



**FORSAKEN  
ANGELS**

MIKE TAM

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A FIRE DRAKE PRESS BOOK  
TORONTO

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*For My Friends...  
Who know who they are*

**FORSAKEN  
ANGELS**



## Prologue

Pain seared through my chest with each pounding footfall but I didn't dare stop running.

*You stop, you die.*

I'd only taken a glancing blow, pressed up as I had been beside the door when the breaching shotgun took out the hinges. The pellets hadn't actually penetrated thanks to the nanoweave mesh sewn into the lining of my jacket but it felt as though I had at least two cracked ribs. With considerable effort, I channeled the pain into energy for a quick burst of speed as I rounded a corner, trying to put more distance between me and the cop while he couldn't see me.

The plan had been so simple – a bag and grab job I'd pulled many times before – but it's funny how just one unforeseen variable can bring the whole thing crashing down around you. What was that we

used to say in the Corps? Oh yeah, *no plan survives initial contact*.

See, the guy I'd been after was a nobody. A street-scum drug runner so low on the ladder that if you took him out, two more would replace him within the week and the people upstairs wouldn't have even noticed. But I'd been told he had information on the whereabouts of an old acquaintance of mine that I needed to find, so I'd decided to set up my own little meeting to ask him.

I'd planned the whole op down the last detail, spent two days casing the warehouse where he'd set up shop and had even gone to the trouble of paying some of the locals to keep tabs on the guy. When I got the call that he was at home, I made my move.

I left my hired driver cruising around the area in a rented van, making sure he understood that as soon as he got my signal, he had thirty seconds to pull up outside the warehouse and open the door for our guest. As for me, I had to get in unseen, locate the guy and drop him before he could reach any of the guns in the arsenal the locals had told me he had. And since I wanted him alive, all I carried was a little subcompact Riley nine-mil loaded with a mag of K/O rounds. The plan was all set.

And that's when the cops showed up.

I'd just managed to slip in the back when the lights went out and I was instantly left blind. Feeling my way back along the wall, I tried to find the door again when suddenly, all I knew was thunder and pain. The metal door slammed inwards, a squad of SWAT officers spilling through in its wake. Shit, I'd

stumbled into a bust!

I opened fire with the Riley, knowing full well it wouldn't do a damn thing against their body armor and gas masks but thinking it might buy me a few seconds anyway. Scrambling on hands and knees, I crawled deeper into the warehouse, hoping to lose myself in the maze of storage racks before finding another way out.

When I'd found a relatively quiet corner, I struggled to my feet using the racks for purchase. My chest stung like fuck but I tamped it down, filed it away for later. Reaching into my pocket, I ejected the empty mag from the Riley with one hand and slammed home a fresh one with the other. Now, to hit the recall switch so I could get a ride out of here. I fumbled around in my other pocket.

*Where the fuck—?*

It must have fallen out in the confusion. Did I want to go back and look for it or take my chances on foot? A SWAT officer rounding the corner made my decision for me.

"Hey, you! Stop!" He ordered.

I squeezed off two rounds blindly behind me and bolted.

"Ah, shit, we've got a runner!"

I ducked through an empty space in the racks, momentarily catching my foot on a broken shipping pallet before recovering. He didn't even slow, crashing through hot on my tail. I jinked right and then drove hard left when I reached a perpendicular aisle, seeing in the dim light slanting in from the ceiling windows a door marked with red and white diagonals. Bursting through without slowing, I found

myself outside in the open air and just kept running.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I didn't notice the SWAT truck that lurched out of the alley ahead and cut me off, screeching to a halt right in front of me. I ran headlong into it, making a hollow *thunk* before stumbling backwards and falling flat on my ass, dazed. The driver flung open the passenger side door and leapt out, jamming a handgun into the spot just above the bridge of my nose.

"End of the line, asshole."

The one who'd been chasing me rounded the corner with his submachine gun leveled and wrestled me face down onto the pavement when he arrived. I bit off a scream as my ribs slammed into the ground but he paid me no attention, slapping a pair of flex cuffs onto my wrists and hauling me roughly to my feet.

"You," he said, breathing heavily, "Are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say—"

"I know my rights," I muttered and they hoisted me into the truck.

