear blue eyes regarded him with amused cynicism. Streaks of white at the temples added a touch of formality and dignity to an otherwise rugged face and powerful figure women liked. Frank gave a mental shrug. Some guys had it all, knew it, and made many self-conceited bastards. He wondered if this guy fit the mold, prepared to be surprised.

A young waiter brought a fat glass of red wine and placed it before Frank's new acquaintance. The man took a pull, nodded in appreciation, and lifted the glass in a salute.

"Not bad actually. How's your stuff?"

"Drinkable," Frank said with a grin. "Coming here is a diversion from the unforgiving madness outside."

"Wow, heavy stuff for this time of day," his friend growled and turned slightly to check out females cruising to be picked up.

"You're wasting your time, my boy," Frank told him with a shake of his head. "All the good ones are already taken. These are strictly one-nighters."

"Can't shoot a guy for looking. They haven't passed a law against that yet, but give them time." The deep laugh lit the man's eyes with open humor. "Name's Dan," he said and stuck out a meaty paw.

"Frank."

No pretense there and he began to warm to him.

Dan's hand cool and dry, both maneuvered for a knuckle crusher. Childish, but what the hell. Frank left all the serious bits he wanted in the office. Time to chill out as the kids said. He had an advantage in height and reach, but did not underestimate Dan's powerful grip. From a confident smirk, Dan's expression changed to a surprised grimace of pain. Frank let him go before the encounter became too uncomfortable.

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“Damn!” Dan grunted and massaged his fingers. “It’s been a while since I came off second best.”

“I’ll be around whenever you want a reminder,” Frank told him with a smile.

They clicked glasses and Dan suddenly sat up. “Man! Check out that chassis!”

Frank followed his gaze and almost missed her standing at the bar entrance.

Early twenties, not tall, she carried herself with power and maturity, something he liked to see in a woman. Black hair spilled down her back and hung above a slim waist. Oval eyes, highlighted by blue eyeshadow, drew attention to a delicate face, small upturned nose, and full lips brushed with gloss. He could not tell if she wore any other makeup. Dressed in a loose beige blouse with a generous cleavage, the clinging brown knee-length skirt showed shapely legs. Black stiletto heels, open at the toes, fixed at the ankles by thin straps, gave an impression of extra height. For a second, he swore silence drowned all conversation as every male eye in the room clicked to focus on her. Her confident posture and an almost visible glow gave her away. An energy feeder, he wondered what prey she would catch tonight. She hunted openly, wanting men to see her ready for some close entertainment.

It takes maturity, training, and a lifetime of experience to recognize a feeder, provided one chose to be recognized. There were little mannerisms a feeder can adopt to prevent recognition, and Frank used them all. This woman flaunted her desire.

He turned and shrugged. “Not bad,” he said offhandedly.

“Not bad?” Dan shook his head and gave him a pitying sigh. “You happen to leave your eyeballs at home or something? Step aside. This is man’s work, sonny.” Without taking his eyes off the woman, he placed his wineglass on the bar and stood up.

Amused, Frank watched him walk to her, beating another suitor vying for her attention. Dan leaned toward her and said

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something. She gave him an appraising look as though measuring a side of beef, nodded, and smiled. Dan wound her arm around his, winked at Frank, and they strode out. He expected Dan to have a very interesting night.

Frank lifted his tumbler and sipped, figuring it was none of his business how the woman hunted, and she would not take too much from Dan. Ordinary men provided what she needed to survive, and women provided what men like Frank needed. Simple as that. He could link with a man, but that wasn't his stuff. Life went on, and nobody could figure out why it had to be like that. Philosophers, priests, and mystics tried over the millennia, and some thought they had it. He never read anything yet that explained it to his satisfaction. Best to stick with his *Zen shikantaza* and forget trying to understand it all. Let the all be his total self without conceptualization, grasping, goal seeking, unencumbered by traditional *bodhisattva* rituals.

He finished the drink and dismissed Dan from his mind. Right now, he had a culinary appointment to keep. He stood, threw bills on the bar, waved to Walt, and headed for the lobby, looking forward to dining on some superb Japanese cuisine.

\* \* \*

Fingers locked behind his head, Frank gazed absently at the far wall of his bedroom. Dawn broke and he heard muffled sounds of cars moving outside. Nice and snug, his thoughts wandered, not dwelling on anything in particular. A jumble of random associations he used as an excuse not to get out of bed. To get up meant shattering his contented mood and face a harsh, indifferent world. *Only a few moments more*, he told himself and closed his eyes.

A car horn blared as a driver vented frustration at some offending miscreant. His fantasy dissolved and he became fully awake. He pursed his lips, threw back the light blanket, and

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padded into the bathroom. A shower and a shave perked him up and he dressed quickly, not fussing over his appearance, but as managing director of Urbi Investments, he needed to project a professional front for the company's existing and prospective clients.

With the percolator going, filling the kitchen and living room with an enticing aroma, he prepared breakfast of homemade muesli, the ingredients bought at Victoria Market—the packaged supermarket stuff mostly sugar bombs—cut up a red capsicum, then added blueberries and tomato slices to the mix. Sadly, most vegetables these days lacked any smell and were almost tasteless. Lately, the apples and pears he'd been eating started an argument with his stomach. Probably all the chemicals in them to force growth or keep them from rotting on shelves. On his weekend trips out of town, he always picked up fruit and veggies from local farmers that had old-fashioned substance and flavor.

A second fix of coffee, warm mug held between his hands, he glanced at the electronic wall clock screen: 8:05 AM, Wednesday, December 6, 2023. The rest of the week would be all downhill toward another Saturday. As he watched the thing, the number changed to 8:06. Coffee finished, he washed up, brushed his teeth, slipped on a dark maroon tie, and pulled on a black cashmere jacket to finish off. A last glance at the mirror showed a hard face, granite gray eyes below a full crop of almost charcoal hair brushed straight back. At 179cm, he still looked good; no eye bags or drooping jowls, his body kept trim with regular exercise at the downstairs gym. He nodded and headed for the door. With the monitored alarm system enabled, he strode quickly toward a bank of three elevators. The Oaks on Collins apartments, located in the Collins Street Tower office complex, made getting to work almost a pleasurable experience. As with everything, some days were better than others.

As an added security measure, a wireless camera installed in the ceiling aircon grille kept five days of takes in cloud storage.

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Personal safety and security were priority life items for every Keeper who contemplated ongoing survival, which Frank did. One hint of his true nature to anybody and the exterminators would come sniffing. His parents may have suspected during his turbulent teenage years when the urge to feed first manifested itself, but they never broached the subject. Perhaps better for all concerned.

In December 2010, the debilitating effects of the Global Financial Crisis starting to fade, he bought his two-bedroom pad and persuaded Owen Emerson, a longtime friend, to start a financial consulting business. If they wanted to make serious money in life, slaving for somebody else on a salary would not do it, regardless how high the salary, he told Owen. Frank had two other buddies; the four of them attended the same high school. After graduating, each pursued a different course of study and career, and over time drifted apart. Except for Owen. They all got together once or twice a year without the wives in tow to yarn over old times and pontificate on the new, but the close connection they enjoyed before faded as the years marched. Flotsam on the river of time, that's what they were. Like time cared where it took people riding it.

Many investors, large and small, badly burned during the GFC, were ready for someone honest to tell them what to do with their money. The industry had a deserved 'buyer beware' dictum and people were wary. An office opposite the Rialto Tower added a veneer of prestige and reassurance to nervous clients not sure two young looking entrepreneurs could handle their millions. It took five years of long hours and many missed weekends to build up a solid reputation and goodwill in the cutthroat financial market before things picked up and real returns started to come in.

