

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

TECHNOMANCY

BOOK TWO OF THE NIGHTPATH TRILOGY

M. S. Farzan

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For my parents
Who read, comment, critique, and unfailingly, support

KEY LOCATIONS

Aurichome – Squatting less than forty miles from San Francisco proper in what’s known as the “North Bay,” the nation of Aurichome is a haven for all races - provided that they swear unequivocal fealty to King Thog’run II. Parts of the underground kingdom are still under construction, but its borders are ever-expanding, and well-defended.

Columbus-Farrow – The carnivalesque atmosphere of the city’s North Beach district is punctuated by booming music, kaleidoscopic three-dimensional digital ads (“digads”), and neon lights. If there’s action to be had, it can undoubtedly be found here.

Downtown – San Francisco, being geographically contained within a forty-nine-square-mile peninsula, was one of the first global city centers to begin building vertically in earnest. The skyline is crowded to the point of being impenetrable to all but the midday sun, and the auric-majority undercity reaches half as deep into the earth as Downtown’s tallest building.

East Bay – What the East Bay lacks in glamor, it more than makes up for in diversity. Industrial shipyards and towering skyscrapers can be found alongside luxury houses and underground ghettos, and there are rumors of safehouses and saloons located in abandoned subway train stations.

Golden Gate Bridge – The iconic suspension bridge lay dormant and decrepit for a period of two decades, caught in the crossfire between Aurichome to the north and the Pacific South NIGHT headquarters. It has since been returned to its former glory as a tremulous show of peace between the two factions, serving as an orange beacon spanning the San Francisco Bay.

New Castro – Rivalled only by Columbus-Farrow in its ostentation, the centrally located New Castro is home to nightclubs, digad-pocked virtual reality emporiums, and vacation suites. It’s sleek, it’s sexy, and it represents the absolute best that San Francisco money can buy.

Pacific South NIGHT Headquarters – Poised forebodingly on the island of Alcatraz in the center of the San Francisco Bay, the three ivory towers of the Pacific South NIGHT headquarters house over two hundred NIGHT agents, Inquisitors, foot soldiers, staff, and officials. It has enough space for fifty virtual penitentiary inhabitants, and is comparable in size to the Pacific North NIGHT headquarters in Seattle, Central West NIGHT headquarters in Denver, and Atlantic North NIGHT headquarters in New York.

Presidio – Once a military base, then a park, now an overgrown forest that abuts the Golden Gate Bridge to the north, the Presidio is a not-so-mute testament to the

societal and magical issues that plague modern societies. Filled with ragers and worse, the Presidio has been reported to feature a naturally occurring source of ceridium, although no faction has yet been publicly willing to send its forces to investigate.

Richmond-Sunset District – Ordinary people have to find somewhere to live, and in San Francisco, the Richmond-Sunset District is their best option. Soaring apartment buildings, underground housing structures, and the ever-present dual layer of traffic all dot the landscape, along with a visibly Aurichome-themed sports bar known as *They Might Be Giant*.

Santa Clara – Having boomed and busted multiple times over, Silicon Valley has continued to expand, finding Santa Clara to be its current hub forty-five miles south of San Francisco. All manner of technology - from drones and antigravity cars to cerujet engines and ceridium weaponry - can be found here, provided that one has the appropriate connections and pay grade.

Sparks, NV – Two hundred and twenty miles to the east of San Francisco, beyond a dwarven outpost and the forgotten - but still neon - city of Reno, sits the tiny city of Sparks, Nevada. From this suburb appeared an augur known as the Sigil, who has since taken up residence in an open-air casino amphitheater in Reno, surrounded by drones and all types of machinery.

KEY PERSONAE

Agrid the Destroyer – A low auric entromancer and known equally as “the Destroyer” and “the Betrayer,” Agrid once had the command of a legion of assassins loyal to his word alone, although he has spent the past year languishing in the dungeons of Aurichome.

Alina “The Pitcher” Hadzic – Former relief pitcher and owner of a revolutionary-friendly tavern in the Richmond-Sunset District known as *They Might Be Giant*, Alina Hadzic is a veteran high auric terramancer and Aurichome’s official Consul for Human-Auric Relations.

Eskander Aradowsi – Spymaster to the king, Eskander Aradowsi holds the dubious honor of being one of the first high auric NIGHT agents, having recently made the jump to Aurichome after a mission gone south.

Gloric Vunderfel – Gloric Vunderfel is a gnome technomancer extraordinaire and King Thog’run’s Chief of Technology, despite his long-standing ties with the Sigil of Sparks.

Marguerite Liu – Former attaché to William D. Karthax, Marguerite “Madge” Liu is a human Daypath of some repute and voted to be the next Inquisitor General after her predecessor abdicated the position under accusations of treason.

The Sigil of Sparks – Although the artificial intelligence experiment has failed many times over, rumors boast of a sentient, preternaturally clairvoyant leader who, just as strangely, takes the form of an early-twentieth century automatic vacuum cleaner and is attended only by his cantankerous - and very human - Scribe.