\* \* \*

## Chapter One

*As I drift aimlessly through open space, stars twinkling dimly against a black velvet backdrop, I gradually become aware that I'm breathing. With this realization comes a sense of déjà vu. But if I'm having the dream again, that means she's supposed to be—*

*There.*

*The girl floats serenely before me, her pale skin almost indistinguishable from the white dress that billows around her in slow motion as though under water. A cloud of dark brown hair frames her narrow face and she fixes me with cold blue-gray eyes, the color of the ocean after a storm. Her lips move silently, pleading with me though I can't hear. I strain, trying to make out the words—*

My eyes snapped open, the darkness of the cell around me forcing me to reach out with my other

senses. I couldn't tell just yet what had woken me but the subconsciously-triggered stress response meant it was probably trouble. I lay very still, breathing quietly and listened. But it wasn't a sound I'd heard. It was a scent. Cigarette smoke.

Lewison.

The guard's bulky frame appeared in the doorway, silhouetted against the bars, the glowing tip of his cigarette burning a hole in the darkness. Technically, guards weren't supposed to smoke while on duty, but then again there were a lot of things the guards technically weren't supposed to do that Lewison seemed to revel in. And if his partner behind him cradling the shock pulser was any indication, I was in for some serious revelry.

"Convict Sixty-Eight Twenty-Six, step up to the bars slowly and let me see your hands," he drawled.

I didn't move, pretending to be asleep. Lewison drew his baton from its holster on his belt and *clanged* it against the bars.

"*Now, convict,*" he said, an edge creeping into his voice.

*Well, shit.*

I shrugged off the threadbare blanket and swung my legs over the side of the bunk, dropping onto the concrete floor. I plodded up to the bars.

"Hands," he said.

I stuck my hands through the small gap in the door and was immediately cuffed.

"Now step back into the center of the cell and do not move."

I did as I was instructed and Lewison swiped a keycard, unlocking the door. He stepped out of his

partner's line of fire as the door trundled open.

"Come with me," he said, and started off down the hall. I followed and the other guard fell in behind me, not quite pointing the pulser at my back.

"Where're you taking me?" I asked.

That earned me a smack with the butt of the pulser. I stumbled, refusing to fall, and somehow managed to regain my balance. Raising my linked hands to rub the back of my skull, I shot the guard behind me a nasty look.

"Eyes front, convict," he sneered.

They marched me out of the block and into the visitation area where they opened one of the doors into a claustrophobic conference room with a metal table and chairs bolted to the floor. A camera with an unblinking red diode watched me from one ceiling corner and I let myself feel a small surge of hope. Maybe they wouldn't try anything with the Man watching.

"Sit down and put your hands on the table in front of you," Lewison said. I obeyed and he attached my cuffs to the table with a short length of chain. They left without another word, the door slamming shut solidly behind them.

I waited, my back to the door, for what seemed like ten minutes before I heard muffled voices outside. A few minutes later, the door opened and shut again. I didn't turn around to see who'd walked in.

"You're looking pretty pale, Mercer," a familiar voice said. "I guess you haven't been getting much sun lately."

His footsteps clicked on the concrete floor as he

rounded the table into my field of view. The green and khaki service uniform he wore was immaculate, each pleat and crease razor-sharp, his black leather shoes polished to a mirrored gleam. An olive-drab garrison cap perched atop his high and tight haircut completed the picture – Lieutenant Colonel Liam Coxwell, my former CO in the flesh.

“If I’d known you were coming, I’d have made more of an effort,” I said.

Smoothing down his tie with a well-manicured hand, he slid into the chair opposite me and dropped a manila folder he’d been carrying onto the table. He clasped his hands together on top of it and leaned forward.

“You’ve been a difficult man to track down. I didn’t think you’d have made it off-world.”

I smirked. “That was kind of the idea.”

“Well in that case, you fucked up,” he said, “Managed to get yourself arrested. It was only a matter of time before that crossed my desk.”

“So, what?” I said, jerking my chin at the folder. “You going to court-martial me for desertion? Drag me back to Earth just so you can throw me in the brig for eighteen months? C’mon, don’t tell me you came all the way out here for that.”

He shrugged. “Well, we take care of our own. But no. I’m here to ask you some questions.”

“I’ve got nothing to say.”

“If you cooperate, maybe we can work out a deal.”

I turned away. “Not interested.”

“You might not feel that way if you hear me out first.”