Although only twenty-seven at the time, Frank brought into the business KPMG work experience and investment knowhow gained at Lodge & Porters, one of the most respectable trading

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houses in Melbourne, a bachelor's degree in commerce, and a master's in finance. A year older, Owen held an accounting and law degree, which gave Urbi the required spread of practical professionalism and academic snobbery clients appreciated. Everybody liked to see framed diplomas on an office wall. They handled a portfolio of \$716 million, distributed in shares, various managed funds, and cryptocurrency. So far, Urbi's clients did well sticking with the relative newcomers, because he and Owen treated them with scrupulous honesty, prepared to steer them somewhere else for a better deal. Many came back when that better deal turned out not to be so good.

The elevator door opened on the 14th floor and he faced a long frosted glass panel, his business name set in black-bordered gold script. The single clear entrance panel slid away when he pressed a glowing green pad, and he walked into the tastefully furnished reception area.

Catherine Rossen looked up from her curved, grained wood workstation flanked by two tall potted plants decorated with tinsel and colored glass balls in anticipation of Christmas, and smiled. Behind her, a floor-to-ceiling window revealed a jagged city skyline. The modern, clean décor always went down well with clients, in contrast to some firms who still thought the 1900s dark paneling look spelled stability and respectability.

"Morning, Frank," she said cheerfully and held out several message slips.

With them since he and Owen opened the firm in mid-2011, of average height, short auburn hair highlighted bright brown eyes and small mouth, Cathy served as receptionist, office manager, and general gofer. Whatever needed doing, she took care of it. Not a partner, but Frank made sure her salary and benefits kept her with them. She did not need the money really, moderately wealthy after following Frank's investment advice. As she pointed out over coffee more than once, work kept her mind busy. Better than staring at a TV all day and slowly going batty.

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Happily married, two teenage boys a handful at home, she added cheerfulness and a sunny disposition to some dull days. Like any business, Urbi had them.

“Anything I need to know?” he asked as he grabbed the slips.

“You have a Miss Tammy Rezing at nine. The rest are call-me-back things. One is from an old client, Gregory Forster. He wants to see you soonest.”

“Is Owen in?”

“Not yet.”

He shoved the message slips into his jacket pocket and headed for the small kitchen/lounge. A mug of strong black coffee in hand, one sugar, he walked into his office and powered up the networked tower computer sitting on a large black-grained gray executive desk. Apart from a ceiling-high wall unit stuffed with books, magazines, odd trinkets, two seascapes on one wall, Frank liked his office bare and functional. A window behind him took up the entire wall and provided all the natural light the room needed.

He quickly scanned several financial websites for latest market developments, stock movements, and general heads-up items. The vibes from everyone were strong that the Federal Reserve Bank would lift interest rates before Christmas. Otherwise, the local and international trade, monetary and fiscal climate, looked fairly stable, already having factored in a possible rate hike designed to keep inflation in check. Coal futures were down again as the world slowly weaned itself off this energy source, but gas had rallied.

The Greens Party wanted to kill all coal and gas usage in the name of reducing global carbon emissions, but reliable, cheap renewable supplies were still years off in their ability to provide base load power for houses and industry. This cold fact did not stop them beating the drums of change. At the last federal election, Elena Griffin, the new Labor Party Prime Minister, refused to adopt the Green’s radical and economically damaging

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policy, and promoted investment in gas exploration and delivery infrastructure. She insisted all companies must reserve at least 20% of all supplies for the country's internal consumption rather than seek best deals through international sales. No more nonsense pegging the domestic market to the international spot price. The big exploration companies grumbled and threatened to pull out, and Griffin told them to go ahead and leave. In reality, reserving a percentage of production for domestic consumption meant a miniscule drop in annual earnings. Not worth incurring the government's wrath and public ridicule for being heartless profit gougers, which everybody knew they were.

Homework done, he checked the message slips, shot off several email replies, and slotted Forster for three PM into the appointment system.

The phone rang and he picked up.

"Miss Rezing is here," Cathy announced, and Frank glanced at the clock weather station on his desk, startled to find it showed almost nine.

"Show her in." He hastily dragged on his jacket and straightened loose papers. *Perception rules everything*, he told himself.

He recalled Rezing's file and two previous meetings when she approached Urbi for investment advice. Twenty-nine, a geologist at BHP, single, around 162cm, raven hair tied in a severe bun, which made a startling contrast with her pale features. Frank remembered a long, somber face, large green eyes with penetrating directness, and a sharp delivery when she spoke. Slim, fashionably dressed, he would not have minded dating her. A passing fancy.

A knock and Cathy opened the door, ushering in his guest. He stood and offered his hand.

"A pleasure to see you again, Miss Rezing." He squeezed her small hand, smelling fresh perfume.

"Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Hram," she replied coolly and sat in the visitor chair without waiting for an invitation. She

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clearly expected deference and made sure she got it. Legs crossed, she tugged down her navy blue skirt over tanned legs.

“Can I get you a coffee or something?”

“I’m fine.”

“In that case, what can I do for you?”

She bit her lower right lip and frowned. “I’m in a bit of a bind. As you know, apart from my shares portfolio you helped set up, I own thirty Bitcoins my father bought for me in 2012 as a flyer. Since then, I accumulated an additional twenty before the 2021 peak. With the current price hovering around \$89,300, I want to sell some to finance purchase of a central city apartment to better suit my work requirements and lifestyle. The alternative is to offload some of my shares for the purchase. I would appreciate your input what to do.”

“Both are sound options, but have you considered taking out a fixed rate home loan for the apartment? The current bank rate is around 6.5% for a 20-year loan. If you pay off some of it over twelve months, you’ll be making money on the deal.”

She arched her eyebrows. “I’m surprised to hear you say that. The fortnightly repayments would be an impossible drain on my operating liquidity.”

“Your income and dividend yields will service the loan comfortably.” He smiled and leaned over the table to concentrate on her face. “In twelve months, you can sell a few Bitcoins to unload the loan balance.”

“But if I sell now, I can purchase the apartment without any outstanding liability.”

“That’s true, but you’ll be doing it by sacrificing future Bitcoin appreciation, which is far more than 6.5%, even if you’re not getting any dividends from it now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When Bitcoin first came on the market in 2009, it had a fixed issue of twenty-one million virtual coins. Some 19.2 million are already in circulation. Roughly every four years, Bitcoin miners

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go through a block reward subsidy halving. Right now, miners are rewarded with 6.25 Bitcoins for every transaction block they create, which releases more Bitcoins for people to buy and sell. In May next year, that reward will drop to 3.125 per transaction block. As the available supply of Bitcoins shrinks, miners will have less incentive to create transaction blocks. This means you can expect to see a sharp increase in Bitcoin price. By March next year, the market is predicting a value of \$120,000 per Bitcoin. If you take out a bank loan to finance your apartment purchase, you'll be able to repay it by selling far fewer Bitcoins than if you sold now, and you'll be preserving your investment."

"Mmm, I think I understand. A tantalizing tactic, but what if Bitcoin value doesn't go that high? I'll be stuck with an expensive loan."

Frank shrugged. "You'll still be in a better position, as a price increase is an absolute certainty. All investment is based on perception, not mathematical formulae. If every cryptocurrency suddenly bottomed out, they'll be in a mix of other investment instruments, and the world economy would face another GFC. All of us would have survival on our mind, and repaying a bank the least of your problems. It's not a scenario we're facing, though."

She allowed herself a small smile. "So, you're recommending I hold onto my investment portfolio and borrow, the loan serviced by asset appreciation."