Striker Johnson – Striker Johnson is a NIGHT agent celebrated for his efforts during the Karthax affair, although his metal arm, breastplate, and assortment of cybernetics indicate the toll the incident has taken on the human Nightpath.

Thog’run II – A low auric war hero and sovereign of Aurichome, King Thog’run II is known far and wide for his battle prowess, tactical acumen, and brutal dealings with enemies of the throne.

Tribe Achebe – A high auric vanguard and the adoptive nephew of King Thog’run, Tribe Achebe is more often found causing problems for Aurichome than solving them.

Vasshka “Doubleshot” Lestrage – Known by most only by her moniker, “Doubleshot,” the dwarf Vasshka Lestrage is a revolutionary in service to the crown and one of King Thog’run’s personal tactical advisors.

William D. Karthax – (location unknown) A war hero and the former Inquisitor General of NIGHT, William D. Karthax was indicted *in absentia* for collusion against NIGHT while attempting to manipulate King Thog'run and Aurichome. Karthax was last seen escaping from the Pacific South NIGHT headquarters on Alcatraz.

PROLOGUE

Andrew Alyawarre hung his head in his hands, desperate. The figure on the holodisplay in front of him continued to speak, filling the small hotel room with its androgynous monotone.

“This does not have to be difficult, auromancer,” the voice said dispassionately. “Complete the task to our satisfaction, and she will be released into your custody.”

The big man sat up straight, letting his curly black hair slip through brown fingertips. He squinted at the holodisplay, staring as though his eyesight could penetrate the vaguely humanoid form on the screen. Several acerbic retorts came to his mind, but he knew that the representative on the other side of the holodisplay – whoever it was, and wherever they were – would not take kindly to his sarcasm.

Andrew spoke honestly. “At what cost?” His voice, ordinarily deep and smooth, was hoarse with emotion.

“The question is not of cost, auromancer, but of ability,” the holodisplay voice responded quickly, misunderstanding his question. “If you can perform the task adequately, the repercussions will be of no concern to you.

“I will send the coordinates to your digitab immediately,” the figure continued. “Utilize the credit account you have been provided for any necessary transactions.”

The holodisplay flashed once, illuminating the sparsely furnished room in brightness, then fell dim. Andrew sat in the darkness, staring at the empty holodisplay, his mind half a world away. The vertical metal cylinder that housed the machine’s innards offered him no answers, and the sparsely furnished room was quiet except for the continuous buzz of traffic coming from the single-pane windows.

The man slowly let his head fall back into his giant hands, and wept.

Damara Drivas liked baseball more than she liked magic, but while one was a hobby, the other kept the lights on. She kept the midday game tracker running on her lens display while she worked, directing her attention now and then to the corner of her vision to keep up with the score and highlights.

“Our issue is not with his eligibility, Inquisitor,” the party representative repeated, drawing Damara’s attention away from the game-in-progress statistics. “But with his status. Neither the NIGHTs nor the federal government know where Karthax is. Otherwise, I’m sure they would have court martialed him by now.”

Damara let her gaze rest on the politician, expertly masking her contempt for his feeble attempt at drawing information from her to bolster his position. She looked at him blankly, her warm brown eyes inscrutable, and rested her cheek on a delicate hand as though considering her next comment with great care.

Expertly, she pierced a small blue stone set within her earring with a finger, allowing a tiny gasp of azure vapor to escape from within, unnoticed by the oblivious

man in front of her. She allowed the silence to stretch between them uncomfortably as the ceridium vapor snuck its way through her nostrils and into her body, silently empowering her with the means with which to work her craft. When she spoke next, it was with power.

“Let *us* concern ourselves with finding the Inquisitor General,” Damara said at last, her dulcet tones having a hypnotic effect on the hapless politician. She could see his eyes glaze over subtly as the magic took hold, snaking through his subconscious and nudging him ever so gently to respond more agreeably to her.

“And while we do that,” she continued, confident in her ability to sway the weak-willed politician, “your factors will set the stage for his triumphant return to the political circuit.”

The fat man nodded slowly, his jowls bouncing as any vestiges of resistance to the stunningly beautiful woman sitting across from him fell away. Somehow, he felt as though he could trust her, and that her ideas, while across party lines from his own, would benefit him in some way.

“I’ll do it,” he said, “although I can’t promise compliance from everyone else.”

Damara smiled a winning smile, allowing herself the slightest bit of pride in how easily the meeting had turned in her favor. She sat back in her chair, the waves of her dark brown hair cascading down her shoulders.

“Let us concern ourselves with that as well,” she said again reassuringly, tightening the noose around the politician’s mind with her magically enhanced voice.

The man nodded again mutely, inspired by the conversation and unaware of the magical intervention. He rose to leave, allowing the Inquisitor to peer again at the statistics on her lens display.

A fielding error during play had allowed the opposing team to score, putting them ahead in the bottom of the eighth inning. Bases were loaded, with no outs.

Damara sighed irritably at the politician’s back as he left the room.

Kwame Daigan climbed, and kept climbing. The trail to the mountain fortress had been eroded by time, and was no more than a suggestion carved into the near-vertical cliff face.