"Doubt it," I said and turned to call for the guards so they could escort me back to my cell.

"Ouroboros," Coxwell said quietly.

I froze, halfway to my feet. His face remained impassive.

"Do I have your attention now?"

I sat back down. "Okay, I'm listening."

Grimly, Coxwell opened the folder and extracted a photo which he slid across the table to me.

"Raczek," I said, frowning down at the face of one of my old squadmates in the coroner's photo. "What happened to him?"

He slid another photo across the table. I glanced at it and instantly wrenched my head away.

"Jesus!"

He'd been cut up pretty bad, then the wounds pulled apart until the flesh tore. I felt the bile rising in the back of my throat.

"He was found by local law enforcement after one of his neighbors complained about the smell," Coxwell said. "Cause of death was blood loss, and the autopsy report suggests it wasn't quick."

I said nothing. I couldn't get the image out of my head.

"He had time to write this, at any rate."

Coxwell produced a third photo. It was a close-up of the floor where the words MERCER and OUROBOROS had been smeared in broad, red strokes onto the scuffed wood.

I turned back to Coxwell, face carefully neutral. "You mentioned a deal."

He nodded, tapping the photo with the backs of two fingers. "Tell me why he mentions you by name

and what 'Ouroboros' means and I'll talk to the warden about reducing your sentence."

I scoffed, shook my head. "That's not good enough."

His eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"Your deal sucks. I'm sure you can do better than that."

He shrugged. "Take it or leave it. Makes no difference to me."

"Liar," I said, lip curling, "You flew forty million miles out here to talk to me. That can't have been cheap. What'll the brass think when you come home empty handed?"

I grinned as the first crack in his stoic veneer appeared. His eyes narrowed and his jaw jutted out a fraction of an inch as he pressed his lips together.

"Listen here, Mercer," he said, voice low, "You're serving a twelve-year sentence and you've only been here eight months. If you cooperate, you could be out of here in half the time."

"Don't insult me," I spat. "If we're going to play ball, I want nothing less than a full pardon and free passage to anywhere in the system. Let me know when you've got that taken care of. 'Til then, I'm not saying another word."

There was a flash in his eyes that made me think a meltdown was coming but to my surprise, he managed to regain his composure. Calmly, he got up and walked over to the door, knocking twice. He had a quiet conversation with the guards on the other side and when they came to unchain me and escort me back to my cell, Coxwell was long gone.

I knew he was bluffing.

Wasn't he?

Doubts began to surface when I saw they weren't leading me back to my cell but down to the SHU instead. I smirked. Did he really think a night in solitary was going to soften me up? He'd be back tomorrow. I was sure of it.

Forty-eight hours later and I was beginning to think I'd miscalculated. I knew Coxwell would be back eventually, but I had the feeling that he was trying to teach me a lesson first. He was wasting his time.

A lot of guys can't handle solitary and they either end up rocking back and forth in a dark corner or babbling incoherently. That had been me the first time, nineteen years old and sent down the hole after a fight. I was a zombie by the time they let me out, going through the motions without a word to anyone.

One of the old-timers took pity on me and introduced me to the prison library just to keep my mind occupied. I ended up devouring every scrap of reading material I could get my hands on, even giving up smoking so I could trade cigarettes for books.

Once, I traded for a copy of *The Art of War* and jumped into it right away, thinking it would teach me to fight. I'd read it cover to cover three times before I realized it was actually teaching me to win without having to fight in the first place. Even now, almost two decades later, one particular lesson had stuck with me. It went:

*All warfare is deception so when strong, feign weakness and when weak, feign strength. If your target is nearby, make it appear to be distant. Only thus will you achieve your objectives.*

Of course, that meant I had to get a handle on the bigger picture before I could put my own spin on it. Seeing as how I had so much free time, I took the opportunity to try and piece the situation together.

I figured that Raczek had been working for Coxwell when he bought it. The colonel hadn't explicitly said so but it was all there if you took the time to work it out. After all, if Raczek's body had been found by the local law, why else would they have informed Coxwell of all people? Of course, that alone wasn't going to be my ticket to freedom, but it was a start. I'd have to talk a pretty good game to get more information before lining up one hell of a Hail Mary pass. Then again, every con is a gambler and I was no exception.

They finally dragged me back out into the light after three days, returning me to the visitation room where Coxwell was seated with arms crossed and a smug expression on his face.

