

PRAISE FOR ENTROMANCY: BOOK ONE OF THE NIGHTPATH TRILOGY

"Entromancy is that rare gem you find among the all-too-common dross of self-published novels. Author M. S. Farzan takes a premise that is truly unique and imaginative . . . throws in a diverse cast of characters, all to deliver an urban fantasy thrill ride."

--San Francisco Book Review

"In this rousing...science fiction novel, it's a futuristic San Francisco and the element [c]eridium has emerged as a renewed source of mythical power and otherworldly strength. Ceridium's side-effects, however, unlock mutative genes in the population resulting in a secondary race called [a]urics who become threatening to the human population. Thankfully, vigilant cops like Eskander Aradowsi are defending the races and reinforcing the safety of each. The narrative is fast-paced...this is a promising...launching point for the planned series."

--The BookLife Prize in Fiction

"Entromancy has been an amazing journey...which I think I would like to take again in the next book of the Nightpath Trilogy. The world building is out of this world no pun intended. If you like a lot of action, fighting and guns a blazing then you are going to fall in love with this series."

--The Avid Reader

"ENTROMANCY has one of the coolest speculative fiction worlds I've encountered in a while. The mix of magic and technology is an amazing blend that results in all kind of badassery from the characters. Backdropped against a sort of dystopian/Philip Marlowian cityscape, it felt like an epic D&D slipstream universe...I recommend this book for anyone who wants to get lost in an awesome world and/or anyone who grew up on table-top role-playing games."

--Kit 'N Kabookle

"I love all the characters in the book...I love the little hint of romance that floats in the plot while everyone get shot at. I really couldn't put this book down once it got started."

--Emily Carrington

"This book was a fun to read story that centered on several important issues concerning diversity, differences, and deeply-held fears. I read mostly to be entertained, but I couldn't help but think about some of problems in terms of today's political climate. An attention-grabbing tale of conspiracy, hatred, and misconceptions that was easy to read, fresh, and frightening, my reading time was well-spent with this book."

--Laurie's Paranormal Thoughts and Reviews

"I am in love with the worldbuilding on this one. Seriously, it's amazing. It's hard to write science fiction with fantasy races and have it make sense, but by jove, I have now seen it done...I'd recommend picking this up if you like a good mix of science fiction and fantasy."

--Where Landsquid Fear to Tread

"I enjoyed the story a great deal...The plot was tense and also topical, which was a great boon to the book. I liked the way that current events were used to see a new race and a new world order."

--Judge, 25th Annual Writer's Digest Self-Published Book Awards

"Very vivid...Very compelling...Very fresh and punchy"

--Judge, 5th Annual Writer's Digest Self-Published eBook Awards

PRAISE FOR ENTROMANCY: A CYBERPUNK FANTASY RPG

"An agile little assassin...Entromancy is a gem waiting to be found."

--Geek Native

"I am seriously impressed with this book. My favorite part is the near-total absence of scaling, and the menu-option approach to gaining new features from your class and destiny. It works well here for the same reason it works well in Powered by the Apocalypse playbooks and 13th Age."

--Tribality

"Nightpath [Publishing] has established a setting with teeth that can grab the imagination of player and game master."

--EN World

"A...cyberpunk/fantasy take on the 5E rules that might be one of the fastest pick-up-and-play games out there."

--Drop Lowest

BOOKS BY M. S. FARZAN

Entromancy: Book One of the Nightpath Trilogy
Technomancy: Book Two of the Nightpath Trilogy
Shadowmancy: Book Three of the Nightpath Trilogy
Jinnspeak

GAMES BY M. S. FARZAN

Entromancy: A Cyberpunk Fantasy RPG
Entromancy: Hacker Battles
Not-So-Super Villains

ENTROMANCY

BOOK ONE OF THE NIGHTPATH TRILOGY

M. S. Farzan

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For Mom, Dad, and Annie
My world, which inspires me to write about others

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The act of writing may by nature be a solitary endeavor, but it is rarely done in a vacuum. I am deeply indebted to my parents, to Andrea, and to Brian, for their infinite patience in editing, critiquing, suggesting, supporting, listening, reviewing, and unfailingly, reading. I am also appreciative of Meredith's incredible eye for design and generosity with innumerable proofs, and thankful for the work of Elena, Kat, and Owen in creating the art for new covers. Additionally, I am grateful for my monthly gaming group and best friends besides, who provide for some of the most ridiculous scenarios, which in turn spur the imagination to consider the most epic of stories.