"That's right. All economic indicators point to an expanding domestic and international future, with no political threat indicators in the medium timeframe to cause a downturn. If you have some cash capacity, consider investing in Ethereum crypto. Right now, it's cheap, but growth over the last eighteen months suggests it might overtake Bitcoin as a favorite investment."

"Why not invest in shares? Are you saying I should dump them in favor of crypto?"

"Not at all. Diversification is a good thing. I am merely

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pointing out a possible opportunity that's likely to become very competitive next year.”

Rezing flashed him a broad smile, rose, and held out her hand. “Thank you, Mr. Hram. Your advice has always been reliable.”

“Whatever decision you make, Urbi Investments will execute your transactions.” They shook hands and he escorted her out.

He checked his email Inbox and went over what he said to Rezing. Perhaps he should follow his own advice and extend his holding in Ethereum. He could easily afford to put in another \$20,000. Perhaps the firm could also apply some surplus to increase its portfolio. He'll have a chat with Owen.

Frank stood before the tall plate window and gazed absently at a profusion of towers clawing for the sky, reflecting how Bitcoin got him started.

In January 2015, he bought eighty coins when they were at \$304 and basically forgot about it. A very risky venture, crypto still an unknown investment quantity then. In April 2021, the price unexpectedly soared above \$79,000, and he offloaded everything, which netted him over \$6.3 million. The windfall allowed him to retire all personal and most company debt, and he used the balance of the initial six million to service his capital gains tax liability. The government always made sure it got its cut from any enterprise.

By July, the price dropped to roughly \$43,500 and he bought 100 Bitcoins. At his urging, Owen, Cathy, and some clients, came out of that rollercoaster trading cycle financially secure, as did Urbi itself.

His parents also did well following his advice, retired, and bought a property at Airlie Beach in Queensland, gateway to the Whitsundays, and now enjoyed luxury living and first class travel.

As an only child, he recalled a rocky relationship with his father. A rather stern personality, which, according to his mother, he passed to his son. A senior Commonwealth Bank manager in their retail division, no dummy when it came to technology and

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the evolving world of personal computers in the early 1980s, mobile phones in late 1990s, email communication, and the Internet, Attard Hram drove Frank hard to get a university education. This invariably generated a rebellious response. Never wild, Frank's late teens were years of experimentation and impulsive decisions all teenagers indulged in. His mom, a partner at the time in the downtown Central City Realty, a practical, down to earth woman, tempered his rashness and resentment of his father's stifling authority with quiet talks and wise guidance.

Frank weathered the discipline of high school and found himself in a free world of Melbourne University where he enrolled in a Bachelor of Commerce degree. He liked all sciences and read widely, but never considered an academic or engineering career. The higher mathematics turned him off.

He enjoyed university life and became active in the Student Union for a while, until it started to encroach too much into his study time. Undergrads could attend lectures and tutorials or not. Nobody drove them to do anything. The Uni got its fee and did not care how the students spent their time. He barely scraped through the first year, and many of his classmates fell by the wayside. This left him with a sober realization that the safe, comfortable existence he enjoyed living with his parents did not prepare him for the tough and indifferent world he found himself in now. Predictably, he blamed his dad for letting him down. One evening, Hram senior walked into his room and gave Frank a brutal choice. Get a degree and secure a future for himself or become a menial worker. The world owed nothing to anyone. Opportunities lay everywhere, but he must reach out and grasp them. He would never realize them from a factory floor.

The somber talk gave Frank a lot to think about, resenting his old man's blunt dressing down in the process.

He got his degree and immediately joined KPMG in their Management Consulting division. The four years he spent there gave him a solid grounding in the impersonal cut and thrust of

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corporate finance that knew no quarter. A lot more mature, he came to appreciate what his parents had done for him, and the relationship with his dad improved immeasurably. These days when they met, they talked as equals, and Frank valued the words of praise and approval from his father.

As he gazed out the window, life unfolded from his memories and he found himself uncharacteristically despondent.

A thriving company, fancy apartment, nice car, financial security, he should be riding high. Instead, when he opened the door to that fancy apartment, no one stood there to share his successes, and his nights were lonely. Did that explain why he liked going to Blink's and other bars, because he wanted surrogate companionship? There used to be someone four years ago.

Rainey...

Engaged to be married, his life turned dark when a week before the wedding, a speeding truck driver ran a red light, hit her car, and drove it against a concrete light pole. The rescue crew had to cut through the mangled wreckage to get at her torn body. Six years, that's what the driver got, but it did not bring Frank any satisfaction, or filled the emptiness he still felt inside.

Endless days, months, and years providing personal and corporate financial advice, growing richer in the process, maintaining his cover as a Covenant Keeper, was that all life held for him? More than once, he reflected that professional achievement meant little if no one shared it with him. He figured a mind twister would find him a very messed up client. Sometimes even Zen contemplation did not help lift his mood.

Still morose, he walked back to his desk and got the computer working. Time for some paid work, and screw all psychiatrists. Whom did they consult when they needed straightening out?

He secured two new clients before lunch. Both middle-aged, successful executives looking for options. They typified the kind of people he saw. With a bit of due diligence, they could have

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managed their investments themselves. Most could not be bothered, did not have the time to research, or were overawed by the stock market mystique. Urbi Investments made a lot of its money from such people. Corporate clients were usually more savvy and required careful handling.

At noon, Frank walked out onto Collins Street and paused to soak in the streaming traffic, hurrying pedestrians, and the city's pervasively noisy atmosphere. A deep blue sky reflected warm sunshine and cast sharp shadows. Not bothering with a tie or jacket, he ambled toward the Southern Cross railway station, the street festooned with Christmas decorations. At the food court, he snagged a salad roll, a cup of freshly squeezed orange juice, and perused a small bookstore. Not finding anything of interest in the small collection—for a serious bookworm like himself, Dymocks had it all—he made his way toward Bourke Street a block up. His latest brain prodder, *Ethics*, edited by James P. Sterba, made for thoughtful reflection. Some articles induced instant slumber. By the time he completed the circuit back to the Collins Street Tower, he felt prepared to tackle more clients.

He and Owen Emerson jointly handled any firm with an annual turnover of more than \$10 million. Each contributed specific expertise to every discussion. As Frank admitted more than once, he did not know everything, something Owen did not let him forget.

At one, Cathy showed a severely dressed lawyer into the meeting room, and the three of them shared small talk over coffee. The rake thin individual represented a company based in the city's western suburbs that made various stainless steel containers for milk processors, beer fermenters, chemicals suppliers, and custom storage tanks. The company's profits had increased substantially and the owners did not want surplus funds languishing in a bank interest account paying a miserly quarter percent.

“What is your medium term expansion strategy, Mr. Lewis?”

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Owen asked.

The lawyer pushed up his rimless glasses that slid down a sharp nose and cleared his throat.

“We’re building a new plant in Sydney. The property is already acquired and the architects are waiting for the local council to approve the drawings. We’re hoping to get it next week before the process gets bogged down because of Christmas and New Year holidays.”

“How are you financing the new plant?” Frank put in.

“From general revenue.”

Frank exchanged a quick glance with Owen, the response typical from small companies not versed in corporate financing.

“Mr. Lewis, have your owners considered borrowing the required capital instead of drawing down your earnings?”

“We have, but they’re averse to leverage the business, and in the process, burden it with subordinated debt or substantial loan repayments.”

“Which are tax deductible,” Owen pointed out.

“But still payable up front.”

“Effectively, a loan costs you nothing, and your earnings profile shows you could service it comfortably or you wouldn’t be here.”

Lewis gave a strained smile. “That’s what I told them. However, the firm is family owned and they have a strong policy of financial prudence.”