His strong, dark hands knew the mountain well enough, and his aging but powerful legs propelled him ever forward. A long, embroidered jacket lined with white Tibetan lamb wool protected him from the cold wind that pressed him against the rocks. A wrapped package, as big as his torso, was strapped to his shoulders with twine, still warm even in the plummeting temperature.

Soon enough, he reached the cave opening, stepping surely around the rocky entrance and onto the smoother path within. The wind stopped abruptly as he entered the grotto, reduced to a plaintive howl behind him. The cave was cool and damp, with the faint aroma of brimstone and something more metallic, which to anyone else would have seemed pungent, if not slightly revolting.

To the auric, it smelled like home.

He shifted the package on his shoulders and marched forward, through the small passage and into a massive cavern, carved from the same stone as the mountain encasing it, but with walls that had been smoothed as though with a giant spoon. The grotto lacked a ceiling, allowing the evening starlight to bathe the area with radiance. Precious and semi-precious crystals sparkled in the dim light, veins of splendor within the silky grey stone that was marred only by scorch marks at intervals along the walls.

At the center of the cavern lay an enormous beast, a dark and foreboding presence in the otherwise wondrous cave. It was coiled like a snake, its front and rear paws tucked beneath its massive girth and its triangular tail framing its muscular body. Two black wings sat folded across its back, and a horned, angular head rested upon the stone floor towards the cave opening. Here and there, a metallic scale on the beast's body glittered from the starlight, easily as brilliant as the crystals set within the walls.

"What have you brought?" the beast asked, its multi-toned voice booming across the cavern walls. Although spoken at no more than a whisper, the question still shook the mountain, requiring Kwame to set his feet firmly beneath him.

"Dinner," the shadowmancer replied, untying the package from his shoulders and dropping it in front of the dragon. He unwrapped it carefully, revealing a medium-sized mountain goat that had been freshly killed and drained of blood.

The dragon's eyes remained closed, but it inhaled through a nostril the size of Kwame's head.

"Not even breakfast," the beast taunted, exhaling. A gust as strong as the outside wind, but smelling of fire and metal, hit Kwame squarely in the chest, causing him to take a step backward.

"No appreciation from an old fool," the shadowmancer replied testily.

One of the dragon's eyes opened at that, its nictitating membrane sliding back to reveal a sparkling green orb spattered with flecks of gold. "Only an old fool expects appreciation for that which is his duty."

The silence held, as did the dragon's gaze, boring into Kwame like a green and gold laser.

The shadowmancer broke first, laughing harshly into the dimness. "My apologies, Zzethromandus. This was all I could find on the way here," he explained.

The dragon guffawed as well, a grating, bellowing sound in the hollow cavern. "No harm, old friend," it said reassuringly. "It shall be my breakfast."

Ponderously, the beast pushed itself up onto its forelegs, opening its other eye and shaking its wings free from slumber. It moved its head from side to side and opened its considerable maw in what looked like a yawn, revealing rows of dagger-like teeth.

Without preamble, Zzethromandus darted his arrow-shaped head towards the mountain goat, plucking it from the floor delicately with his front teeth. He flexed his powerful neck to toss it upwards, then caught it deftly in his open mouth. The dragon bit down once, scissoring meat, bones, and fur within his maw, then swallowed the rest of the animal whole.

Kwame stood politely, ignoring the sickening sounds emanating from the dragon's mouth and the bits of blood and bone that rained down in front of him.

At length, Zzethromandus eyed him piercingly. "What do you want?" the dragon rumbled.

The shadowmancer cleared his throat. "A war is coming," he said openly, knowing that the dragon would see through any prevarication. "It is time."

Zzethromandus picked at his giant teeth with an equally long and yellow forenail. "You orichites and humans are always warring about something, if not the other," he boomed.

"We prefer 'aurics,'" Kwame boldly corrected the dragon, whose knowledge of humanoid species was centuries old and in clear need of an update. "And this war will be of the kind that will arrive at even your doorstep, if you don't act upon it presently."

The dragon cocked its head to the side, considering. He looked at Kwame like a giant bird examining its prey.

"It has been long, by human and dragon standards, since I went to war," Zzethromandus said thoughtfully.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," Kwame replied quickly. "If it does, I'll need much more than just your help."

The dragon laughed again, a terrible sound. "Since when did you become so unruly, Kwame Daigan?"

The shadowmancer sighed, wiping his forehead with a swarthy hand. "I'm just tired, and old," he said.

"What does that make me?" the dragon asked wryly.

ONE

"I'm not here to talk about auric rights; I'm here to talk about baseball. We've got three more to play in this series and I'm just trying to win games for this team. If you want to talk politics, you can ask me in the off-season; if you want to ask a question about baseball, ask."

-Alina Hadzic, post-game interview during the 2068 Global Series

The door buzzer beeped, a merciful reprieve from the constant racket. I rummaged through the couch cushions, extricating my forgotten digitab and pushing a button to answer the intercom.

"Yeah?" I said, putting the digitab up to one ear and a finger in the other to block out some of the sound.