In addition to the above dedication, this book is for anyone who has ever felt marginalized, isolated, or alienated for being different.

PROLOGUE

Tribe hummed to himself cheerily as he worked the clothes hanger through the tiny crack. Slender olive fingers probed expertly at the window base, dexterously seeking the catch that would spring the sedan's passenger door.

"Any day now," he complained, feeling the metal slip along the inside of the door. Slowly, he slid the hanger from one side of the window to the other, nudging the antiquated locking mechanism within.

After what seemed like an eternity, the hanger caught on a thick piece of metal, and Tribe shifted his grip, carefully pulling on the catch without unraveling the hanger's hook.

"Easy," he cautioned himself.

Confident with the hanger's position, the auric gave it a quick tug. The catch sprung abruptly, giving way under the sudden pressure, and unlocked the door with a faint click.

"Ace," he breathed triumphantly, withdrawing the hanger silently and stowing it within a ratty knapsack. Taking a cursory look around him, he opened the car door and slid inside, shifting uncomfortably over the ancient gearshift and into the driver's seat. As he suspected, the prehistoric machine had the most rudimentary of controls, without boosters or touch recognition. Apart from what appeared to be a more modern stereo system, the car's interior looked like something found in a VR museum tour, although it was in much worse shape. The antique still ran on electricity.

Tribe pulled a digitab from his jacket and held it up to the ignition button, syncing the device with the car's primitive computer. He tapped a few buttons and the sedan purred to life, humming softly as its console lit up with LEDs. Swiping through a few screens, he found the machine's stereo system, and synced it with the device's prized music supply. A turn-of-the-century hip hop track buzzed through the antiquated speakers, gently vibrating the car frame.

"Not bad," the thief nodded to himself. Checking his side mirror, he put the sedan in gear while waiting for an opening in the nighttime traffic. Neon lights assailed his sensitive eyes as cars zipped past and above him, and he had to squint just to see the street behind him. After a brief wait, there was a short lull in the lower traffic, and he pulled the small vehicle into the roadway, immediately slamming his foot down on the acceleration pedal to blend into the flow of cars.

Speeding as quickly as the old sedan would let him, he made his way through SOMA and into downtown, ignoring the periodic flicker of blue lights overhead as the boosted vehicles passed above him. He slowed as he reached a traffic light, drawing an Oxidium packet from a pocket and slipping one of the small pellets into his mouth. The drug immediately took effect, clearing his vision and seeming to slow down everything around him. He tapped impatiently on the steering wheel in time with the music as the light ahead took agonizingly slow to turn.

As if in slow motion, the red light turned green, but Tribe's heightened senses led him to notice a bit of motion out of the corner of his eye. Four NIGHT cruisers sped through the intersection's bottom and upper levels, siren lights flashing silently and blue light spilling from their ceridium engine vents. Cars around and above him pulled up nervously to avoid hitting them and each other.

"Someone's in a hurry," Tribe said to no one in particular as he watched the agents speed away.

Karthax stood on the balcony, holding the digitab out in front of him. A sandy beach stretched out below, the Atlantic a sparkling blanket of jewels beyond. A balmy breeze caressed his dry skin, lightly ruffling his military fatigues.

"The wheels are set," he spoke into the device. "Expect my call within the week."

The figure on the digitab display grunted in agreement. "And if it fails?"

"That will not happen," Karthax reassured him. The Inquisitor General paced along the balcony rail, the sun casting his craggy face in radiance.