“Mr. Lewis, we can advise your owners how to invest surplus funds at minimal risk,” Frank told him, “but we can do much more for you that will increase your returns without damaging the firm’s financial discipline. Do the owners have a background in management accounting?”

“Small-time business experience only before they started manufacturing.”

“We can help them change their mindset,” Owen told him. “Running two plants requires a broader outlook and professional

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management if they want to be successful.”

“We’ll provide you a list of investment options, including cryptocurrency, and your owners can make an informed decision how to proceed,” Frank added quickly. “However, if you restructured your financial profile for the new plant, your owners will be in a greatly improved fiscal position. We’ll email you some material for your consideration. I suggest you bring in your principal owners and we’ll explain the reasoning behind our recommendations.” He stood and held out his hand. “It’s been a pleasure, Mr. Lewis. Don’t hesitate to call us if you need more information.”

He saw his guest to the elevator and returned to the meeting room. Owen refilled his mug and gave a wry smile.

“You hurried him on purpose without giving him time to consider what we said.”

Frank grinned. “Lewis knows I’m right. He only wanted my confirmation of his position. The owners are using a flawed, outdated operating model, and I wanted to reinforce that impression. Take my word for it. They’ll be here next week asking how to restructure the company.”

“With a slice of their earnings landing in our pocket.”

“Of course. We value add whenever we can.”

Owen shook his head and laughed. “You’re a thief, Frank.”

“That’s the business we’re in.”

His next two clients were simple status update sessions, a review of their portfolio holdings and possible changes in the mix within a growth marketplace. Both left happy, and Frank made himself ready to meet Gregory Forster.

The fifty-eight-year-old import/export entrepreneur had \$14 million in personal and company savings invested with Urbi. He was also a feeder. The Covenant network regularly channeled such clients to Urbi, Owen and Cathy thinking they were random referrals. Some of those clients suspected Frank to be a feeder himself, or even a Keeper, but he never allowed himself to admit

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anything. A client might be a friend today, but could turn into a bitterest enemy tomorrow. Exposure would be a personal disaster and ruin for Urbi. With the US-based Project Purple, cooperation from the Australian Federal Police Taskforce Crimson, Interpol, and most governments around the world hunting feeders and working to unmask the Covenant, he did whatever it took to protect his identity as a Keeper. Sometimes a damn hard thing to do when he needed to feed.

Promptly at three, Cathy introduced the short, overweight Forster. They shook hands warmly and Frank offered the man a tumbler of Willett Distillery bourbon. Forster took an appreciative sip and settled himself in the visitor chair.

“Still serving cheap booze, I see.”

“Can’t afford anything else, Greg. Business is tough these days.”

“You don’t know what tough is, you con artist.”

“With all your millions, I can see how you suffer.”

“Screw yourself.”

Frank smiled, not taking offense. They indulged in such banter all the time. “How’s Christy? The cruise to the Bahamas still on in January?”

Forster sagged and suddenly looked seventy. He took a long pull of whiskey and placed the tumbler on the desk with a loud click.

“She’s fine, but I may have to postpone the cruise.”

Immediately concerned, Frank leaned forward. “Something happened to the company?”

“I need you to liquidate five million and have the funds in my bank account by three PM tomorrow.”

“Christ! What’s going on?”

“Can you do it?”

“Not a problem, but—”

Forster raised his hand. “No questions, okay?”

“Listen, Greg. We’ve known each other for eight years now,

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and I consider you a friend. If you have troubles, perhaps I can help. Nobody asks for five mil on 24-hour notice. Talk.”

Forster gave him a hard look. “Under the rose? If this got out...”

Frank lifted his hand, palm out.

“It’s Melany. Always a little wild and prone to an occasional excess. With wealthy parents behind her, she overindulges sometimes. Two weeks ago, she met some smooth-talking sleazebag at a St. Kilda bar and allowed her sexual appetite to get the better of her. After three days, she dumped him. She tends to do that with men she meets. The thing is, this character suddenly developed aches and pains and became extremely lethargic for several days. You know how these things work. He recovered, but his family are now on my case and want retribution.”

Frank felt his mouth go dry. Greg’s daughter could be a possible feeder.

“Who are they?”

“The guy is a son of someone in the Pomperi Family clan.”

“Pomperi? You’re kidding.”

“That’s what he told her during one of their pillow talk sessions. Of all the jerks to get involved with, she picks a mobster! They practically own the Maritime Union.”

“I heard.”

“Nothing moves on our docks without them knowing about it. They’re major smugglers with links to local and overseas crime syndicates. The federal police regularly raid their offices and arrest the small fry, but they can’t make anything stick on the Pomperi. They’re always several layers behind the front men.”

“And they’re blackmailing you, threatening to expose your daughter as a feeder, right?”

“An energy vampire,” Forster growled. “Gods!”

Frank hated the term, coined by popular cultist literature, but they were not far off the mark. No one could explain, not even the Covenant, why some people needed to draw energy from a

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sexual partner or from a crowd to sustain themselves, but they do. Frank fed at least once every five weeks to maintain his vitality. If he abstained, the urge became relentless as he turned steadily weaker. The problem, and why the world hunted feeders, if one took too much, the partner could suddenly die of apparent old age as though life was sucked out of them. Which in a way, it had been. Greg's daughter apparently came perilously close to killing her lover, and one of the most powerful criminal families in Australia was now after her.

“Does Melany know she's a feeder?”

“She suspects, and I talked to her about it, but she doesn't want to know,” Forster replied miserably. “I think she secretly hates me for it. I'm so totally screwed.”

“About the Pomperi Family—”

“They want the five million by five PM tomorrow. Given the business they're in, I fear this will only be a down payment. They'll keep sucking until I have nothing left, then probably expose my daughter and kill her. Once this comes out, I'll be ruined, unless they kill me as well. Might be better that way.”

Frank took out a small pad and wrote quickly. “Here's a number for Ardor Helpline—”

Forster snorted. “I've seen their ads. Sounds like a pimp outfit.”

“It's not. Get Melany to call them. They'll help her. I mean it, Greg.”

A worldwide front set up by the Covenant, the Helpline steered youngsters and some not so young who exhibited unusual sexual urges to respectable psychology/psychiatry clinics. They confirmed if a person was an actual feeder and instructed them how to manage their condition without exposing themselves. If they were not, the clinics provided normal counseling. With taskforces everywhere hunting feeders, the Covenant could not say how long this program would last before exposure destroyed everything.

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Forster tilted his head. “How come you know about all this stuff, Frank? Are you a feeder? I always suspected you might be one.”

“I read up on it and I’m simply helping a friend. Don’t worry about the Pomperi. I’ll take care of your problem.”

“How will you take care of it? Do you realize the muscle they wield? Cross them and you’ll end up in a pine box.”

“I know people who know people who handle such things.” Frank stood and held out his hand. “Make sure Melany calls that number.”

Forster slowly rose. “If whatever you have in mind fails, she’s dead. I’d rather pay up than see something happen to her.”

“Trust me,” Frank told him with more confidence than he felt, and walked his friend out. Many things never turned out as planned. This one needed to work perfectly. “Give my regards to Christy.”

At his desk, he picked up the cellphone, set encryption mode, added a ten digit PIN, and tapped in a number ingrained into his brain. He had no idea how encryption worked, and didn’t care as long as it worked. When he became a Keeper, the taciturn man who gave him the phone said all calls Frank made in encryption mode were totally untraceable. He also told him not to use it for personal or professional calls.

“Manuel de la Kass,” an electronically altered voice answered after three rings. “Identify.”

