

# **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*

# SHADOWMANCY

BOOK THREE OF THE NIGHTPATH TRILOGY

M. S. Farzan

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For Annie

You inspire me to follow my dreams, no matter how crazy they may seem

# KEY LOCATIONS

**Aurichome** – Squatting less than forty miles from San Francisco proper in what’s known as the “North Bay,” the nation of Aurichome was once a haven for all races, but has recently seen its borders closed under the despotic rule of Agrid the Destroyer.

**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 once took 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 known equally as “the Destroyer” and “the Betrayer,” Agrid has the command of a legion of assassins that are loyal to his word alone, and is the new leader of Aurichome after seizing the throne by force with the help of the Unaligned in the Three Factions War.

**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 former official Consul for Human-Auric Relations.

**Andrew Alyawarre** – An Australian human auromancer, Andrew Alyawarre was coerced by the Unaligned to kidnap Aurichome’s crown prince, allying himself with the auric nation after their help in recovering his sister, Celine.

**Celine Alyawarre** – A teenage human chronomancer, Celine Alyawarre was abducted by the Unaligned during the events leading up to the Three Factions War and has since been traveling with her brother, Andrew.

**Damara Drivas** – (location unknown) Cunning, driven, and deadly, Damara Drivas is a human Inquisitor and formerly NIGHT’s most politically influential, public-facing figure next to the Inquisitor General Marguerite Liu.

**Eskander Aradowsi** – (location unknown) Once spymaster to the king, Eskander Aradowsi holds the dubious honor of being one of the first high auric NIGHT agents, having made the jump to Aurichome after a mission gone south.

**Fazgha Hezdottr** – Queen of Aurichome, Fazgha Hezdottr is a low auric terramancer and the auric nation’s leader in exile after King Thog’run’s disappearance during the Three Factions War.

**Gloric Vunderfel** – Gloric Vunderfel is a gnome technomancer extraordinaire and Aurichome’s former Chief of Technology, having recently taken over as the Sigil of Sparks.

**Kwame Daigan** – Kwame Daigan is a high auric shadowmancer and friend to Zzethromandus.

**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 once boasted of a sentient, preternaturally clairvoyant leader who, just as strangely, took the form of an early-twentieth century automatic vacuum cleaner and was attended only by his cantankerous - and very human - Scribe. The charade of the augur's true form was exposed during the Three Factions War, resulting in Gloric Vunderfel taking over as the new Sigil.

**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** – (location unknown) A low auric war hero and first 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 former personal tactical advisors.

**William D. Karthax** – 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 has since been voted as the Mayor of San Francisco after allying with the Unaligned and promoting a xenophobic message against the auric-majority undercity.

**Zzethromandus** – Zzethromandus is an ancient shadow dragon and friend to Kwame Daigan.

# PROLOGUE

*It has been six months since what is being called the Three Factions War.*

*The following is my first log as the new Sigil of Sparks.*

*The previous Sigil was destroyed in a battle with Agrid the Destroyer, a low auric entromancer in the service of the Unaligned. The former, who is brother to Fazgha Hezdottr, queen of Aurichome and leader of the underrace nation, employed technomancers to raise lifeless dragons from beneath the earth, fusing them with machinery to create leviathans from the abyss. The latter have proven to be a devastating adversary for Aurichome and the National Intelligence Guard of Human Technology, known by most as NIGHT.*

*Originally conceived as a paramilitary force to contain the new races of people that began appearing in the early to mid-twenty-first century, NIGHT now serves as an armed buffer between humans and aurics, with their Pacific South headquarters located on the island of Alcatraz in the San Francisco Bay. A stone's throw away in the North Bay lies the underrace nation of Aurichome, NIGHT's bitter rivals and once led by the low auric warrior, Thog'run II.*

*I am complicit in King Thog'run's demise, by virtue of my inability to stop the Destroyer and the plot carried out by his factors in the Unaligned.*

*The Unaligned, or at least a splinter group thereof, overtook the previous Sigil by force, hijacking his massive network to pave the path for a coup within the ranks of both Aurichome and NIGHT. Numbered among them are assassins, mages, and of course, the technodragons that roam as nightmares throughout the Bay Area sky, impervious to the weaponry of the other two factions. Even the United States military, occupied as they are in protracted battles overseas, have proven ineffectual against the clandestine might of the Unaligned, who have claimed San Francisco as their own.*