"So, are you ready to talk to me yet?"

"You got that pardon yet?" I mumbled, keeping my eyes on the table in front of me. My face was itchy under three days worth of stubble but with my hands chained up, there wasn't much I could do about it.

"You're treading on thin ice, Mercer," he said, his affability fading, "If you won't talk to me this way then I can always start using enhanced interrogation

techniques. Are you that eager to see what happens when I attach your balls to a battery?"

I decided not to call his bluff. "Could you repeat the question, please?"

He balled his fists momentarily, then relaxed. "Tell me why Raczek named you specifically and tell me what 'Ouroboros' means."

I finally looked up at him. "It's a code word."

He threw up his hands. "Oh, really? Thanks! That clears up everything!"

"I'm not finished," I said, choosing my next words carefully. "Ouroboros is a symbol, either a snake or a dragon eating its own tail. Basically, what goes around comes around. It's supposed to remind me that I owe him a favor, and now he's calling it in."

"So what's the favor?"

I shrugged. "I dunno, you tell me. What was he doing for you?"

He blinked.

"I'm asking the questions here," he said, leaning forward irritably.

I opened my hands, or tried to. "And I'm trying to give you answers, but I don't have enough info to work with."

He eyed me warily for a few moments before answering. "I'm afraid the specifics are classified, but what I *can* tell you is that for the past few months, Raczek was involved in an investigation on my behalf. He was supposed to deliver his latest report to me when he dropped off the grid. Then, two weeks later, he turns up dead."

"Hm," I said, stalling while deciding how to best play my cards. "Sounds like he wants me to finish

the job for him.”

Coxwell cocked an eyebrow.

“Raczek wasn’t stupid,” I said, taking the lie and running with it, “He probably realized someone was on to him, so he hid the intel he’d collected before they could get to him. Clearly, he wants me to find it and turn it over to you so it wasn’t all for nothing.”

He still didn’t look convinced.

“Look, colonel,” I said, putting on my best earnest face, “I get that you don’t exactly trust me, but my friend is dead and his last act was to make sure I remembered that I owe him one. I’m not going to flake out on that. We take care of our own, remember?”

Coxwell was silent, mulling it over for a long while. I fought back the impulse to squirm. Everything hinged on this, whether or not I’d managed to sell it. I *had* to get back. And soon.

“In that case,” he said finally, “I’m going to have you remanded into military custody under my supervision for the course of the investigation. Get yourself cleaned up and meet me back here in twenty minutes. You and I are going for a ride.”

## Chapter Two

They say you're not supposed to dream while in suspension – that your mind goes into hibernation along with your body – but I had no such luck. Even the fastest ships still took about two weeks to cover the distance between Mars and Earth, and during that time, chemically-induced hibernation or not, I saw *her* again.

But this time, the dream was different.

*“Contact!” Raczek shouts over the chatter of incoming rifle fire, “Eleven o’clock high!”*

*I recognize it immediately. Pakistan, eight years ago, combing through the radioactive fallout of a Karachi slum after a decades-long game of brinkmanship with India had finally gone nuclear.*

*“Check your corners!” Christeson says behind me, “There might be more of them!”*

*I turn and sweep the other side of the street with*

*the barrel of my rifle and find...*

*Wait... That's not right.*

*In front of me is a door – a thin rusted sheet of corrugated steel, crooked against its makeshift frame. Not that that's out of place, but what snares my attention is the white light pouring out from behind it, beckoning me closer.*

*"Movement, right!" Christeson calls, oblivious to my absence.*

*I reach out a hand, my rifle completely forgotten in that way that only happens in dreams. Pushing the door aside, I find myself in a featureless white hallway. I follow it to the end where I arrive at another door, this one sleek and modern. Reaching for the release plate, the door hisses open and I step through into open space.*

*Stars twinkle dimly against a black velvet backdrop. She fixes me with those cold blue-gray eyes, the color of the ocean after a storm. Her lips move silently, pleading with me though I can't hear. I strain, trying to make out the words.*

*It's the slightest of whispers, quickly dissipating like smoke from a snuffed candle.*

*"Please..."*

A sudden rush of cold air jerked me back to reality. I gasped and shivered, flexing stiffened muscles that twinged in protest. Seized with the sudden sensation of drowning, I scrambled, bent forward and let loose with a spasm of racking coughs, expelling the oxygenated suspension fluid from my lungs. As I struggled, a pair of strong arms came in to support me.