"I require more than your personal guarantees," the figure replied.

Expecting the skepticism, Karthax had his answer prepared. "The Destroyer will work for us on this."

"The Betrayer does not work for anyone but himself," the figure corrected him.

The Inquisitor General swatted at a fly buzzing near his face. "Nonetheless, he has agreed to perform any necessary cleanup."

The figure considered Karthax's words for a moment, long enough to make the human wonder if his display had frozen. Then it grunted again in agreement.

"I will await your call."

The digitab clicked, and the display went black. Karthax pocketed the device, putting his burly forearms on the balcony railing and gazing out at the horizon. Below, the ocean lapped lazily at the quiet beach, tracing sparkling foam patterns in the sand.

Thog'run II handed the digitab to an advisor, settling back into his throne. The king put his hand on the large battleaxe resting against his leg, rocking it absently against the stone floor.

"Sire, if I may," the advisor said politely, "it feels as though we have made a deal with the devil."

Thog'run stared ahead, his calculating eyes piercing the dim light of the underground audience chamber. A guard shifted nervously nearby, uncomfortable with being privy to the conversation.

"It does feel that way, doesn't it," the auric king said.

ONE

The NIGHTs are excellent strategists, combatants, and mancens, but they have a singular vision of the world and its inhabitants. Would that they would see less black and white and more grey.

-The Sigil of Sparks

“How many out there?” a voice buzzed through my earpiece.

I watched the city below carefully, standing stock still as the evening breeze whipped my coat behind me. The bright neon lights formed an iridescent halo through the layer of fog that had begun to coalesce, but I could still pinpoint a handful of signal markers within the haze. The ancient radio tower loomed behind me forlornly like a ruddy tuning fork sticking out of a concrete mound.

I tapped a button on my digitab, magnifying a selected portion of the cityscape through my lenses. “Three,” I replied. “Two on Columbus-Farrow and one downtown.”

“Pissing underrats.”

I grimaced at the racism, but said nothing. Marking the three waypoints on my digitab’s city map, I hurried back to the cruiser bike.

“HQ wants you to prioritize the downtown storefront,” the voice continued. “Intel says that it’s set to go nova first, and there’s no telling what these gutter trash will do when we expose them.”

I nodded to myself as I mounted the cruiser, passing a gloved hand over the vehicle’s blinking security console. Its engine instantly came to life, cold blue light spilling out of the bike’s casing.

“Oh and, Nightpath,” my earpiece buzzed. “Bring me a couple of knife-ears as souvenirs, will you?”

I tensed on the bike, disgusted by the snickering I could hear in the background.

“That’s enough, Striker,” I said curtly.

The laughter stopped abruptly. “Just get it done,” the voice said, and the earpiece clicked.

“Jackass,” I spat, irritably flicking a dial on the bike’s handlebar. The cruiser jolted forward under my touch like an angry dog against a leash, the ceridium engine growling mutedly beneath me. I spun the bike in a quick u-turn and began making my way down the barren hill back to Old Market and the downtown signal marker.

The city was unseasonably warm, a sinking, dry heat that was only just being chased away by the fog. It had been a hot week, the one handful of days out of the year that the temperature came anywhere close to triple digits. I was sweating under my standard issue uniform and long coat, my hands damp against the cruiser’s metal grips. The neighborhood around me, no more than abandoned houses and empty lots this far up Twin Peaks, smelled of dirt and old pavement.

I checked the time in the corner of my lens display, which read 20:31:59. I had

over an hour to get to the downtown location, more than enough time to neutralize the situation and make my way to North Beach. The storefronts, which represented over two months of undercover stakeouts, bribes, and interrogation by questionable means - what the NIGHT leadership liked to call "careful research" - represented the tip of an iceberg. A couple of tiny first-floor shops rigged to blow were nothing compared to the extensive terrorist network that was teeming beneath the city, and defusing them was no more than a lame PR move to demonstrate that the government's pet protection agency still had jurisdiction at the civic level. As much as I hated to admit it, Striker was right about one thing: no one quite knew what the revs would do when they were exposed.