*The new faction gained support quickly, and secretly, under the noses of NIGHT and my previous master, King Thog'run of Aurichome. Bringing the xenophobic William D. Karthax, the former Inquisitor General of NIGHT, into their fold, they spread an anti-underrace message throughout the Bay Area, initiating a revolt in the undercity below San Francisco just as Agrid brought his technodragons to bear in the forests above Aurichome.*

*The result, and ensuing fallout, has been catastrophic. Both the king and his Chief of Intelligence Eskander Aradowsi were lost in battle, their bodies as yet unfound. The throne has passed to Queen Fazgha in exile, as Agrid has assumed control of Aurichome with full authority. The current Inquisitor General, Marguerite Liu, still oversees the NIGHT headquarters, but is powerless against the new leadership of Aurichome and the independent city of San Francisco, which designated a resurgent Karthax as its mayor in the recent public election.*

*Seeing the havoc caused by the decades of turmoil between NIGHT and Aurichome, thousands of humans have flocked to the standard of the Unaligned, joined by*

*underraces who are afraid of the repercussions of dissent. A silent majority elected Karthax into power, making the Unaligned's rulership of the region complete.*

*The former Inquisitor General has begun building his barrier around the undercity, claiming that doing so will keep San Franciscans safe from the perceived threat of the underraces that have lived among them for over fifty years. I have helped to provide sanctuary for the queen, her loyal subjects, and others who are still true to the Aurichome of old, but I dare not reveal their location in this log. The previous Sigil proved to be many times the technomancer that I am, and yet he met his demise at the hands of the Unaligned.*

*I, Gloric Vunderfel, former Chief of Technology to the king of Aurichome, write not with hope that this log will be read, as it is encrypted within the same network that I have worked to rebuild after the Unaligned wrested it free from my predecessor. I write for the same reason as those that have come before me: to document the shifts of power that are evident through magic and technology, to read the patterns of human and auric civilizations and employ my network to promote balance among them.*

*I write, secondarily, for a reason that I suspect has been shared by the long line of Sigils that precede me, from well before the synthetic element of ceridium was discovered and revealed the genetic mutations that gave rise to the phenotypic variation of the underraces and the resource to power enchantments and spells.*

*I write because it is lonely to know everything, and to be bound by oath to share it with no one.*

*-The Sigil of Sparks*

# ONE

*"They have slept for a millennium. I do not imagine they will be thrilled to be roused."*

-Kwame Daigan, Master of Shadow

Contrary to all of my previous thoughts on the matter, the future turned out to be eerily similar to the present.

For six months, we walked the blasted land above Aurichome, moths to a flame that threatened to overwhelm us on a daily basis. We found safety among the gnarled trees that ringed the giant clearing that was once a battlefield, still recovering from the ravages of magical war and time. Informants once loyal to the throne met us at way stations, providing us with food and news from within the undercity beneath San Francisco, painstakingly putting together piece after puzzle piece that had taken decades to uncover.

It had taken me two weeks to emerge from my time-warped daze, and another two to comprehend the depth of the mess into which I had been dropped.

My last memory of the old world was shadowstepping to the back of a monstrous, magic-powered technodragon, only to be blasted by the foul breath of another of the beasts that had Agrid the Destroyer as its commander. I had been ensorcelled by a spell cast by Celine Alyawarre, a teenage girl who was just coming into understanding her chronomancy power, and fell through time and space to appear in a dystopian future, roughly thirty years ahead of my present.

Celine's spell had saved me, and ruined everything else in the process.

I had emerged not far from the battle site, in a desolate clearing where Agrid's technodragons had blasted the earth decades before. A much older and more powerful Celine had greeted me, along with an ancient shadowmancer named Kwame Daigan and a gigantic black dragon, Zzethromandus, who was an odd traveling companion. They took me into their protection, gently explaining the events of the past as I recovered from the mental and physical disorientation of being transported into the future, while keeping us safe from an enemy that always seemed to prowl at the corners of our vision.