*"That's it," said a female voice, "Get it all out. You*

okay now?"

The voice belonged to a middle-aged med tech who handed me a towel as I straightened up.

"Thanks," I croaked, wiping off my face.

She checked me over quickly and once I was steady on my feet, pointed me to a shower stall.

"Your clothes are over on the bench there," she said.

I nodded and climbed in, spending the next several minutes scrubbing the viscous gel off my skin and out of my hair. After toweling off and pulling on my jeans, I noticed my limbs felt heavier than usual as I was buttoning up my shirt. Having spent the past four years in Martian gravity, my atrophied muscles were no longer conditioned to life at one full gee. These next few months would be rough, getting my body back into shape, but I'd worry about that later.

"The colonel's waiting for you outside," the tech said once I emerged from behind the modesty screen.

"Fantastic," I said without enthusiasm.

"Just go out through the double doors straight ahead once you're in the hall. You can't miss it."

I stepped out of the recovery ward and noted the illuminated exit sign with an arrow pointing towards a set of swinging double doors. Deliberately ignoring it, I went in the opposite direction, looking for a different exit.

"Nice try, Mercer."

*Dammit.*

I'd barely gotten fifty meters. I turned to find Coxwell leaning against one half of the opened

door, arms crossed, with a sardonic look on his face. I trudged back up the hall and he marched me out into the facility proper.

“I want to make one thing very clear,” Coxwell said when we’d reached his office. “Your ass is mine. The only reason you’re here is because I said it was okay, but that can change very quickly. You’re free to continue Raczek’s investigation but you can bet I’ll be keeping you on a very short leash. Mark my words, if you fuck with me, I will fuck you up, you hear?”

I nodded.

“Good. Now put this on.” He reached into a desk drawer and tossed a small black object at me. I caught it.

“What’s this?” It looked like a wristwatch but without a face.

“Your leash. It’ll let me track your movements in real-time.”

I gave him my best wounded puppy look.

“I’m sensing a lack of trust,” I said but reluctantly did as I was told. I hiked a foot up onto his desk, knocking some of his toys out of place and tightened the strap around my ankle before covering the thing with my pant leg. He seemed to relax slightly.

“I shouldn’t have to tell you not to tamper with it, ‘cause if you do, you’ll be back in a cell so fast you’ll have skid marks on your ass.” He leaned forward in his chair. “Now, I’m giving you three weeks to put this thing to bed. If I haven’t seen any results by then, the deal’s off.” His hand disappeared into his

desk drawer again and produced a smartphone. “This’ll get you started. Everything Raczek knew is in here. Everything I gave him and all his reports to me. Keep it on you at all times in case I want to reach you.”

I took the proffered phone and dropped it into my pocket. Coxwell studied me carefully before continuing. “Also, I expect to be kept in the loop. I want to know every move you plan to make *before* you make it. Otherwise... skid marks. And, if you even think about trying anything illegal, guess what?”

“Skid marks?” I ventured.

“Good, you’re catching on.”

City lights unfurled beneath me as I rode the glass-walled elevator down from Coxwell’s office to street level, extending to infinity in all directions but one. Where they ended, it was as though slit with a scalpel, replaced abruptly with the blackness of the ocean. When the doors opened, I emerged into a lush indoor rainforest which formed part of the self-contained ecosystem providing fresh, clean air for the arcology.

The hyperstructure itself, housing the political and economic elite of the city’s society, rose a full kilometer above the skyline like a stylized ocean wave and was completely self-sustaining. On my way to the exit, I had to pass through a multi-tiered shopping complex packed with high-end boutiques, fancy restaurants, a cinema and a transit hub. Banks of express elevators leading up to penthouse

apartments were guarded by uniformed attendants who held the doors and tipped their hats to the residents that passed by. I rode the escalators down to the ground floor and, drained from all the walking, flagged down a cab.

“Know any good hotels around here?” I asked the cabbie as I climbed in.

“The Shangri-La ain’t bad,” he said after a moment’s thought. “Good hourly rates and the girls are clean.”

Not exactly what I had in mind, but good to know regardless.

“I’m just looking for a place to stay. Clean, comfortable, bar in the lobby?”