“Frank Hram.”

After several seconds... “Okay, you’re you,” the Melbourne Master’s executive assistant declared amiably. “How’s the investment racket going?”

“We’re raking it in.”

Manuel gave a booming laugh. “I don’t doubt it. What can I do for you, amigo?” The third-generation Australian loved to flaunt his Spanish ancestry.

Frank summarized Forster’s problem without embellishment.

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“The Pomperi Family, eh? Your friend has a problem, all right, and Melany definitely sounds like a feeder. You gave him the Helpline number?”

“He has it.”

“Well, if the girl doesn’t call in the next few days, we’ll chase her down. We can’t let her run around loose. As for Forster, we’ll make a persuasive statement to the Pomperi to drop the blackmail or they’ll come in for some bad karma.”

“Thanks, Manuel. He’s really beating himself up over the whole thing.”

“No doubt. Leave it with me. By the way, when are you doing Lenny?”

“This weekend. Probably Saturday night.” He would still have most of the day for a trip into the countryside.

“Take care.”

“All the time.” Frank chuckled and hung up, relieved the Covenant would handle the Pomperi. He had no idea what Manuel had in mind, but he did not underestimate the Covenant’s resources or reach.

Lenny the Finger...He looked forward to offing the pimp and Taskforce Crimson informer. The little weasel only thought of himself and pointedly ignored the harm his carnal activities caused all feeders. The Covenant warned him to curb his excesses, and Lenny told them to shove it, certain the underworld mob behind him would keep him safe. He killed two women within six weeks, leaving them desiccated and old, and the Covenant decided he had to go. Frank drew the short straw with the other five Melbourne Keepers for the job.

Despite counseling, some feeders still turned rogue and killed. Some did it without ever becoming aware of the Covenant or understanding why intimacy suddenly made their partner die of old age. Others, men and women, took a life because they enjoyed inflicting ultimate pain and suffering. Rehabilitation helped many manage their excesses. Those who persisted were

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cut out like cancerous cells before the disease spread, and Keepers did the cutting. The Covenant could not really refer such cases to the police, although on occasions they did share information anonymously with local taskforces to take care of business.

Nine years ago when he trained to become a Keeper, he questioned the binary live/kill doctrine applied by the Covenant. In centuries past when death stood at every corner with no shortage of customers from numerous diseases and constant wars, a feeder could satisfy his or her need in utter secret. With Europe under the Inquisition's horrible excesses well into the 18th century where individuals were seized, tortured, and often burned at the stake on someone's mere say-so, feeders were rightly wary of exposure. To protect itself and normal feeders, the Covenant issued an unbending edict: a rogue must be eliminated without mercy, lest the whole society rose up in a program of even more extreme extermination.

It might already be too late for all of them. With rapidly advancing technology, it was only a matter of time before Project Purple researchers developed the capability to recognize feeders, which might set off a worldwide purge. If existence of feeders became public prematurely, there could be riots, vigilantes, protest marches, and political overreaction. Project Purple and the Covenant operated programs of population conditioning to the existence of feeders, but he feared premature disclosure.

What if everything did become public today? Across Australia, less than two people a week died of sudden old age. On average, twenty-five lost their lives in road accidents. Nobody marched in protest or rioted, desensitized to the carnage despite police warnings and graphic advertising. Why should people riot over old age deaths? Riots and protests did not happen spontaneously. It took planning, organization, and communication to create rampaging mobs. Incidences of sudden old age deaths had not reached the necessary flashpoint.

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The flashpoint might be reached if he added the word ‘vampires’ into the equation. Something dark lurked in man’s psyche that would awaken at the image of energy vampires walking the streets. Countless books and films had firmly embedded visions of blood-sucking evil things who damned every soul they touched. Although rampant fiction, many actually believed such creatures existed, fostered by religious dogma.

Authorities were pouring billions into research to ascertain the cause of sudden old age deaths without reference to feeders as the cause. From what he knew, special research centers and large pharmaceutical companies pursued two lines of inquiry: a virus vector and genetic variance. Most leaned toward the latter, as decades of study failed to find any virus. Understandably, people were getting impatient, as incidences of sudden old age deaths steadily increased. As the world’s population grew, so did the deaths in direct correlation, more noticeable in poorer countries with high birth rates. As usual, irresponsible media sensationalized the situation with wild innuendo that fueled public unease and unrest.

\* \* \*

Frank liked Fridays. Mornings attracted mostly corporate clients. Mom-and-pop and small corner store investors usually came early in the week. A pattern beyond unravelling, ripe for some sociology student’s paper. Afternoons tended to be easy as people decided to leave the city early and avoid the exodus crush, which, of course, created the crush as everybody else came up with the same bright idea. From the 14th floor, his senses were spared the sight of jammed cars and horn blasts from frustrated drivers wondering if they would ever get out of the mad city.

What made this morning special and added a spring to his step were news clips on all channels as he prepared breakfast. Reporters talked learnedly about organized crime as they stood

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in front of the luxurious Pomperi Family's suburban Toorak mansion, with police in the background keeping back the overly curious. Panning cameras showed the entire front brick fence wall painted with blood, according to the forensics people still taking samples.

Greg Forster called him yesterday afternoon, very nervous at what might happen to his daughter if he did not pay up. Frank told him to take a drink and sit tight. About to close for the day, he received an encrypted text saying his friend no longer had a problem. A text to the Pomperi, according to Manuel, far less pleasant. The Italian crime syndicate understood symbolism and what a blood wall feud represented.

This morning, Greg rang, gushing his profuse thanks and relief. An anonymous text he got basically said he could forget the five mil payment, and his daughter would not be touched. He showed his gratitude in a substantive way by depositing \$50,000 into the Urbi account. Frank knew better than to knock it back. It would only insult his friend if he tried. He accepted, glad to see the matter settled satisfactorily.

The rest of his day progressed less dramatically.

By four o'clock, he finished updating his billable hours and expenses sheet, and allowed the computer to crunch the numbers. When they started the practice, Owen insisted that every hour and spent dollar must be accounted for. Not only to provide a legal basis for client billing and tax deductions, but time records generated valuable engagement profiles of busy and slack weekly, monthly, and seasonal patterns where promotional advertising could be employed to attract more clients. This required getting an accounting package able to do all those things in addition to churning out normal general ledger reports, profit and loss statements, balance sheets, and other paperwork necessary to run the company. Frank did not argue the need for such a system, although the drudgery to keep it fed with data sometimes became an irritant.

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Tonight, a reservation at Rialto's Vue de Monde, nothing would keep him from that gastronomic rendezvous, not even administrative chores. He made the reservation some six weeks ago—not a place where someone could simply ring for a table. He pictured himself in the quiet atmosphere, all the décor done in black, tall windows gave a stunning view of Melbourne under lights. But first, he'd have a quick one at Blink's.

Around five, he powered down the computer, slipped on his jacket, and walked to Owen's office. He knocked and opened the door. His friend looked up and nodded, busy straightening a pile of papers.

"If it's a client, I'm not here."

His partner lived in a fancy three-bedroom apartment in a St. Kilda Road condominium not far from the formidable Shrine of Remembrance memorial. Frank urged him to buy a pad in the Collins Street Tower, but Owen liked open spaces and parkland that ran from the Yarra River to the Shrine where he could take a peaceful jog. Exercising in a gym simply wasn't the same thing, he declared flatly more than once. No argument from Frank there. The condo an easy tram ride to Collins Street, Owen did not get stressed out having to commute into the city. Having money came in handy sometimes. Karen and his teenager Merva also liked some open space. Owen could argue with anyone about many things, but not with Karen when his wife set her mind about something, and the Emersons never moved into the CBD.