Our nomadic lifestyle was difficult with a cerujet-sized dragon in tow, but not impossible. As a shadow dragon, Zzethromandus could cloak himself in gloom with a thought, obscuring him from all but the most discerning instruments at night. He spent most of the day away from the Bay Area, hunting or doing whatever it is that dragons do in their free time, communicating with Kwame by some unseen method to discern our location and join us after the sun had set for the day.

The shadowmancer himself was one of the most peculiar aurics I have met. He was extremely eccentric, preferring a thick, colorfully patterned Tibetan wool coat and simple breeches instead of more modern clothing, and had a deep, melodious voice that was accentuated by his archaic manner of speech. His skin had a translucent ebony hue to it, and as a full high auric, his ears were twice as long as mine, pierced

with simple studs made from black pearl. I placed his accent from somewhere in West Africa, and in my six months of knowing him, he had proven to be friendly, if somewhat serious.

Celine, my other traveling companion, was just as strange, but in a different manner entirely. The aboriginal human moved with a preternatural grace that was almost otherworldly, and wholly unlike the young girl that I had met thirty years prior. She had mastered the nascent chronomancy ability that I had observed, and the potency of it followed her, sometimes trailing in her wake or flashing in her eyes when she was angry. Her broad features and curly brown hair had matured and softened with age, and although she retained the hearing disability from her youth, she often seemed to know what I was about to say before the words had left my mouth.

The events that had led me to appear in a not-so-distant, dystopian future were, at least as I understood them, a tangled mess that Celine, Kwame, and, less patiently, Zzethromandus had attempted to unravel for me on multiple occasions. As they would describe it, concurrent to my demise in the battle that had delivered me out of time, King Thog'run II of Aurichome had also disappeared, and the tide swung in the favor of the Unaligned, who had also initiated a revolution in the underrace-majority undercity below San Francisco. As NIGHT attempted to contain the fires that had been unleashed on the undercity, Aurichome and the Unaligned waged a terrible battle in the North Bay while four of Agrid's technodragons destroyed everything they came across. A terrible toll was paid as Aurichome's innards were laid bare by the unnatural beasts' magical breath, tearing through the bedrock to expose a terrified underrace nation underneath.

The Three Factions War lasted less than a week, as the aurikar survivors quickly capitulated to Agrid in the absence of their king, and the underraces living among and beneath San Francisco were cowed by the Unaligned, even with whatever meager protection NIGHT was able to provide. In a matter of months, William D. Karthax, my former boss in the predominantly human organization, was elected mayor, and the Unaligned's takeover of the region was complete.

The decades had not been kind to the aurics and humans of the San Francisco Bay Area. After ten years of haphazard authoritarian rule, Agrid had proven to be a terrifying dictator and a terrible administrator, running Aurichome figuratively into the ground as its inhabitants fled for dubiously safer pastures. The aurikar nation, once on the rise to greatness under Thog'run II and his family, was eventually abandoned, and my companions and I stalked the forests above a ruined city that was haunted with unachieved splendor. The San Francisco aboveground had become an unincorporated city and a bastion of humanity, with a wall built around the underrace undercity that made travel between them next to impossible.

To my knowledge, Karthax still lived, innervated by his Inquisitor magic or some foul mancy, and had suspiciously been voted in as mayor in every succeeding election, the irony of which was not lost on the company that I kept. After the crumbling and eventual abandonment of Aurichome, Agrid had disappeared, his technodragons lazily

prowling the skies about Northern California, listless and riderless but no less dangerous to the cities below.

I hoped the low auric entromancer was rotting somewhere in a grave of his own making, but my instincts knew better.

Celine, with help from Kwame and Zzethromandus, had explained that she had met the latter two about ten years ago, after having returned to her native Australia in search of asylum. Her older brother, an auromancer giant named Andrew, had been killed in defending my friend and the new Sigil of Sparks, Gloric Vunderfel, and the young girl had no place to turn other than the home of her birth. Over time, she had come to terms with her magical prowess and became a chronomancer of no small repute, using her abilities to perform minor miracles in places of auric resistance around the world.

I wasn't sure how long Kwame had been walking the earth, but from the high auric's aged features and archaic speech, I guessed that he had been around for centuries. Unbeknownst to the general populace, he and Zzethromandus were the missing connection between the auric present and what Kwame called the "orichite" past, linking cultural histories of magic and fancy to a very real, and very dark, future. Their presence confirmed that the synthetic element ceridium, developed in the twenty-twenties by green researchers as a sustainable fuel source, once existed, centuries ago, in a natural form known as blue orichalcum. Then as now, the element powered magical spells collectively known as "mancy," and revealed a dormant mutation in some humans that, when exposed to ceridium or blue orichalcum, resulted in the phenotypic variation exhibited by the underraces, including low and high aurics, dwarves, gnomes, and trolls.