Tall, dimly lit apartment buildings began to dot the sides of the road as I made my way out of Twin Peaks and down Old Market. The project housing, which had been hastily built after the establishment of Aurichome to support the massive influx of human refugees, was an eyesore on what was otherwise a potentially picturesque landscape. Here and there, between the increasingly numerous buildings, I caught glimpses of the luminous city below, bustling with nighttime activity. I swerved between the few cars that were on the road this far away from the city center, accelerating as I neared the first row of neon-encrusted structures.

The change in architecture as I reached New Castro was as abrupt as it was symbolic, signifying a shift in population as well as resources. Old money had met new money on the outskirts of the city center and they both liked their nice things. Rows of erstwhile apartment buildings had been reclaimed and repurposed as nightclubs, VR emporiums, and vacation houses for the handful of moguls who had made a killing on the augmented reality media boom. Dozens of digads assaulted my senses as I sped through the vibrant neighborhood, pulsing asynchronously from AR-enabled monitors in front of each storefront.

The lower nighttime traffic increased considerably as I cruised through the busy district, slowing to a crawl as I reached the New Castro-downtown border. Tapping a few buttons on the cruiser's console, I engaged the vehicle's boosters, gently revving the ceridium engine and easing into the less congested upper tier.

From my new vantage point, I could easily see through the fog of AR animations and into downtown, and began to review the mission briefing from memory. The NIGHT intel had identified three underrace-owned storefronts that were emptied out and rigged to blow within fifteen minutes of each other. They were thought to be distractions from whatever scheme the revolutionaries had planned this time, which was undoubtedly above my pay grade.

I made a face, disgusted with how the NIGHT leadership and the government at large had let it get to this point. Locking people up, taking away their basic rights, and treating them as second-class citizens had always proven to be a surefire way to foment revolt. Remove everything they have to believe in, and they'll make every effort to return the favor.

The worst part was the lack of any kind of accountability on the NIGHT leadership and politicians behind the current state of affairs. Any questions about the

maltreatment of auric prisoners or rights talk in general would be unfailingly met with vague statements about internal defense, or even worse, feigned ignorance about the root cause of revolutionary violence, with some sideways remark about the rage plague and the need for greater Oxidium control.

I shook my head and refocused on the task at hand. By all accounts, it would be a standard breaking and entering job with minimal force; defuse the bomb and neutralize any hostiles. The NIGHT headquarters would dispatch heavier forces to the other two storefronts, which would undoubtedly see more resistance when the first place didn't blow as planned. I'd be in and out in under ten minutes, tops.

I slowed slightly as I made my way deeper into the downtown district, which was no less colorful than New Castro with its towering, digad-pocked buildings that crowded together as if huddling against the fog encroaching from the Bay. Turning onto a small side street, I disengaged the cruiser's boosters and coasted to the bottom level. The shift was almost deafening in its marked decrease in traffic noise and digads, with only a few trucks loading and unloading at service entrances and a few street people making their way through the night.

I checked my location against the signal marker that I had observed from the old radio tower, nodding to myself. If the NIGHTs' informants were being paid the right amount, the signal marker they had set up would correctly lead me to a storefront two blocks away, without any paper or digital trail to identify them to the revs' leadership. The auric king's people didn't take kindly to snitches.

I turned into a tiny cul-de-sac, passing a hand over the cruiser's console to turn off the engine. I stepped off of the vehicle and unraveled my long coat, adjusting my lenses to see better in the dim light away from the main thoroughfare. Moving casually but silently, I walked to the mouth of the alley and peered down the side street towards the storefront, a large corner location masquerading as a legalized Oxidium dispensary. Unlike the larger buildings surrounding it, the shop was comprised of only two stories, with dark, nondescript windows facing out towards the intersection.