"Eskander?" Alina's voice buzzed through the digitab's speaker. "Are you there?"

"Hey! Hang on," I replied, ducking out of my living room and out of the way of a soapy sponge flying out of the kitchen. "Sorry, what's up?"

"You haven't answered your phone in two days," she admonished. "I came by to make sure everything's alright."

I shut the living room door behind me, muffling the cacophony of yelling, television noise, and banging of pots and pans. The skinny entryway of my apartment was a disaster, and I stepped around a morass of shoes, umbrellas, toys, and not a few shopping bags towards the front door.

"Yeah, sorry," I repeated, pulling the digitab away from my stubbled face. "It's kind of a mess here."

I heard Alina sigh into the intercom, and felt a little guilty. "How are you?" I managed weakly.

"Fine," she said curtly. "Are you going to let me in?"

"Sure," I said dubiously, looking down at my undershirt and sweatpants. I wasn't expecting company. "Are you downstairs?"

"I'm outside your apartment," the Pitcher growled, exasperated. I could almost hear her eyes rolling at me. "You gave me the passcode to the building, remember?"

"Right, right," I said, jumping as a shoe or some other object hit the living room door behind me. "Just a second."

I clicked off the intercom through the digitab, looking down the long hallway that ran parallel to my apartment's front wall. A large, sunburst-shaped mirror hung at the far wall to my left, at the end of a corridor that led to the place's only bathroom. The image that greeted me was little better than the chaotic entryway, and more disheveled. My normally brown hair was almost black from not being washed in several days, sticking out to one side unfashionably. My pointed nose and angular cheekbones were comically accentuated by my three-day beard, and dark half-circles could be seen under my brown eyes even at this distance. My slightly pointed ears

poked out awkwardly, making my neck look abnormally long, and although my body was tanned and muscular under my shirt, I had undeniably gained a few pounds.

I brushed a hand perfunctorily through my hair, which only swept it from one side to the other, and hastily grabbed a grey zip-up sweatshirt from the pile at my feet, thrusting my hands through it and dropping the digitab. I stepped over a rubber skateboard and punched a number into the front door's security system, turning the key that was already sitting in the physical lock.

I opened the door as nonchalantly as I could, leaning on the frame and trying to use my body to hide the clutter behind me.

"How's it going?" I said casually.

The Pitcher glared at me, her blue eyes gleaming, and lips pursed in irritation. A wayward curl framed the left side of her face under her baseball cap, and she wore a simple blue jumper and tight jeans.

"Fine," she said for a second time, looking me up and down. Her look softened somewhat as she saw my condition, laugh lines creasing slightly at her eyes. "Better than you, I guess."

"It's been rough," I said honestly.

Her brow furrowed as she took in my outfit, and I noticed that my sweatshirt felt a little snug. I realized belatedly that it was a woman's jacket, and two sizes too small. I was not covering myself in glory.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"Um," I hesitated. The living room door opened behind me, letting in a clamor of voices and mechanical sounds. A short, portly woman with graying hair stuck her head into the hall, putting a soapy wet hand on the outer doorknob.

"Eskander," she said, "will you *please* tell your sister that her children *cannot* play in the kitchen while I'm..."

Her voice trailed off as she saw Alina, standing perplexed in the doorway. The woman looked from her, to me, and back again, equally taken aback.

"Who's this, Eskander?" she said imperiously.

I hung my head, defeated. "Mom," I said, uncomfortable, "this is Alina. Alina, this is my mother."

"Oh, *really*," my mother said without missing a beat, her tone simultaneously warm and inviting towards Alina and admonishing towards me. "I have heard so very little about someone so very pretty!" she said, entering the hallway and wiping her hands on the corner of her apron.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Aradowsi," the Pitcher said smoothly, extending her hand.

My mother grabbed it greedily, pulling Alina in for a hug, which the half-auric returned politely. She then hooked an arm around the Pitcher's elbow, steering her towards the living room door.

"Arabiyya-Ferdowsi," the older woman corrected, shooting a withering glance in my direction. "*Some* of us are not ashamed of our heritage."

"Mom, I..." I protested.

“Come, dear!” my mother continued, ushering Alina through the doorway. “You could not have come at a more perfect time. The whole family is here!”

A deluge of sounds flooded through the open door, children’s voices mixed with the blaring of sports noise and TV announcing. I looked over at the sunburst mirror once again, shaking my head at my reflection, and followed my mother and Alina into the room.

What was ordinarily a tidy living room had devolved into complete chaos. An uncountable number of toys were strewn haphazardly around the floor, and a fort made from couch cushions partially blocked the entrance to the kitchen to the left. Empty juice containers and snack pouches littered nearly every furniture surface, and three of the room’s several digital art frames stood askew against the cream walls, pushed askance by tiny, sticky hands. Two small children jumped up and down on a small loveseat to the right, yelling unintelligibly at one another, while a young woman, holding a tiny baby, tried to interpose herself between them. Across the room, an older man sat on a cushionless couch watching the giant augmented reality TV in the corner, seemingly oblivious to the bedlam.