The cabbie looked disappointed. He’d lost a commission. “In that case, try the New Rose down on Dock Street.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “Let’s do that.”

He pulled us away from the curb and into the steady stream of traffic.

I watched the lights and buildings melt past outside the window, interspersed with momentary glimpses into the lives of people on the street. We passed into Chinatown, the streets alight with neon and paper lanterns and more people bustling into and out of shops and restaurants. I became aware that I hadn’t eaten anything in two weeks.

Rounding a corner, we pulled up outside a squat, five-story building with a modest neon marquee that spelled out THE NEW ROSE HOTEL in sleek red letters. A weathered awning over the door fluttered noisily in the chill Pacific wind and mirrored windows made it impossible to see inside. I tipped

the driver and stepped through the automatic doors into the lobby as he drove away.

Inside, the décor looked like it was vintage last-century, installed that way and never updated since. However, the cabbie hadn't been lying about the bar in the lobby. Small round tables radiated out from a central circular bar in the middle of the room that looked like it doubled as a reception desk. The only other person in the place was the heavysset bartender who nodded at me as I slid onto one of the threadbare bar stools.

"Hey, what can I get you?"

"Whiskey and a room," I said.

He turned and plucked a square bottle from the rack behind him and took a glass from under the bar. Pouring out two fingers, he recapped the bottle and nudged the glass in my direction.

"Thanks," I said, taking a sip.

"And how long were you lookin' to stay?"

"Three weeks," I said, though I planned to be long gone by then.

"Our weekly rate works out to sixty-five bucks a night," he said.

"That's fine," I said and handed him the credit chit Coxwell had given me to cover expenses.

He disappeared with it and I continued to nurse my drink, studying the place with detached interest. The lighting appeared mainly to come from several electroluminescent panels installed in the ceiling although some had burnt out and had yet to be replaced. The floor was covered in nicks and scratches, no doubt thanks to years of abuse under chair legs whose rubber caps had worn off.

Eventually the bartender came back and handed the chit back to me along with a keycard.

“Here you go. Room four-oh-three.”

I pushed the chit back at him. “There’s fifty bucks in it for you if you do me a favor. Keep your eyes open and let me know if anyone comes poking around or asks after me, okay?”

His eyes widened. “Yeah? Hey, sure thing, mac. My name’s Angelo, by the way. You need anything, you call me.”

“Count on it,” I said and finished my drink.

## Chapter Three

The glowing face of the clock display beside my pillow slid lazily into focus as I opened my eyes.

11:00.

I blinked slowly and the time leapt forward an hour. I made a mental note to tell someone so they could get it fixed.

*Eh, later...*

It was well past one in the afternoon when I was finally awake enough to get up. Still groggy, I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at my feet for a few minutes. Maybe two whiskeys on an empty stomach had been a bad idea.

I took a hot shower and felt a little better when I stepped out, the sluggish haze in my brain lifting. After getting dressed, I went downstairs and headed out in search of something to eat.

The ankle monitor chafed a bit as I walked – a

constant reminder that I wasn't alone. Still, at this stage in the game, being tracked didn't really bother me that much. After all, in Coxwell's position, I'd be doing the same thing. For now though, I had to be a good boy and build trust until it was time to go my own way. Of course, knowing Coxwell, he had at least one other tracker which he'd failed to mention and maybe even someone tailing me. But I'd deal with that later.

I came upon a cozy looking noodle house boasting congee and assorted grilled meats, which were hanging under heat lamps in a glass case by the door. I ducked inside, seating myself at one of the tables facing the door, the vinyl upholstery of the chair creaking as I settled in. A waiter came over and left me a steaming glass of tea then disappeared just as quickly.

Mirrors lined the walls all the way around the little shop, but most of them were obscured by colorful slips of paper advertising various specials both in English and Chinese. I gave them a once-over and put in my order.

As I ate, customers came and went except for one man who didn't seem to be in much of a hurry to get anywhere. He was dressed in a gray suit with an open collar, reading a novel and picking at a plate of fried dumplings. When I'd finished and was ready to leave, he was still there, with the same four dumplings on his plate. That sent up a yellow flag but I kept calm. It could be nothing, just a slow eater wrapped up in his book, but he was also doing everything I'd have done if I were trying to quietly keep tabs on someone.