Reaching into a pocket, I opened a small packet and slipped a ceridium capsule into my hand. I held it out in front of me and made several deft, practiced gestures, scanning the street around me to ensure that I wasn't drawing any undue attention. With a final pass of my hand, I crushed the capsule and tossed the contents over my head in a brief flash of blue. I could feel my skin tingling slightly as the spell took effect, shrouding me in a gentle mist that would hide me from all but direct eye contact.

I quietly padded down the street towards the location's opposing corner, filtering the different readings coming through my lenses and being recorded onto my digitab. A handful of night porters were working a block away, loading furniture into a large truck. Two street people slept under the cover of an awning, bundled even during the unusual heat. Several parked cars lined the roadway, all but one appearing cold in the IR scan. From my vantage, the storefront looked quiet and empty, as expected.

The timer on the upper corner of my lens display read 21:04:05, forty-one minutes

before the place was set to blow. Plenty of time.

Giving the adjacent buildings a quick scan, I briskly walked across the street towards the back entrance of the dispensary, around the corner from the storefront. I sized up the wall in front of me, delicately placing a foot upon a jutting piece of stucco and using it to spring up towards a second-story window sill. I grabbed the sill with one hand and used my feet against the wall for balance, confident that if anyone happened to look my way from an appreciable distance, they'd see no more than a nondescript smudge on the wall.

Using my free hand, I pried at the window, feeling it give way easily under my touch. I opened it silently, gliding through the opening and into a long, unlit hallway that smelled heavily of damp wood and unwashed bodies. Several doorways opened into the corridor, with a stairwell at the far end that presumably led down into the Oxidium dispensary.

It took me all of two seconds to notice that something was wrong. I could hear soft sounds coming from the rooms opening off the hall, and a faint light flickered from the chamber closest to the stairs. I moved down the corridor and sidled up against the first doorway, trusting in my shadow shroud to keep me hidden from all but the most observant of spectators. I ducked my head in and out of the room, allowing my lenses to record its contents.

I felt my breath catch in my throat, and a terrible premonition began to snake its way through my subconscious. Hurrying to the next doorway, I quickly peered inside and felt my stomach tighten in response, either from the overpowering smell, anxiety, or both.

I crept back towards the open window, scrolling through my digitab to find the right contact and tapping a button.

"The hell you want, Nightpath?" Striker's voice greeted me after a few beeps. "Don't you have a job to do?"

"Piss off, Striker," I retorted through clenched teeth. "Downtown doesn't match briefing intel. There are people here, a lot of them, all ragers."

"The hell does that matter? Do the job, man."

"Damn it, Striker!" I clipped, looking around me to make sure I still hadn't been noticed. "I'm saying it doesn't make sense. Why would the revs blow up their own?"

"You get paid to ask questions, or you get paid to shoot people?" Striker's voice buzzed. "Do the job."

"Not innocents, prick!" I could feel my patience dissipating into anger. "Listen to me, Striker. There are *kids* in here. Something's not right."

"Do the job, Nightpath," Striker repeated, and the digitab clicked.

I growled incoherently at the closed line, taking another cursory look around me and noting the time. 21:12:04.

"Piss."

Two rooms were filled to the brim with people in various states of consciousness, vibrant in my lenses' IR spectrum with the telltale fever of the rage plague. Aurics mostly, with a few humans here and there tending to them or keeping them company.

Adults, children, elderly, young. By the size and number of rooms, I'd estimate over fifty people sedated and being held on the brink of lunacy.

"Piss," I said again. The revolutionaries were known for their guerilla tactics and tenacity, not for their brutality. If the building was set to explode, the auric king would have blood of his own kind on his hands, which signified a new depth to his desire to control the city. It was a big play, but it didn't change my objective.

I pocketed my digitab and crept down the corridor, back towards the stairwell. The building was stifling, hotter than the outside world with no hint of a breeze. I could feel a nervous sweat dampen my clothes under my arms and at the small of my back. I sidled past several other rooms and approached the lighted room next to the stairs. A faint murmuring drifted out from it and into the corridor.