“Artin,” my mother called to the man, holding onto Alina’s arm like a vise. Receiving no response, she tried again, louder. “Artin! *ART!*”

The man started, looking over, surprise in his almond-shaped eyes. His balding brown head still had several strings of grey hair, which did nothing to hide his long ears.

“What is it, Beybun?” he protested. “The Union are up two-nil!”

“Bah, turn it down,” my mother demanded, nearly shouting over the television noise and children arguing. “We have a guest!”

The sight of Alina was like a hot knife through butter in the frenzy. My father’s eyes narrowed as he put together the pieces, and he reached a hand out to tap the digital console embedded in the couch’s armrest, muting the ARTV. The younger woman turned from admonishing her children, stopping in mid-sentence and looking at us quizzically. Even the boy and girl stopped their jumping and yelling.

“Art, Suzan, this is Alina,” my mother said into the sudden silence, gesturing at the Pitcher beside her. “Eskander’s *friend*,” she added meaningfully.

My father was the first to react, springing spryly from the couch to shake Alina’s hand, deftly freeing her from my mother’s grasp. “Nice to meet you, nice to meet you,” he said in slightly accented English. “My daughter, Suzan,” he waved a hand towards the younger woman behind him.

Alina reached her hand out to my sister, who managed to clasp it around the baby in her arms.

“Hi,” Suzan greeted her warmly, her face changing instantly from chiding mother to friendly host. “We’ve heard so much - and not enough! - about you,” she said, glaring past Alina at me.

I made a face at her and walked over to the ARTV, passing a hand over a separate console and putting it to sleep. My father looked over at me accusingly, more interested in the soccer match than the current discussion. I waved at him angrily,

gesturing towards Alina and my sister, which earned me a grunt of mixed irritation and resignation.

“Thank you,” Alina said genuinely, reflexively adjusting her baseball cap. “I have to say the same, as Eskander speaks about his family quite often.” I beamed at that, looking at my mother pointedly.

The Pitcher leaned down to look at the two rugrats, who were suddenly shy, peeking out from behind my sister’s legs. “This must be Perinaz and Alex,” she said, smiling at them. They looked at her curiously, their eyes large and softly pointed ears twitching.

“Yes, and Memet,” Suzan answered for them, offering the cooing baby. “Would you like to hold him?”

“Sure,” Alina said dubiously, taking him into her arms.

“Suzan, will you help me in the kitchen please?” my mother asked pointedly.

“Yes, mother,” my sister said, giving Alina a winning smile. The two children followed her, looking back more than once at the Pitcher.

We stood there awkwardly in the suddenly quiet room, Alina bouncing my tiny nephew upon her chest, and my father looking from her, to the augmented reality television, and back again. I cleared my throat and gestured towards the loveseat.

“Want to sit down?” I offered.

Alina looked up from Memet, seeming to have gotten the hang of holding him. She nodded politely.

I walked her over to the small sofa, snatching a model cerujet sticking out from in between the cushions and placing it carefully on a side table. The Pitcher sat down gingerly, still gently bobbing the baby, who seemed content for the moment.

My father had taken up his post on the cushionless couch, his liver-spotted hand hovering longingly near the ARTV console built into the couch arm. I crossed the small ocean of toys to join him, brushing the plain fabric beneath me perfunctorily, trying to sweep it free from crumbs. The older man looked up at me quizzically as I sat down, and I sighed, nodding my acquiescence.

Energized, he waved a hand over the couch arm, and the ARTV burst into life, its centi-core ceridium processor instantly displaying the in-progress match in full 5D. Twenty-two soccer players appeared on a vibrantly green pitch in front of the ARTV, their three-dimensional holograms hovering several feet off the floor. A recognizable bouquet of grass, freshly draughted beer, and the unmistakable tang of sweat wafted through the room as the ARTV’s pheromone adapter simulated the smells of the stadium. The couch and loveseat, connected through the network to the ARTV’s motion simulator, vibrated and pulsed with each kick of the ball, and every contact between players. The sounds of players yelling, sportscasting, and ambient crowd noise assaulted our ears, causing me to wince. Even Memet burbled loudly in protest.

I pushed a button on the console embedded on my side of the couch, dialing down the non-visual stimuli to a less offensive level. The roar of the stadium reduced to a muffled din, while the couches rumbled considerably more softly and the pheromone adapter consolidated the ambient aromas to a single faint odor of lawn shavings.

“Still two-nil,” my father said quietly, reading the score banner that floated above the moving players. Having lived the first thirty years of his life in Eurasia, and the following forty on the East Coast, he was both a dedicated soccer fan and an uncompromising Philadelphia Union supporter. Being a relatively recent retiree, he was loath to commit to any activities on what he simply called “matchday,” which had already provided for a number of scheduling mishaps during my family’s visit. It didn’t help that neither my mother nor my sister shared his love for the game, or sport in general, and took the brunt of his intricately detailed explanations of which midfielders were to be sold to whose team, and what the ensuing tactics should be. I, on the other hand, had inherited the sport gene, and so had my sister’s children, but even we had our limits.