"I wanted to tell you I'm off," Frank said. "Give my regards to Karen."

"I'll do that." Owen peered at him. "Why don't you come over on Sunday for lunch? You haven't visited in a while. We'll have a few drinks and talk crap. Merva is having a sleepover at a friend's place and we'll have the apartment to ourselves."

"Sounds good." Frank genuinely appreciated the invitation. Karen would try to get him married to one of her friends, but he did not mind the matchmaking routine.

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“Great! I know a nice woman who’d love to see you.”

“Not you too!” Frank moaned, and Owen laughed.

“Time to plow a new field, my boy. See you around eleven? We’ll sit on the balcony, puff on a cigar, and drink fine wine.”

“You talked me into it.” Frank waved a hand at him and walked out.

In his apartment, he took a quick shower and dressed casually in dark blue jeans, gray runners, and a black microfiber T-shirt with collar. He would put on something more formal for his dinner. One last thing to do...

He picked up the multi-purpose remote that controlled the TV and surround sound system. A double click on the blue Pip Input key, the small LCD screen lit up as the nonlinear junction detector activated. It took him almost three minutes to check every room for planted eavesdropping devices and cameras. Satisfied, he nodded and headed for the door.

Almost six, he pushed through the flowing pedestrian mob and strode into the Emporium. He never took a table, preferring a bar stool where he could observe fellow connoisseurs. That way, he could also chat with Walt or one of the other bartenders.

He paused at the entrance and winced. A weaving ocean of heads and bodies filled Blink’s. He stood a better chance winning a lottery than finding an empty stool. No chatting today. Determined to have his bourbon mix in company, reluctant to try another bar probably equally crowded, he moved in. He found an empty standing spot at the end of the bar and tried to catch a bartender’s eye.

An older man, fading hair streaked white, a blue shirt and black pants propped up what still looked like a powerful body. A bartender walked over and Frank ordered his drink. Not an extrovert, he often wondered why he frequented Blink’s and other bars, putting aside earlier philosophical ponderings. An unconscious study of human group behavior, or silently laughing at man’s antics? Perhaps a session with a mind twister would give

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him an answer. It might also tell him something about himself he did not want to know. What if it stopped him visiting his watering holes? He never saw a shrink and never got that answer. Anyway, the bars he frequented also provided him with ready females he could feed on.

He leaned against the bar for emotional support and plucked a handful of nuts from a handy bowl, filtering out animated background chatter and music. The old geezer beside him nodded and grinned.

“Pops,” Frank said pleasantly, hoping the guy wasn’t after a free drink. The man did not look like a bum, but he hated hangers-on.

“How you doing, my boy?” the geezer growled, an amused smile tugging his mouth.

Frank stared hard at the blue eyes and did a double take as the face resolved into startled recognition.

“Dan? What the hell happened to you? You look...” He trailed off. He knew what happened to his acquaintance and the realization made him furious.

“I know. I look like shit and I feel like I’m pushing eighty. I had to see you one last time, and Walt said you’re here on most Fridays.”

Frank’s drink arrived and he emptied half of it in two gulps.

“I’m dying,” Dan added wearily.

“Dying? From what?” Frank did not have to ask. He already knew, but could not very well say so.

“Would you believe love?”

“Come on. I’m serious.”

“So am I.” Dan’s eyes sparkled with some of his old inner vitality. “It was her.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You must have caught something,” Frank retorted to maintain the charade.

“I did, and it’s killing me.”

“How can you die from making love?”

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“Beats me.”

Frank stared at him. “Did you see a doctor?”

“Yesterday, my GP took one look at me and wanted to rush me to a hospital. I walked out on him. He knew something, but wouldn’t tell me. Bastard. I’m simply another case of someone suddenly dying of old age you read in the papers or see on evening news. She did it to me, I tell you.

“Remember Tuesday and how we met? Something about her made her different from any other woman I ever knew. She made herself that way for me. For every man in the bar. I could tell. Never mind I was cheating on my wife, I wanted her. She took me to a room at the Grand Hyatt, of all places, and we spent the whole night making delirious love. When I got tired, night service brought us snacks.”

A wishful smile lit his face and some of the years fell away, and Frank saw the man he first met. The moment passed and Dan turned into someone simply old and weary, lost in yesterdays and what might have been.

“When I picked her up, or maybe she did the picking. It doesn’t matter. We both knew where it would lead. She captivated or bewitched me. I don’t know. Her magnetism drew me to her and I couldn’t pull away. Not that I wanted to,” Dan added with a wan smile and took a quick sip of wine.

“You were right. She wasn’t beautiful in the classic sense, but when she looked at me with those large, dark eyes, I knew I was the only man in the world for her. That’s a powerful aphrodisiac, my boy. Something in the back of my mind told me to run, but I couldn’t. My hormones were doing my thinking for me.”

*Helped by the woman’s bioelectromagnetic link*, Frank thought.

“Our fling only lasted a night, but in that night, I lived a lifetime. When I woke the next day, I felt fine, and she had already left. Yesterday, I walked around as though somebody had beaten me up. I looked in the mirror, saw a stranger, and I knew. She took it all. And you know something, Frank? I didn’t care. I

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really didn't. Who knows? Perhaps she left that for me as some kind of compensation. My wife came into the bathroom, went hysterical, and immediately drove me to our GP. Poetic justice for cheating on her, eh?"

"How do you know it was the woman?" Frank demanded.

"You know she did it. I can see it in your eyes, so don't bullshit me. All women take something from a man when you love. Ask my wife. The life-sucking nag drained me for years. Despite everything, I still love her. Isn't that a crock? This one just took a bit more than most. All I know, as we made love, she grew stronger, more radiant, more compelling, and I felt weaker. The thing is, I couldn't stop myself. All that corny guff about feeders and energy vampires? I believe it all."

Frank nodded, knowing what Dan meant. Every copulation entailed an exchange of energy between partners that can lead to deep bonding, understanding, and wellbeing. Most people are not aware of the phenomena, accepting it as something one feels when in love. When one-sided, the affected partner can over time become physically and emotionally weak, age prematurely and, carried to the extreme, die. That's what happened to Dan.

Now, he would have to hunt her down.

Never close to a rogue feeder victim before, seeing his degenerating friend made what he did as a Keeper far more personal. It also gave him an intimate insight into the quality of suffering the victims and those around them endured.

Dan grabbed his arm with surprising strength. "If you see her, don't wait. Run like hell. I'd hate for you to end up like me." He tossed back the last of the wine. "I'm glad I had a chance to see you, Frank. I have a feeling it's for keeps."

"What are you going to do?"

Dan shrugged. "My GP wants to send me to the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine at Southbank for some tests. It won't do anything to cure me. From what they say on TV, once you get this thing, it's terminal, but what the hell. They can carve

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up my body if they want. Perhaps they'll find something to help some other poor bastard."

"Are you going to tell them about your date?"

"You crazy? They'll think I'm a dingbat. I'll just tell them we had a good time. Let them figure it out for themselves, if they don't already know. There might be something to this being a government conspiracy."

According to the Covenant, governments everywhere already knew.

Established in 1947 by President Truman, Project Purple had now run for seventy-six years. During that time, authorities learned a lot about feeders, Keepers, and the Covenant from apprehended subjects without penetrating the organization itself...yet. The Project operated a worldwide deception campaign to explain incidents of sudden old age deaths as a virus or genetic mutation, with hints that feeders were responsible. A deception now wearing very thin among the general public. The authorities dared not reveal the truth that among them lived feeders. Should the truth become known, and many Western countries feared that Russia and China might leak it in order to sow discord among their enemies, governments would be overthrown as the populace rose up to exterminate the vampires among them.