Just as I reached the room's open doorway, a tall auric dressed in street clothes and dangling with piercings walked out of the room, head down as he counted a wad of crumpled paper money. "Later," he called over his shoulder as he turned the corner and trotted down the stairwell, oblivious to my presence.

I waited several beats until I heard a door close downstairs. Peering around the corner and into the room, I could clearly make out several figures in the dim light, my brown eyes picking up on tusks and horns while my lenses picked up the rest. Five aurics, all conscious, with no signs of the rage plague. Two human-sized pairs sitting at as many tables, with one gigantic troll of an auric propped up against a corner wall, all absorbed in their digitabs, which provided the room's only meager illumination. Their superior vision wouldn't need any more than that.

I pressed my back against the wall, mentally preparing myself for what was next. I didn't have time for a protracted battle, and the stakes had just become infinitely higher with the presence of innocent people. Shaking my coat sleeve to drop a long dart from my forearm holster into my left palm, I drew my ceridium-powered stunner into my right. Finesse would have to take precedence over firepower, or I'd have a building full of ragers on me in no time.

I took a short breath and looked at my time display. 21:16:34.

I turned the corner and unleashed chaos into the room.

Spinning through the doorway, I allowed my shadow shroud to curl and coalesce around me, throwing the dart across my body towards the troll, who was just looking up from his digitab. The hulk caught the projectile in the side of his neck, slumping instantaneously from the tranquilizer. Simultaneously, I emptied the stunner's two rounds at the aurics directly to my left. One of them raised an arm reflexively and caught the electrified bolt in a brawny forearm, jittering and falling to the wood floor with a muted thump. The other, a bit more unlucky, took the round in the face and fell backwards, hitting his head on the side of a chair.

The other two responded immediately, reaching for cobalt-glowing handguns within their heavy jackets. I holstered the stunner and darted towards them, jumping and twisting while grabbing another ceridium capsule from my billowing coat. I caught the closest one squarely in the jaw with a thrust from my boot, landing just as the other stood up from her chair and leveled her gun at my twirling form. I came out of my

spin and grabbed the auric's wrist, twisting the weapon expertly from her hand and locking her arm against my body. As she opened her mouth to shout, I spoke a word of power and crushed the capsule in my hand, tossing the blue dust into her face and rendering her instantly unconscious.

I let the auric's body slip heavily back into the chair, and glanced at the time. 21:17:02. Twenty-eight minutes.

"What are you trying to play, man?" a voice reverberated from the hallway. "We said five hundred, not..."

The voice trailed off as I turned around back towards the door. The pierced auric had returned, standing in the doorway with his eyes wide open and his mouth frozen in mid-sentence. It must have been an impressive scene, with me standing like a cloak of death amid the carnage. The man on the floor spasmed awkwardly, latent electricity charging through his body.

"The hell?" the auric said, bewildered.

I moved, and he saw me. My lenses magnified his dilated pupils, and registered his slightly elevated pulse and shallow breaths. The Oxidium would have enhanced his already superior vision, and improved his reflexes to a near super-human level.

I took a step towards him, which spurred him out of his daze, and he dashed out of the doorway towards the stairwell. I raced after him, vaulting towards the door and grabbing the frame to swing around the corner. The stairs switched back upon themselves, and the auric's heightened speed had already taken him to the little landing in between the two floors. I jumped lightly upon the railing that bisected the stairwell, and used my momentum to carry me over the switchback.

I landed upon the auric's back like a cloud of smoke, snaking my arms around his neck and under his armpit like a vise. He lost his footing under the added weight and we tumbled down the remaining stairs, crashing through a light wooden door and knocking into a small stack of empty cardboard boxes. I rolled with the impact and held onto his neck and arm, clenching like a python as he tried to wriggle away from me. The spikes on his leather jacket poked through my coat and tore at my arms, but I ignored the pain and locked a foot around the crook of his knee to try to arch my back for more leverage.