“So,” my father said abruptly, and a bit too loud for the small room. “Eskander tells me you are a diplomat of some sort?”

“That’s right,” Alina replied, smiling charmingly above Memet’s tiny head. “I’m the Consulate to Aurichome here in San Francisco.”

“Uh huh,” my father said, not really listening. “And when did you start doing that?”

“About a year ago, when your son became King Thog’run’s Chief of Intelligence.”

“Uh huh.”

The Pitcher, seasoned from years spent in the media limelight and a bartender besides, was an expert at getting people to talk. She shifted Memet on her shoulder and tugged on a sock that he had been trying to kick off.

“What do you think about Philly’s chances for playoff berth this year?”

My father looked across the room at her, as though seeing her for the first time. “Pretty good,” he said slowly, gauging her interest. “If they can get their back four to hold a line longer than two minutes.”

“Their defense is spotty,” Alina agreed, “but they need to stop hoofing long balls over the top if they want to start dictating pace and possession.”

“Exactly!” my father exclaimed, excited to have someone with whom he could talk shop. “You’re from around here, so tell me this: why haven’t the Earthquakes fired their manager after seven-”

“Lunch is ready!” my mother chirped cheerily, bustling into the living room with an enormous tray of plates and bowls, all covered with heat-containing polymer tins.

My sister followed her, shuttling a trestle table that had been moved to the kitchen to make way for the pillow fort. She was taller than me, and thinner, but had the dark hair and swarthy complexion that all of us shared from our Kurdish heritage. She took more after my grandmother’s auric gene than I did, the tips of her long, pointed brown ears almost touching the side of her head. Not expecting company, she was still dressed casually in a grey sweat suit, minus the zip-up hoodie that I was now wearing.

Perinaz and Alex followed her in from the kitchen, uncharacteristically quiet. With the addition of Alina to the small lunch party, my sister and mother had undeniably lectured my niece and nephew about being on their best behavior, which was sure to last for at least two minutes. Perinaz, the older one, was the spitting image of her

mother, save for the bouncy curls that framed her angular face. Alex took more after his father, who had stayed in Philadelphia to look after his burgeoning digitab application business. The little boy had a mischievous, round face with tousled chestnut hair, and clung shyly to his sister's sleeve.

"Alina, I do hope you like our food," my mother said, waiting patiently for Suzan to set up the trestle table amidst the sea of toys. Satisfied that my sister had placed the table on a solitary patch of even ground, she set down the tray, handing me a bundle of plateware to distribute.

"Oh," Alina said politely, readjusting a now-sleeping Memet on her shoulder, "I'm sure I will love Kurdish food-"

"Cheesesteaks!" my mother exclaimed. She began snatching polymer tins from the plates and bowls and stashing them under the table, revealing a ridiculous spread of fresh buns, cooked beef, pressurized cheese, and innumerable condiments.

Ordinarily, the rest of the family would have descended upon the meal like a band of rabid animals, but with a new guest, the mood was considerably tempered. I got up to hand out plates and napkins, and my father tore himself away from the match long enough to help himself to a cheesesteak with fixings. My sister offered to take Memet from Alina, who complied gratefully, smoothing her shirt and joining the rest of the family in putting together lunch.

When everyone had prepared their respective plates – my mother looking after Perinaz and Alex, who were particularly fussy about their food – my father resumed his perch nearest to the ARTV, and my mother took my seat on the cushionless couch. I sat in between them, while Suzan excused herself to put Memet in for a nap. Perinaz made herself comfortable in the entryway to the pillow fort, looking a little like a wolf pup in front of her den. Alex sat down bravely next to Alina on the loveseat, staring at her with his round hazel eyes and ignoring, for what may have been the first time in his life, the food in front of him.

"Are you my uncle's girlfriend?" he asked suddenly.

To her credit, Alina didn't flinch at the question, and instead looked across the room at me over her plate. "I don't know, Alex," she said impishly, still staring at me. "Why don't you ask your uncle?"

I coughed around a mouthful of cheesesteak, nearly spilling my lunch. I was wholly unprepared for this conversation alone with Alina, not to mention with my entire family present.

"Now, now, Lexi," said my mother, using my nephew's nickname. "It's not polite to ask people about their relationships." I was skeptical, knowing that I would receive an earful about the topic when Alina wasn't within earshot.

"Are you a half-auric like pop pop?" Perinaz peeped from the pillow fort, her high cheeks already smattered with cheese.

"I am," Alina said, giving the little girl a winning smile. "My father is an auric, just like your great-grandmother."

Seemingly satisfied with her response, Perinaz resumed devouring her child-sized sandwich. Suzan returned from putting Memet to bed, and stooped over the table to prepare lunch for herself.

“Alina,” she said warmly, “how did you and Eskander first meet?”

My sister and I ordinarily get along famously. Having grown up in three different countries, two of which were still auric-human warzones, we learned to rely on each other in the way that only children of war can know. Our parents, who had been raised during times of relative peace, were able to cope with the auric revolutions that had rocked modern Kurdistan, Ukraine, and countless other countries in the thirties and forties. Suzan and I still retained some of that survivor mentality running from refugee camp to camp, thinking of home as a transient place and clinging to one another, and our family, instead of locations.