*What a tangled web we weave...*

Dan grunted and pried himself off the stool. "I guess I'm through talking. I should go home, pack a bag, and get my wife to take me to Southbank." His mouth twitched as he stuck out a hand. "Look after yourself, buddy. If things had turned out differently, I have a feeling we could have been pals."

Frank grasped the hand and grinned when Dan tried for the knuckle crusher. His friend suddenly let go, turned, and hurried out. Frank stared a long time at a knot of bodies where Dan disappeared.

Walt ambled over. "Who was the old pop? He asked about

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you last night, but didn't seem that old then."

"Just a nice guy I chatted with once," Frank told him softly. "Tell me something. Do you remember the woman who came on Tuesday? She wore a white blouse and a brown knee-length skirt."

"The one with long black hair?"

"That's her."

Walt bit his lip. "Lots of women come here to cruise, and I remember you picked up one or two. Mmm, I think I know which one you're talking about. She's a regular. Usually comes in on a Tuesday or Saturday, but not all the time. Why? You want to pick her up? Take it from me, my boy, she's bad news. Has that look."

"What look?"

"The hooks. She'll drive them into you and you're gone." Walt glanced at Frank's tumbler. "Want a refill?"

"No thanks. I have a dinner appointment. I appreciate the info about the woman."

"Any time. See 'ya around."

Frank nodded, wondering why he never saw the woman before if she came here often.

Outside, a cool breeze picked up, too uncomfortable for only a T-shirt. Surrounded by hurrying, indifferent pedestrians, traffic, and assorted city noises, his thoughts raced, thinking how to take care of another rogue feeder. As per standard SOP when a rogue demanded termination, he'd call Manuel and see if the Covenant had something on her. Without a photo, he could only give his contact a description, which might not be sufficient to identify her. Dan wasn't anything to him, but he could not allow the woman to hunt indiscriminately. He would pop in next Tuesday and see if his target showed up.

He turned right and stopped at the Bourke Street intersection to cross. Time he did himself up, hoping what happened to Dan would not spoil his dinner.

## NIGHT SIRENS

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The antique tram clattered to a stop opposite the St. Kilda railway station and the door panel snapped open. Frank got up off the hard plastic seat and followed others out without using his Myki card to check off, not wanting an electronic record he'd been on the tram. Several passengers sprinted across the road toward the adjoining Woolworths supermarket to the blare of horns and screeching tires. A few seconds later, the walk sign turned green and he crossed to the other side of the brightly lit Fitzroy Street. The idiots running to Woolies saved themselves a few seconds, but they could have been injured or worse. However, those few seconds appeared to represent a moral victory against the system, and Frank hoped they enjoyed them.

The old refurbished tram clanked its bell and he watched thirty tons of sudden green death, as Melbournians affectionately called the old clunkers, clatter toward the beachfront. The City Council kept a number of them in operation as tourist attractions, together with WW II wooden City Circle relics on which passengers could ride free to tour downtown attractions on a hop-on hop-off deal.

Misty drizzle fell from a dark sky and blurred outlines where it touched. In the west across the Bay, thick cloud cover gave way to a faint orange sheen that colored the water with copper. It faded even as he watched and night claimed its domain. A large cargo ship, its superstructure a blaze of lights, crawled toward the Heads and the open Bass Strait deeps on the other side.

The gloomy evening somewhat different from the bright, sunny morning. Chores taken care of, he took his Subaru Impreza to the leafy, quiet, Bacchus Marsh nestled in the rich agricultural Parwan Valley west of Melbourne. Instead of taking the direct Western Freeway, he went along Calder Freeway and took a back road from Gisborne. He had not visited Bacchus

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Marsh in a while, and intended to pick up a supply of fresh fruit and vegetables. Along the way, he stopped when the valley fell away before him to admire the view and took some snapshots with his phone camera.

Morning should have made him keen to hit the road and leave the city with its problems behind. Instead, the breakfast news curdled his coffee somewhat. More sudden old age deaths across Europe and the United States cast a shadow on his tomorrows. The National Rally Party, a single issue far-right anti-energy vampire quasi-vigilante group, planned to hold protest marches in Melbourne and Sydney next Saturday, the presenter said, demanding that Prime Minister Griffin take steps to eradicate what they saw as a growing menace threatening to destroy the country.

Beijing saber rattled with renewed threats to reclaim Taiwan by force as legitimate Chinese territory. During the week, J-15 and J-20 fighter aircraft made several incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone, and were intercepted by Taiwanese F-35s. Both sides snarled at each other and peace returned. China's Belt and Road Initiative stalled as several African and Pacific nations canceled existing projects or rejected new proposals, prompted by economic and defense measures from Australia and the United States, wary of Beijing's encroachment into the Pacific, which they considered theirs. Elements of the US Coast Guard, supported by warships from the 7th Fleet, clashed with several Chinese Armed Maritime Militia fishing trawlers violating Pacific Islands Exclusive Economic Zones, the small nations lacking capability to drive off the trawlers pillaging their fishing grounds. Nothing new, Frank mused.

All the gloomy news made him depressed and he switched off. He finished breakfast, wondering why the world had to be so screwed up. Once he hit Calder Freeway, his outlook on life improved and he began to enjoy the warm sunshine coming from

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a deep blue sky.

There is a thing in the world he called the Self, comprised of every living thing. Not a God or some supreme creator—he did not believe in such stuff—but nonetheless something that watched over everything. When they philosophized, Owen often kidded him about this apparent contradiction.

When he meditated, Frank sometimes felt a connection and became one with the thing, aware of everything and nothing. The Self existed and continued even when things inside it died, knowing new life would replenish it. Connected, he thought he understood the purpose of it all and his place in the encompassing vastness. When he opened his eyes, reality would rudely crash into his senses and the feeling of oneness faded, leaving him just another insignificant mote to the indifferent Self. Did it mean anything? Frank did not know. What he did know, it helped him cope.

Bacchus Marsh itself remained unchanged, maintaining its rustic, country feel that welcomed visitors. Away from the town center, residential lots spread up the surrounding low hills like a growing infestation. After a simple, tasty pub lunch, accompanied by a tall glass of cold beer, he drove down the Avenue of Honor—towering memorial trees on either side of the road representing fallen war heroes—and made three stops at local farms to stock up. Satisfied that life still had some compensations, he hit the Western Freeway to take him into the city.

The relaxing, diverting drive prepared him mentally for what he must do later.

Back in the real world, he surveyed the brightly lit Fitzroy Street decorated down its entire length with tinsel and glowing balls hanging from overhead wires. Every establishment festooned with some decorations behind a plate glass window to celebrate the coming of Christmas.

Boutiques, restaurants, ice cream parlors, and souvenir shops

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lined the entire side of the street all the way to the beach. Although warm, around 24C, the drizzle and cool air coming off the Bay made walking in casual summer gear somewhat uncomfortable for the streams of pedestrians ambling in both directions wearing all kinds of attire. Mostly young couples and singles looking for action at one of the numerous bars, restaurants, and discos.

The tourists were easy to spot. Many held smartphones or tablets taking snapshots or movie clips. The smooth sandy beach at the upper end of the street always a popular destination for a leisurely dip. A discerning stroller could find almost anything here, from sea shells and strip joints to establishments of more earthy pleasure. St. Kilda held a deserved reputation as the city's premier red light district. The downtown Arts Center complex provided attractions for those with more refined tastes. Frank visited both.