The auric threw his head backwards, catching me cleanly in the temple. My grip loosened on him as stars exploded in my head, and I could feel him scrambling amidst the boxes as he tried to escape. I reached out a hand reflexively and caught at his leg, managing to grab a handful of his trousers. I pulled and twisted, knocking him off balance and back to the floor.

Instinctively, I rolled out of the way, and was rewarded by catching his hi-top sneaker on my shoulder instead of my face. I swatted at it with one hand and used the other to push myself into a crouch, shaking my vision clear and willing myself to stay conscious. I sensed him getting to his feet and saw a flash in my peripheral vision. I ducked underneath his kick and sprung up from the floor, driving the crown of my head into his chin. His teeth came together with an audible crack, and he fell to the floor like a bag of groceries.

“Jesus!” he exclaimed meekly, clutching at his jaw. “You broke my tongue!”

I ignored him, shaking my head again and surveying the chamber. It was a little storage area that opened up into the storefront proper, which was essentially one large room with a long bar that ran from one end to the other. A couple of digital registers sat on the otherwise unremarkable counter, and small cabinets marked with augmented reality-enabled writing lined the adjacent wall. A soft light penetrated through the room’s windows from the street.

My head swam a little, and I looked at the time, dropping the shadow shroud.
21:21:52.

“Come on,” I said to the auric, who was still writhing on the ground. I grabbed a handful of hair and dragged him into the empty room, irritated by the interruption to my mission and wary of any further complications. The auric’s piercings jangled, his jacket spikes scratching at the wood floor.

Even without the lenses’ readout, it would have been easy to spot the bomb if one knew what they were looking for. I noticed it immediately, nestled in between two chairs that were bolted into the wall on the far side of the room, out of sight from anyone who might happen to have access to the dispensary after hours. I strode around the bar towards it, pulling the auric behind me.

“The hell, man! I didn’t do anything!” he said, struggling weakly against me. “Let me go!”

I squatted in between the chairs and put my knee on the auric’s throat to keep him from squirming. He seemed to accept his situation and slumped in defeat. I pulled my digitab out of my coat and set it against the bomb, tapping a few buttons to sync with the device. It was a tiny thing, the size of a roach or VPen chip, but placed expertly at the base of a load-bearing wall. When it blew, it would take the entire building with it.

The digitab finished syncing, displaying information about the bomb’s specifications and a defuse protocol. It was Canadian made, and a newer model at that - no more than a year old. The ticker on it read six minutes and forty-two seconds, a full thirteen minutes before it was supposed to go off.

I felt a bead of sweat trickle down my forehead, the dark room closing in oppressively around me. My temple throbbed, and I could feel the adrenaline of combat slipping away from my body, leaving a hollow feeling of uncertainty in the pit of my stomach. I licked my lips nervously and clicked on the defuse protocol, which opened up a code prompt. I quickly entered the combination provided to me during the mission briefing, which would stop the countdown and disable the bomb.

The digitab buzzed angrily, indicating that the combination I had entered was either incorrect or had been changed. The ticker burped, knocking a minute off the timer and now reading four minutes and twenty-two seconds.

I fought to stay calm. I could hear my pulse pounding in my ears, matching the drumming in my temple, and I kept forgetting to breathe. I hedged, knowing that I could leave, taking the auric with me for questioning, but I wouldn’t have time to

evacuate the people upstairs. I wasn't familiar with being unsure of my next course of action, and I didn't care for the feeling.

I had neither the time to give the defuse protocol another try nor the skillset to hack into the device and do it the hard way. I synced the timer with my digitab and saw the countdown appear in my lenses. Pocketing the digitab, I released my knee from the auric's throat and grabbed him by the collar.

"What's the code?" I snarled at him.

"What?" he said thickly. I could see the blood staining his white teeth.

"Don't play stupid with me," I said, shaking him. "What's the code?"

"The hell, man? What code?"

I could see that he had no idea what I was talking about. I glanced back at the bomb and up at the time display. 21:27:24, three minutes and thirty-six seconds.

The auric craned his neck to follow my gaze, then looked at me. I could see understanding register in his eyes.