Once in a good while, however, she would say something that pushed a button in the way that only siblings could do. In one seemingly earnest question she had put Alina on the spot, prompting her to reveal the underside of her early days working as a fence for the revolutionary kingdom of Aurichome.

“Suzan...” I began, reproach in my voice.

“At *They Might Be Giant*,” Alina interrupted me, referring to the sports bar that she had owned since returning from the Fourth Gulf War. “Eskander came in when he was just promoted to Nightpath, and we made a connection.”

She wasn’t lying. I had come in to meet her, several times, in my early days working for NIGHT. What she didn’t mention is that every time I visited her, it was to inquire about certain revolutionary informants in the city that were outside of the purview of the Pacific South NIGHT headquarters on Alcatraz.

“What’s a night bath?” Alex asked, stuffing the remains of a fried potato in his mouth.

“Three-nil!” my father jumped out of his seat at the edge of the couch, nearly dropping his forgotten lunch plate. Our seats buzzed faintly with the goal, and the player holograms ran across the vividly green pitch to celebrate with a section of fans that was closest to the field. For his part, my father clenched his fist victoriously, peering closely at the three-dimensional stadium with the gusto of a child appraising a freshly made sand castle.

My mother clucked at him irritably. “Sit *down*, Art,” she said, ripping off a tiny piece of her sandwich and handing it down to the opening of the increasingly precarious-looking cushion fort. A tiny hand snatched it and retreated, Perinaz having made herself comfortable within.

“A Nightpath,” my mother said, glancing testily again at my still-celebrating father, “is someone who protects humans from auric revolutionaries.”

“Here we go,” Suzan said sardonically, reaching for a handful of fried potatoes.

“I didn’t *protect* them, mom,” I said, feeling my blood pressure rise with the direction of the conversation. My parents also knew which buttons to push. “I gathered information about revolutionary movements to better serve interracial relations-”

“Bah!” my father said, sitting down and joining the conversation for the first time. “He was a patsy, telling tales on his own people for the good of the government. I’m glad he’s working for the one true king, now.”

“In *any* case,” my mother continued speaking to Alex as if she hadn’t been interrupted, “your uncle served as a secret agent for many years, until King Thog’run made him his spymaster.”

“Chief of Intelligence, mom,” I corrected.

“Who’s Thog-a-run?” Perinaz’s muffled voice carried through the walls of the pillow fort.

“King of Aurichome!” my father was an expert at carrying conversations while keeping his eyes glued to the ARTV. “Champion of the underraces and regent of San Francisco.”

“What’s an underrace?” Alex said thoughtfully. He had unconsciously scooted over on the loveseat and was now resting his head against Alina’s arm.

“It’s not a nice word, Lexi,” Suzan said quickly, brushing her fingers with a napkin. “When people like your great-grandmother started living underground because they looked different, and had nowhere else to live, humans started calling aurics ‘underraces.’”

It was a half-truth told to a child to keep him sheltered from real-world ironies. With the discovery of ceridium, a new stable and reproducible element that now powered over a third of the earth, the first generation of aurics began appearing in urban centers where ceridium was prevalent. It had unlocked a genetic mutation that had lain dormant for centuries, remembered only in myths about fantastic non-human creatures and the existence of a magical ingredient known as blue orichalcum.

In the twenty twenties, green researchers had struck gold – or, more accurately, blue – with what they called ceridium, an azure-hued synthetic version of blue orichalcum which could be manufactured, recycled, and importantly, monetized. It now powered everything that only fossil fuels once could, and most things that they could not, from flash-frying stoves and anti-gravity boosted cars to augmented reality digital ads and cerujets.

The return of ceridium saw a resurgence of schools of magic as well. Equipped with this missing component of spells, charms, curses, and worse, fringe groups began experimenting with ancient texts that had required the element to function. It wasn’t long before unofficial institutions for the advancement of magical education began to crop up, which were in turn quickly quashed or regulated by the powers-that-be.

World governments weren’t far behind. The United States provided a model of paramilitary response to the rapidly expanding communities of ceridium-unlocked races and magic users with the National Intelligence Guard of Human Technology, or NIGHT. The public-facing mission of NIGHT, and national organizations like it, was to facilitate relations between humans and the new races, while enforcing the regulation of newly-discovered magics, including terramancy, pyromancy, and shadowmancy. It housed elite intelligence specialists such as Nightpaths, Daypaths, and Inquisitors, whose namesakes were drawn from their respective specializations as well as

jurisdictions. In practice, the organization enforced the will of the government in a fashion that was much more surveillant than it was inclusive, which was not unfamiliar to the American populace.

