

**THE FORTRESS
IN ORION**

ALSO BY MIKE RESNICK:

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THE FORTRESS IN ORION

DEAD ENDERS BOOK ONE

MIKE RESNICK



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Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228

VOICE: 716-691-0133

FAX: 716-691-0137

WWW.PYRSE.COM

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PROLOGUE

Everything hurt.

Pretorius lay on his back, trying to focus his eyes on the door some ten feet away from the foot of his bed. It took him almost two minutes of intense concentration for it to stop swiveling like a belly dancer.

He gingerly tried flexing his left hand and felt the fingers move. He tried the same thing with his right hand and felt nothing.

He ran his left hand over his torso, winced as it came in contact with medical dressings, and lay perfectly still until the pain subsided.

Finally he turned his head to the left and saw half a dozen tubes leading from his body. Some went to what he recognized as the standard life-support machines, but two of them were connected to translucent vats. There was *something* in each of them—a pair of dissimilar somethings, actually—but he couldn't make out what they were.

A white-clad figure—he couldn't focus enough to determine its gender—approached him and began manipulating something on his left side.

“Damn, that smarts!” he muttered.

“Ah, you're awake,” said the figure in a feminine voice.

“I'd prefer to think that I'm having a nightmare,” he replied.

“You have a visitor, Colonel Pretorius, one who is very anxious to see you.”

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Colonel Pretorius. Right, that's me. I'd forgotten. Then: I wonder what my first name is?

"Tell whoever it is to go away," rasped Pretorius. "We are not entertaining visitors."

The woman—he could focus enough now to see that it was a female doctor—laughed. "Same old Colonel Pretorius!"

He frowned. "I've been here before?"

"It'll come back to you."

"In this lifetime?" he asked.

She chuckled again. "I'll let your visitor explain."

She walked to the door; it opened. She gestured to someone on the far side of it and stepped aside as a burly man with a shock of white hair and a matching mustache entered the room.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll take it from here." She nodded and walked out the doorway, which snapped shut behind her. "Welcome back, Nathan."

Son of a bitch! Nathan is me!

"I've been gone?"

"In every possible way."

Pretorius managed to focus even better and saw that his visitor wore a general's uniform.

"How many possible ways would that be?"

The general smiled. "You went out on a mission—I'll give you all the details later, if you have trouble remembering them—and you accomplished it, as you always do."

"I don't remember a damned thing," said Pretorius.

"That's because you've only been awake a few minutes."

"So where am I back from?"

The general smiled. "You're back from Benedaris IV in the

Albion Cluster.” He paused. “You’re also back from whatever the hell is on the Other Side.”

Pretorius frowned. “The other side of *what?*”

“Life. You died for a few minutes during surgery.”

Pretorius tried to shake his head and winced. “I don’t remember a damned thing.”

“Too bad. There’s plenty that would pay through the nose to know what it’s like there.”

“On Benedaris IV?”

The general looked amused. “You have one more guess.”

Pretorius grimaced. “I don’t want it.”

The general threw back his head and laughed. “That’s my Nathan!”

Pretorius stared at him. “I seem to remember you. Kind of.”

“You ought to. We’ve been working together for a dozen years. I’m Wilber Cooper. Name ring a bell?”

Pretorius concentrated, then frowned. “You’re the bastard who keeps sending me out on these missions.”

“See?” said Cooper with a grin. “You *do* remember.”

“What happened to me?”

“We’re hoping you’ll tell us when you’re strong enough to be debriefed. But it was messy. See these two cases?” Cooper tapped the two translucent vats. “One of them is cloning you a spleen, and the other a pancreas. They should be ready for you, or you for them, in a week.” He paused. “Looks like we’re also going to give you a prosthetic foot, to replace the artificial one you ruined. There’s not a whole lot of the original Nathan Pretorius left.”

“How long have I been here?” asked Pretorius.

“A few weeks.”

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Pretorius frowned. “*Weeks?*”

Cooper nodded. “You’ve been in a medically induced coma. They just let you wake up about an hour ago.”

“And I fulfilled my mission?”

“You always do.”

“What was it?”

“You led a team into a buried facility on Benedaris where the Bolio kept the weaponry they planned to use to disrupt the upcoming Spiral Arm Games. It was pretty sophisticated stuff. There’s not a scanning station in the Democracy that can spot it. Ten of those bastards could have wiped out, oh, eighty or ninety thousand spectators before we killed them.”

“And I disabled the weapons?” asked Pretorius.

Cooper smiled. “That’s one way of putting it. You blew up a third of the goddamned planet.” He paused. “They killed your men while you were escaping and came damned close to killing you. You were quite a mess when we found you.”

“I thought you said I *did* die.”

“In surgery, not in the field,” responded Cooper. “Though I suppose it comes to the same thing in the end.”

“So since I’m clearly damaged goods, I suppose I should ask about my pension and the best retirement communities.”

Cooper emitted a heartfelt belly laugh. “Forget it, Nathan! We’re in the middle of a war!”

“*You’re* in a war,” said Pretorius. “Me, I’m in a hospital.”

“For the fourth time,” said Cooper. “Or is it the fifth?”

“How the hell should I know?” demanded Pretorius. “I didn’t even know my name ten minutes ago.”

“It’ll come back to you. It always does.”

“I get shot up a lot, do I?”

“It’s a dangerous business,” replied Cooper. “But you’re the best covert agent we’ve got, and there’s no way you’re walking away from this.” The general paused, then added: “And once your brain and body are working again, you won’t want to.”

Pretorius stared at him and had the uneasy feeling that he was right.