I have written elsewhere about the second-class citizen status of the underraces as they began appearing in the twenty-first century, but suffice it to say that their condition has been the complete opposite of their ancestors' counterparts. As Kwame describes it, in times prior to the western Dark Ages, aurics – then known as orichites – enjoyed their own civilizations that were coveted by the barbaric humans that prowled near their borders, calling them "elves," "orcs," and using other fantastic terminology to describe them.

Over time, humans became savvy to their neighbors' use of blue orichalcum, utilizing the element to power their own growing schools of magical knowledge and eventually exhausting the world's natural reserves of it. Within a century, orichites all but disappeared from the face of the earth, their features fading into obscurity as their genetic mutation returned to dormancy and they intermingled with human communities. The study of mancy lay barren as well without an element to power it, and magic became relegated to myth and legend instead of the factual history it warranted.

A small order of shadowmancers, numbering a solitary chronomancer among them, foretold of the depletion of blue orichalcum and subsequent decline of the orichites. They were treated with derision as misanthropes and forgotten when their divination had come to pass. The prophecy, outrageous as it may have seemed at the time, was

that humankind would overtake the natural order, sending orichite civilization into darkness for an eternity, until a new source of blue orichalcum was discovered. The shadowmancers believed in the eventual resurgence of an orichite people, although the mechanism by which they would rediscover the element that is now called ceridium was unknown to them.

The shadowmancers, referring to themselves ridiculously as the “Masters of Shadow,” sought to preserve orichite civilization by channeling their power into one being, safeguarding the essence of their magic within a vessel that was powerful enough to sustain it until the return of blue orichalcum. They made a deal with a dragon that was known to them, to use its body as the vessel and to instruct them in the intricacies of the shadow magic needed to enact the ritual. The dragon would disperse its power among three others of its ilk, awaiting a time foretold among them when blue orichalcum would resurface.

That dragon was Zzethromandus.

The Masters of Shadow spent a fortnight, years before the disappearance of blue orichalcum and the orichites from the earth, casting a long and winding spell that channeled their essence into Zzethromandus, who was to then disperse it among the three others of his kind. A shadowmancer was bound to him as a guide among humankind, should the dragon need one, and bereft of his power but still retaining his orichite form due to his connection with Zzethromandus.

The initial transformation of power was successful, but once the Masters of Shadow were gone, their power depleted and their bodies empty husks, the dragon was unable to complete the final spell to preserve the other dragons. Painfully, the beast sat and watched as his ministrations only partially took effect, placing the dragons in a kind of stasis that persisted until the present time.

Whether Kwame was the dragon’s original guide, or has inherited the position from another of the Masters of Shadow, the dark auric hasn’t said, but he truly has no magical affinity, shadowmancy or otherwise. His living curse has been to wander the world in search of a shadowmancer fit to complete the ritual and restore life to the other dragons, bringing the prophecy disclosed by the Masters of Shadow to culmination.

That, Celine revealed to me one night as we were discussing strategy after months on the move, was where I came in.

“You want me to what?” I had asked, trying to sort out my new companions’ explanation of why they had brought me to a future dystopia and what my role would be in the weeks to come.

“We need a shadowmancer of some ability,” Celine patiently explained for what must have been the hundredth time, “to complete the spell that the Masters of Shadow began, and bring Zzethromandus’ kin back to life.”

I swallowed, hard. I had been given extensive shadowmancy training in my time with NIGHT and was an adequate spellcaster, but sincerely doubted I had the aptitude to wake a sleeping gerbil from its slumber with my magic, let alone a dragon.



“I don’t understand,” I said, stalling, “There are plenty of NIGHT agents and others that are proficient with shadowmancy. Why not go to them?”

Celine shook her head gently, her long, gold earrings sparkling against her brown skin in the light of our little campfire. “None of the agents are of auric blood, which is a requirement of the spell.”