Almost nine o'clock, he inhaled a mixture of pleasant smells coming from various eateries. He walked casually past a couple gawking at trinkets in a jewelry store, stopped briefly to study a menu stuck to the front glass panel of Peppé's Italiana, then paused outside the Kitten Club.

Wearing a yellow cardigan, black pants, gaudy alligator shoes, Lenny the Finger strode up and down the front of his joint urging passersby to come in and enjoy the delights waiting inside. Evenings along the street were busy year round, especially during the summer months, but Fridays and weekends drew the big crowds. That's what Frank relied on. Another unremarkable face in a sea of anonymous faces.

Last weekend, sporting a limp, thin mustache, ragged jacket and pants—several people even offered him coins—he walked around the railways station, the Woolies store, and the street, checking for surveillance cameras. Some of the stores probably had them, but he could not see any mounted facing the street. Satisfied his presence would not be recorded, he considered a

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number of alternatives how to off Lenny. In the end, he decided to keep it simple. Keeping things simple meant fewer things that could go wrong, and Murphy never slept. The beauty of his plan, it allowed him the luxury of waiting for the optimal opportunity to strike.

A group of five laughing youngsters jostled each other as they approached the Kitten Club, making a nuisance of themselves for other pedestrians trying to walk past them. Frank reached into his lightweight gray windcheater, grasped the Ruger .22 automatic with a fitted suppressor, and pushed through the group.

Lenny beamed a huge smile and tugged one of the boys toward the club's entrance. The others talked it over, snickered, and began to shove each other inside. Frank stopped behind Lenny, smelled cheap aftershave, lifted the automatic, and fired two rounds through the windcheater into his upper body level with the heart. The rogue pimp pitched forward, almost dragging down two boys. Frank slid the automatic into the inside pocket and kept walking, not concerned about the small hole the bullets made in the fabric. It took almost two seconds before a shrill female voice screamed. Making like any curious pedestrian, he stopped and turned to check out the commotion. A small group gathered before the club to stare at Lenny's body sprawled on the sidewalk, laughter gone from the five boys. Frank kept walking up Fitzroy Street toward a lit intersection and tram stop for those wanting a return trip to the city, happy with his work.

The cops would figure Lenny to be another victim of underworld crime, write a report, file it, and close the case. Given the pimp's checkered past and several short-term prison tours, nobody would look too closely at circumstances surrounding his death. Tomorrow, the Deputy Police Commissioner for Public Safety and Security would stand before TV cameras, solemnly report another gangland killing, and promise that those responsible would be apprehended. The police will not tolerate violence in any form, he would declare ponderously. Anybody

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with dashcam footage, please hand it in to help with the investigation. Stirring stuff. Fitzroy Street would get free publicity and draw more visitors.

Frank nodded as he waited at the tram stop. Light rain continued to fall. He had heard it all before.

He could not say positively the shots killed Lenny, but his training and practice at a deserted patch of forest near Woodend—he could hardly practice at a shooting club—a little satellite town west of Melbourne, made him fairly confident. A .22 round might be small, but its unusually high velocity made it lethal at close range. It would rip through any tissue in its path, and the heart represented very soft tissue. Lenny probably hit the sidewalk dead before realizing what happened.

Frank rode the tram all the way down St. Kilda Road, up the CBD's Swanston Street, and got off at the RMIT University. Not many attractions this far uptown, the street had only an occasional lone pedestrian. Thankfully, the drizzle had stopped, but a fresh breeze made walking unpleasant.

He walked toward Victoria Market and dumped the Ruger and his windcheater into a drop box. Somebody from the Covenant would pick up the items, dispose of the jacket and clean the Ruger, ready to be used by some other Keeper or disposed. He now needed to thoroughly wash his clothing and scrub himself to remove any gunpowder residue that might have stuck to him. Always take care of the small things, his trainer drummed into him, and he would live to enjoy a long life. The chances that cops would come after him for Lenny's murder were vanishingly small, but he could not afford to be complacent, mindful of that long life.

He hurried down Queen Street, his black cashmere cardigan barely keeping him warm. He smiled as he walked past Blink's Bar, the inside packed with reveling customers. Tempted to go inside, Frank kept walking. He would have his drink after taking care of the chores.

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At Oaks, he pulled out a clean tissue and used it to press the elevator pad. When the door opened, he did the same thing to touch the button for the sixth floor. He pressed the keycard against the door sensor to his apartment and it gave a solid click. A new tissue wrapped around the handle made sure he did not contaminate it. He would wipe the card later. Inside, he deactivated the alarm system, walked quickly into the bathroom, and thoroughly cleaned his hands. He stripped down and threw all his clothing into the washer, then wiped down the floor tiles. His precautions extravagant and probably unnecessary, he believed being thorough at what he did.

A long, hot shower perked him up and he hurriedly pulled on jeans and a warm shirt. In the lounge, a tumbler of bourbon in hand, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* filling the room, he allowed himself to relax. As termination jobs go, this one went smoothly. How many over the last nine years? He stopped counting after eleven.

The rogue woman feeder, on the other hand, required some thinking as he gnawed on the feedback from Manuel. Likely name: Kaneel Mercer, and she killed four times as far as they knew. The Covenant warned her twice to curb her indulgences, clearly without effect. If Frank wanted to eliminate her, Manuel would provide whatever equipment he needed.

Frank could put a bullet into her and end it. Neat and simple, but he wanted to make her suffer for what she did to Dan and other victims. Training told him not to get personally involved with his work, but he felt this woman deserved it. He decided to repay her in her own coin.

"Poetic justice, Dan," he murmured and lifted the tumbler in a silent salute.

Tomorrow, lunch with the Emersons to scrub Lenny's memory.

Frank placed both feet on the glass-topped coffee table, leaned back against the soft recliner, closed his eyes, and allowed the music to create random images in his mind.

## About the Author

Stefan Vučak has written twenty novels, which include eight SF books in the Shadow Gods Saga. His *Cry of Eagles* won the coveted Readers' Favorite silver medal award, and his *All the Evils* was the prestigious Eric Hoffer contest finalist and Readers' Favorite silver medal winner. *Strike for Honor* won the gold medal.

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

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## **Shadow Gods books by Stefan Vučak**

### **In the Shadow of Death**

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

### **Against the Gods of Shadow**

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

### **A Whisper from Shadow**

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

### **Shadow Masters**

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

### **Immortal in Shadow**

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

### **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 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 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.

### **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.

### **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.

## **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.

## **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.

## **Autumn Leaves**

Dural had it all: a loving wife, adorable daughter, and a successful practice as a psychologist – until fates conspired to take his daughter and wife from him. A near miss lightning strike left him changed in several profound ways. This helped him handle his patients, but did not fill a gaping hole left in his heart.

## **All My Sunsets**

Andrew Payne had a great career as a virtual reality games designer, a woman he loved, and a promising future – until he developed a particularly nasty type of melanoma. His doctor told him he had five years to live, then twelve months, then four weeks. His only hope was an experimental drug, and Andrew took a chance. He had nothing to lose.

## **F/X-26**

A radical new sixth generation air superiority fighter...Betrayal and murder...A fight for survival. The future of air combat lies in unmanned remotely controlled vehicles. All Ogdan Kostan had to do is prove it. He demonstrates the fighter to the Air Force, a first vital step to have it accepted by the Pentagon in its budget submission to Congress.

## **28th Amendment**

A clash between US and Chinese destroyers near the Spratly Islands prompts President Samuel Walters to launch an attack against one Chinese military base. To curb influence of Super PACs in the national political process, the President urges the Supreme Court to reverse its 2010 decision on the ‘Citizens United v FEC’ case. He then introduces the 28th Constitutional Amendment to set Congressional term limits.