I got a good look at his face as I stood up to leave, his graying hair almost the same color as his suit. He seemed to be of medium build and average height – a completely forgettable man, which was the idea. I watched for any reaction in the mirrors as I shrugged into my jacket. He was still seated and reading his novel when I walked out. So, either I was just being paranoid or he had a partner waiting outside. I surreptitiously scanned the parked cars I passed on my way back to the hotel.

Angelo was on duty when I got back and he gave me a smile and nod.

“Hey, how’s it goin’?”

I stepped up to the bar. “Hey, do you have a pen and some paper I can use?”

“Uh, lemme check,” he said, ducking down and rummaging around under the bar. He came back up a few moments later with a ballpoint pen and a stained, dog-eared legal pad.

“Thanks,” I said and took the elevator up to the fourth floor. Back in my room I settled onto the bed with the smartphone, skimming the files and taking notes, memorizing everything I could.

It turned out Raczek had been looking into the activities of Hawthorne-Kanegawa Biosys, a firm initially contracted by the Department of Defense to develop counteragents against biological weapons. However, a handful of documents had surfaced which implied they were involved in ‘ethically questionable’ research into genetic engineering with human subjects, which the DOD wanted to have verified before they could take any official action.

Raczek's investigation hadn't turned up much according to his reports, certainly not enough that someone from H-K would have wanted him killed. Of course, that still left the missing final report. Could that have been the kicker?

I put down the pad and dialed the number Coxwell had given me for his private line. He answered after the first ring.

"Coxwell. Speak."

"It's me," I said. "Just wanted to let you know I'm planning on going down to Raczek's apartment this afternoon to sniff around and maybe talk to the neighbor who reported the smell if I have time. That okay with you, chief?"

"Real cute, Mercer, but stow the attitude. Get down there and see if we missed anything. We've kept the place locked down so no new tenants have moved in. You should have the whole place to yourself. You've got the door code, right?"

I rifled through my notes. "Yeah, I got it."

"Okay. Good hunting. Call me right away if you find anything."

"Will do," I said and hung up.

Raczek's building was located in an area that the locals referred to as the Bricks, the old part of town where all the buildings from decades past were still made mostly of red brick, hence the name. The cab dropped me off in front of a grungy low-rise that had clearly seen better days. What had once been white stucco was streaked green and brown with water trails and THE EMERALD ARMS was decaled

onto the front window glass in peeling black and fake gold leaf. A narrow concrete path led up to the door, passing between two stout brick lamp posts topped with round frosted glass fixtures.

I had to struggle with the door before I could get in, it being made of heavy steel and glass. Finally, I emerged into the mosaic-tiled lobby where two elevators stood on the far wall and hallways led off to either side. I thumbed the button for the elevator and got in when it arrived, riding up to the sixth floor.

Raczek's door was down the hall and to the left as I got off the elevator, made of cheap particle board and wood veneer with cracked black plastic numbers screwed on. A keypad glowed faintly to one side and I typed in the door code. The lock clicked and I stepped inside, brushing past remnants of police tape.

The trauma scene decontamination crew had probably been through not too long ago as I could smell a faint tang of cleaning agent still hanging in the air. I walked over to the spot where in the photo, Raczek's body had been sprawled but which now looked just like any other part of the room. Kneeling down, I brushed the hardwood floorboards with my fingers, not sure what I was expecting to find there but feeling compelled nonetheless.

I'd first met Raczek back in the Corps. Back then I'd just been a lowly Private, fresh out of boot camp, and he'd been a Corporal with one hell of a mean streak, taking every opportunity to smoke the new guy. Every time I fucked up, I could look forward to a gas mask run in boots and utes or, if he was feeling

generous, being forced to buy rounds of drinks for everyone.

I remember one time we were all at a bar and he was in a generous mood so I was buying. As I got up to get the next round, I accidentally bumped into a guy and spilled his drink. Before I could say anything, the guy called me a ‘fucking jarhead faggot’ and took a swing at me. Next thing I knew, Raczek was on his feet and the guy was on the floor, his face a mushy pulp. Raczek had spent three months in the brig for that and had his pay docked, but the message was clear. *We take care of our own.*

By the time we were serving together in Pakistan as part of the U.N. task force stationed there, he was a Sergeant and I’d made Corporal. His mean streak had also cooled considerably since I wasn’t the new guy anymore, and his attention was turned to other, more deserving targets.