That at least made sense to me, as my grandmother had the high auric gene, and passed it on to my father and his children. “Why wait until now, then?” I pressed. “Why bring me all the way to this wasteland instead of tapping me before the Three Factions War?”

Kwame cleared his throat, shaking a handful of sunflower seeds in his hand before popping one into his mouth. “I have been searching for a very long time, Eskander. First, we-” he waved a swarthy hand vaguely at the forest, as if to include Zzethromandus, who was roaming somewhere in the night, “-waited for centuries for blue orichalcum – what you call ceridium – to be rediscovered. Then we waited until the old ways were renewed, and mancy came to a suitable level of development.

“But we tarried overlong. It wasn’t until several years after the Destroyer made his move against Aurichome that we met Celine, who remembered your sacrifice in the battle that began the Three Factions War, and vouched for your ability and orichite heritage.”

“Wait,” I protested, my head spinning. “Am I dead in this world?”

Celine shook her head again. “Not anymore.”

“I was dead?”

“You weren’t alive,” Kwame explained.

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

“After I met Kwame, and then Zzethromandus,” Celine took over, “it became apparent that the only way to undo what happened in the past, was to return to it. But deciding on a thing and doing it are two separate tasks entirely.

“It took me several years,” she continued, “just to perfect the spell that would bring you here, and another six months for us to locate the sizeable amount of ceridium required to cast it.”

I nodded dumbly. “How did you do it?”

Celine beamed, and for the faintest instant, I saw in her face a shadow of the girl I had helped save from the Unaligned’s clutches years ago in the monster-overrun Presidio. “You’ll recall that I cast a spell of quickening upon you on that fateful day,” she said, recounting our battle with Agrid’s technodragons and the Unaligned. “That incantation provided a window in time with which to work, and the beast’s foul breath was the catalyst in your time to help propel you to ours.”

I remembered all too well the technodragon, clad in rotting flesh and metal machinery, spouting a beam of magic from its maw that was intercepted by Celine’s chronomancy spell. “So the technodragon’s breath sent me into the future?”

“Not exactly,” Celine said, her voice still thick from the hearing impairment she had experienced since birth, but no less clear or powerful. “Time is not a fixed variable, as most people think; it is more of a river that ebbs and flows, rushing ever forward. If

one knows how to swim against the current, one can manipulate their place in its passage.

“But even the most skilled chronomancer requires a power source to work against the natural tide. On our side of the river, we used a great amount of ceridium to bring you here. In your time, the beast’s breath provided the fuel, while my spell indicated the exact location in which to find you.”

My thoughts began racing again. “So I *didn’t* die when the technodragon hit me with its breath?”

“You didn’t,” Celine confirmed, bringing the conversation full circle. “But neither did you live. You were transported to our time, without anything in between.”

I sat back for a while, staring at nothing while Celine waited patiently and Kwame spit sunflower shells into the fire. I wrestled with the idea of asking about those close to me, of Alina, of my family and friends. I decided that I didn’t want to know how they had fared.

“What do we need to do?” I asked after a long while.

Kwame smiled, his teeth white and a little predatory. “We need to wake up the dragon’s family.”

The plan, as it was explained to me, was to travel to the three locations of Zzethromandus’ kin, awakening them from their stasis by channeling a shadowmancy ritual that Kwame, himself being bereft of magical ability, would teach me. Celine would then transport us back in time to do battle with Agrid and his abominations and, hoping against hope, forestall the apocalyptic future to which my companions had transported me.

It didn’t sound easy, and the logistics proved to be even more complicated. For both the shadowmancy spell and Celine’s attempt to return us to my time, we would need unusually large amounts of ceridium, which were ordinarily available only through official government channels that were not accessible to us as fugitives. Celine’s factors had a lead on a potential source that was being stockpiled in the undercity below San Francisco, which was ringed on all sides by a now-ancient barricade that Karthax’s people had constructed.

The scheme also presupposed that I had the magical prowess to bring dragons to life, about which I was skeptical. I resolved to take it one step at a time, having already spent months attempting to become accustomed to the idea that I had been transported in time and would have to learn some arcane shadowmancy spell for a shot at returning things to normal.

I slowly stood in front of the fire, latching my nightblade to its holster on my hip and stretching my back, which was sore from sitting.

“When do we get started?” I asked.

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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.