The “underraces,” as they were called, were treated on a spectrum that ranged from mild suspicion to open hostility. Human societies, raised on the xenophobia of red and green scare tactics from previous generations, were all too ready to turn their attention to a new common enemy. The new races were genetically identical to humans except for a tiny mutation that, when exposed to ceridium over an extended period of time, resulted in several different sets of phenotypic variation. Dwarves were, as expected, shorter and stouter than humans, with small and sometimes curling horns protruding from their foreheads. Trolls were considerably larger, with hulking frames and broad faces marred only by giant protruding noses and floppy ears. Gnomes were child-sized, bald, and for the most part genetically myopic. The rest of the underraces were recognizable only by a handful of observable features, whether they be the short tusks and flat noses of the so-called low aurics, or the almond-shaped eyes and curving, leaf-shaped ears of high aurics.

In some places, they were mocked, in others, persecuted. With the exception of a small minority of forward-thinking communities – specifically those which had themselves experienced some ongoing form of marginalization – the underraces were initially viewed as aberrations of humanity and not to be trusted. They lived a harried and harrowed existence on the fringes of society for nearly a generation, until public interest groups began to force the greater society to make space, literally and figuratively, for the rapidly growing underrace populace. Second generationers were gradually accepted into the general workforce and even public office, although old perceptions were very difficult to change. The duality of the “underrace” moniker held, as the new races largely lived underground in the crowded human metropolises, and were overall treated as second-class citizens.

It all changed with Thog’run II.

In an age of unprecedented surveillance and documentation, it was perhaps ironic that very little was publicly known about the auric king’s childhood and early life. A first generationer born to a small farming family in central California, Thog’run had only showed up on government records as a teenager, beginning with his enlistment into the military. The armed forces comprised one of the first avenues of underrace participation in wider society, as it had been for minorities before them, and provided a venue for Thog’run’s particular brand of strategic genius. He quickly made a name for himself as a lieutenant and then captain in the Third Gulf War, but became inevitably disillusioned with the ways in which underraces would give their lives for their countries, yet still endured second-class status when they returned home. Shortly after the war, he went to ground, disappearing once again from the books.

It’s unclear whether Thog’run knew which way the wind was blowing, or if the wind itself marched to the tune of the imminent auric king, but when he resurfaced, there was hell to be paid. The Fourth Gulf War was in full swing when Thog’run’s revolutionary forces commandeered a military base in the Marin Headlands of

Northern California, with the name “Aurichome” on their lips. Caught with their pants down and their military elsewhere, the United States government and the NIGHTs quickly capitulated the region in a matter of days, allowing the revolutionaries to set about building their new capital a figurative stone’s throw from the Pacific South NIGHT headquarters.

Thog’run immediately called the underraces from around the globe to ally with Aurichome, granting them sanctuary and even offering amnesty to human individuals and nations who recognized him as king. He gave the underraces a name: aurics, which was an interpretation of the historical term orichites, itself used to describe races affected by blue orichalcum in ages long before. Its root also shared the name with an ion of gold, suggesting the value of the aurics’ worth, rather than the deficiency represented by the “underrace” moniker.

In the years that followed, Thog’run and his constituents had built Aurichome to a nation-state that rivaled most small countries in influence and military strength. A recent failed attempt by the NIGHT leadership in the form of William D. Karthax, the erstwhile Inquisitor General, to unseat Thog’run had resulted in Aurichome annexing San Francisco and the greater Bay Area. Karthax’s treachery had been exposed, Thog’run gained official political recognition for Aurichome from the U.S. government and the NIGHTs, and I got a new job. It had been a long year of building and rebuilding since then.

“So are we underraces or aurics?” Alex was asking, drawing me out of my reverie.

“Both,” Suzan replied smoothly, “but being called aurics is much *nicer*.”

Alex nodded, satisfied with the response for now. He fidgeted with a button on his pants, still leaning against Alina.

“Alina,” my mother began, changing the subject, “you should speak with Art about baseball! I’m sure you’ll have a lot to talk about.”

My father drew himself away from the soccer match for the briefest of moments, again looking at Alina as if in a new light.

“Hadzic?” he asked, recognition finally dawning in his almond-shaped eyes. “Relief pitcher for the Giants for the sixty-eight series?”

Alina touched her cap in recognition. “It was a tough one, but we ground it out.”

My father looked from Alina to me, approval written all over his face. “Impressive,” he said.

I blushed uncharacteristically.

“Actually,” Alina said, putting her arm around Alex comfortably, “the reason I came by was to remind Eskander about an upcoming charity event sponsored by Aurichome. The king is sponsoring a Veterans’ All-Star game this weekend, and I’ll be pitching an inning or so to represent the National League West.”

I nodded, remembering the details without needing to look at my digitab’s calendar. “I’ll be there, Alina.”

“I want to go!” Perinaz’s voice piped from within the pillow fort.

“Me too!” Alex said, snuggling closer to Alina on the loveseat.

“Well,” Alina said, looking at me for endorsement, if not consent, “I’m sure we could easily get tickets for all of you, if you’d like to come.”

I shrugged, resigned. It would be a mess trying to wrangle my family at what would ordinarily be a work event for me, but I couldn’t see a way out of it.

“Sure,” I said.

“Yay!” the children yelled in unison. My father grinned at the prospect of going to a live sports game, particularly one in which he now personally knew one of the players.

“It’s a date!” my mother said, beaming.

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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.