The last time I’d seen him had been four years ago at a bar in Shanghai, just before I went off-world. I’d let him stiff me out of a beer since he’d made good on his promise to hook me up with a datajack who could forge credentials. Without him, I’d never have made it to Mars.

I sighed and straightened up, moving back out to the tiny foyer where the bedroom and bathroom faced each other beside the front door. I opened the door to the bedroom and stepped inside.

Most of Raczek’s things, like his computer and all the contents of his desk, had been impounded as evidence and no doubt the cops already had people pouring over it looking for answers. Even his books

were gone, the empty shelves skeletal in their absence. I slid open the closet door to find all his clothes in a messy pile inside, probably the result of having each article searched by some overworked schlub who hadn't bothered to put them back properly. It looked to me like the place had already been turned upside down and that there wouldn't be much left for me to find, but I'd have to be thorough if I wanted to stay out of a cell.

I decided to start with the desk. Opening each of the drawers in turn, I pulled them out of their frames to check behind them. This was a trick I'd learned for hiding sensitive documents since people rarely thought to do more than rummage through the drawer itself.

There.

Taped onto the back face of the second drawer was a thin unmarked envelope. I peeled it off and tore it open, dumping the contents out onto the bed behind me. Inside were a credit chit and a data wafer. I pocketed the chit and plugged the wafer into a port on the smartphone.

A window popped up establishing a wireless connection and then it prompted me for a password. I tried 'Ouroboros' and got an access granted confirmation before the system directory of a remote storage drive appeared on the screen, listing several dozen image files. I opened the first one.

It was dark and grainy, looking like it'd been taken with a cheap camera in a bar or club of some sort. Among the throngs of patrons, it showed a table with several men in suits seated around it in the

company of some nubile young lovelies. I didn't recognize any of the suits but maybe Coxwell would know. I flipped through a few more of the photos and was about to put them away when a familiar face stopped me cold.

He'd been sitting in the background a few tables away but in this photo, his face was turned towards the camera, watching the table with the suits. Sandy blond hair topped a lean, sharp-featured face and his sunken eyes seemed to hold a perpetually saddened expression. His name flashed through my brain like a lightning strike.

Elias Burch. *Traitor.*

So, this was why Raczek had initiated the Ouroboros protocol. It'd taken me five years and a trip to Mars, but finally the motherfucker was mine! I'd have to tread carefully, though. As long as Coxwell was watching me, I had very little wiggle room.

*But I've got your number, asshole.*

Turning back to the task at hand, I went through the rest of the desk and when that didn't turn up anything, I checked the closet and behind the bookshelves – any potential spots that the five-o might have missed. Moving back out into the apartment, I checked the toilet tank, took framed photographs off the walls, tapped the drywall and floorboards looking for hollow niches and tore open the cushions on the furniture to root around inside. I came up empty-handed and it was dark by the time I was ready to leave. I stepped out into the brisk evening chill and made my way down the concrete walkway towards the street.

“Hey, bud. Got a light?”

I turned. The collapsible baton slammed into my right thigh and the entire leg went instantly numb. I dropped to the sidewalk, clutching my leg in both hands, a silent scream locked in my throat. The next blow went to my side, a steel-toed boot driving into my ribs. I scabbled, my fingers groping for anything I could use as a weapon. A boot heel came down on my hand and I screamed as I felt bones snap. I rolled, caught a glimpse of a guy wearing a black ski mask and then I was hauled to my feet and thrown against one of the brick light fixtures. The glass shattered when my head hit it, hot shards slicing my face and neck. I slid to the ground and lay there, slumped over like a little bitch as the guy walked slowly over to me, twirling the baton in one hand.

“You should stay out of other people’s business, if you know what’s good for you,” he said, lifting my chin with the tip of the baton.

I gurgled, tasting blood.

“The last guy didn’t listen too well. Maybe you’ll be smarter, huh?”

He sheathed the baton and took off laughing. I passed out.

If you enjoyed this sample from *Forsaken Angels*, would you consider giving me some feedback and/or constructive criticism? It would help me grow and develop as a writer and would also be greatly appreciated. You can e-mail your feedback to:

mike [at] firedrakecreative [dot] com

Thanks for your time!

- Mike Tam