"We're dead?" he queried.

I nodded absently, reaching for another ceridium capsule. Prying off a glove with my teeth, I reached out towards the device.

The auric's hand shot up and grabbed weakly at my wrist. "You're going to kill us, man!" he protested.

"Probably!" I looked back towards a side entrance next to the counter. "Can you open that?"

He hesitated, then nodded slightly.

"Do it," I said. He got up slowly and trotted over to the door.

I returned my attention to the bomb, and delicately pried at it with my fingers. It was stuck firmly to the wall with some kind of adhesive, but I picked at it with a fingernail gently, making sure not to damage the device itself.

"The *hell*, man," I heard the auric behind me. "You made me lose my keys!"

"Be creative!" I yelled back, and could hear movement upstairs. Our little row must have woken up some of the ragers. I didn't have time to savor the irony of my attempt to save the lives of a group of people who would be happy to tear me apart at the slightest provocation.

I continued picking at the device, absently wiping my forehead with my free hand. It came away bloody. I ignored the pain in my temple and gave the bomb another flick, and it fell into my palm with a little resistance.

I hastily moved my other hand around the device in a circular motion, chanting softly under my breath and crushing the ceridium capsule. A shadowy thread, almost invisible in the darkness, emanated from my fingers, building upon itself and wrapping around the bomb like a ball of black yarn. I closed my fist over it and ran back towards the counter.

The time in my lens display read 21:30:28. Thirty-two seconds.

Muttering to himself, the auric was working at the door's physical locking mechanism with a pair of picks, having already disabled the digital keycode. I shouldered him out of the way and drew my ceridium pistol, stepping back and firing

a round into the deadbolt. It blew a baseball-sized hole through the door with a loud *whoosh* and the lock went with it, leaving a smoking blue ring behind.

I ripped open the door and tossed the shadow-encrusted bomb into the street, aiming for a car across the asphalt. I barely had enough time to see it crash through the sedan's window, providing the neighborhood with the most meager of protection along with the shadow shield. I slammed the door against the frame, turning towards the auric and pushing him underneath the counter, shielding him with my body.

21:31:00.

The world exploded.

A light brighter than the sun flashed outside of the dispensary, illuminating the room with a painful flash. A dragon's roar filled my ears as the building shook, glass and bits of wood and plaster raining down painfully on my coat as the windows and parts of the walls blew. The ground rocked violently, threatening to tumble the entire dispensary down upon us. I could hear the auric yelling in fear below me.

Then, as soon as they had begun, the light and noise vanished. My ears rung in the silence, and I could taste blood in my mouth, having bitten my lip during the explosion. I held my position for several heartbeats, feeling the dust continue to rain down on me and waiting for the building to collapse.

Nothing happened. The whole neighborhood seemed to have fallen silent, as if waiting for someone to make the next move. Even the ragers upstairs seemed to have been temporarily mollified.

I dared to look up from my crouch, shaking woodchips and glass from my hair. The dispensary looked like it had been hit by a mortar, but it was still standing. The side door had been torn completely off of its hinges, and the glass double doors at the front of the building had shattered along with the windows. The wall closest to the side door had gaping holes where it had taken the brunt of the blast, but it held. I tried not to think of what the outside neighborhood looked like.

A million different scenarios came to my mind, hazy explanations for how a relatively easy job could have gone south so quickly. I pushed them out of my head, grateful for the moment just to be alive. I slumped against the counter, putting a hand to my temple and letting a long breath out through my nose. The auric crept up next to me, tentatively peering over the bar at the carnage.

"Jesus," he said.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. S. Farzan was born in London and grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. He has written and worked for high-profile video game companies and editorial websites such as Electronic Arts, Perfect World Entertainment, Modus Games, and MMORPG.com, and has served as the Community Manager for games like *Dungeons & Dragons Neverwinter* and *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. He has trained in and taught Japanese martial arts for over fifteen years and has a Ph.D. in Cultural and Historical Studies of Religions.