

Erebus

By Kingsley Montgomery

Chapter Three Scavenger's Retreat

Erebus eyed the ammo critically. The red cartridges were smooth and properly ventilated, and made of light plastic which provided better durability than the more commonly encountered cardboard ones. He flipped each of them over and examined their primers and charges. Everything seemed to be first-rate. There was nothing more irritating, or more dangerous, than firing a dud in the heat of combat. Most of his earnings went to ammunition and maintenance on weapons. They were the lifeblood of the survivalist in the Outlands. Unfortunately his duraplast breastplate was destroyed a while back when he took a fusillade of small arms fire in the chest. Nothing had penetrated the armor, but it was scrap after that and he had suffered some broken ribs and massive bruising that laid him out for days. He would have to get armor for both himself and Kat as soon as possible. Next to a good weapon, decent armor could save your ass when the shit hits the fan.

“Fine as always,” he said to the tall lanky tech, laying the cartridge beside the row of others. The man wiped his hands on the slightly stained light gray pocket-laden jumpsuit worn by all Silic techs. A wide black belt wrapped his midsection, tools and rags poking out of several well worn leather pouches. The black with gold trim arm bands designated him as a weapons tech. The Silics were nothing if not organized. Very utilitarian, but often annoying. The man adjusted his glasses nervously. Erebus had dealt with him several times before. Though it was technically illegal to sell top notch ammo to mutants, laws were somewhat lax on the fringes of Silicon Republic territory.

“What you got to trade?” The man had a rough, gravelly voice, at odds with his skinny stature.

Erebus looked down at the table. Eighty shotgun shells and two hundred rounds of 8mm ammo for Kat's Far Slayer. That should last them until they made it through to Haven. “Well, Gordon, what do you need?”

The man smiled. “Got any more skin rags?”

Erebus flattened his lips. “Those are pretty hard to come by and worth a hell of lot more than a few hundred rounds of ammo,” he said as he crossed his arms, putting on his best poker face. The plas-paged porn magazines were a dollar find, and worth a lot to both men and women in the Outlands, and even in the more civilized areas. “No, I don't have any of those.”

“What about drugs?”

Erebus shook his head. “You know I don't run drugs, Gordon. I'm a scavenger remember? You don't run into many drugs in the rubble. How about some aluminum or jewelry? You still got that blonde you are seeing?”

Gordon's eyes dropped. “Nah, she was arrested for theft and taken to Command for punishment.”

Erebus recalled the Outland woman had a problem with sticky fingers. Gordon was a sucker for bad apples. The one before had been a skanky and rather mannish trapper who had disappeared in the Highlands Forest, undoubtedly dinner for a raptor or smiley. “Sorry to hear that.”

“I could use the aluminum though,” mused Gordon. “Some of the guys were looking for patch material for one of the rovers, and the boys at Command are always slow to get materiel to us down here. The T-3 is down again anyway, so we can’t request anything without going asynch. How much of it do you have?”

The Silic lingo was not so hard to understand when you knew a few of the key words. The T-3 was the Silic name for the network of radio communication towers they tried, often in vain, to maintain on the fringe of Silic lands. Asynch meant that they would have to send couriers to communicate while the T-3 was down. Erebus questioned Uncle Ollie about the meaning of that one a while back, but his uncle had no idea where most of the words came from. Some Pre-Fall jargon no doubt.

Erebus knew Gordon was probably giving him lip service. He would more than likely just trade the aluminum to his mechanic tech cohorts for cigs or alcohol, or both. It was amazing how far some people would go to cover up little indiscretions, especially among the conservative Silics. “I’ve got a couple of street signs, and two hollow tubes each about the size of a large gun barrel. Good grade aluminum.”

Gordon raised his eyebrow, causing his long forehead to crease oddly. “You still finding street signs? Damn, would have thought them all found by now. Sac Hold has been operating for nearly a decade. Old swamp town should be about looted-out, at least at the street level.”

Erebus recounted the number of forays he had made into the sprawling ruins. “I’ve been around for a couple years and have yet to come out of that place empty handed. Lots of scavengers don’t sweat the smaller stuff. There are still big finds there too. There are still dozens of weap caches buried under the rubble, and rumor of intact caches sealed underneath the Frisco, not to mention the thousands of jewelry, hardware, vehicle, and other caches.”

“It is hard to imagine the amount of junk the Pre-Fallers had at their fingertips,” said Gordon musingly. He looked down at the ammo. “Okay, throw in some of your long gun brass and we have a deal.”

“I’ll throw in fifty,” replied Erebus.

Gordon thought it over for a moment. “Deal.”

Erebus shook the man’s pale hand in the universal gesture of a done deal, a form of deal sealing that the Leaguer’s insisted was used by Pre-Fallers all the time. And if anyone knew about sealing deals, it was the League of Free Traders. The bastards were everywhere these days, and cutting more and more deeply into independent operations. He scooped the ammo into a small burlap sack and headed back out into the main corridor. He would have to deliver the goods tonight. Gordon was a good man and trusted him to deliver, an unusual arrangement between anyone, much less a Silic Human and an Outland Mutant. This would make the tenth time that Erebus made good on his deals with Gordon, and that kind of consistency bought favors. Though he could scam the man with some of the loot, he never did it on principle. Besides, being caught scamming just once would ruin his rep in the Hold and cause him no end of troubles in the future.

Making his way down the corridor, he passed several other office-like rooms with techs and traders haggling over scavenged goods. Most of the scavengers were Silic Immunes, those Outlanders that had performed some service for the Republic and were granted a limited form of citizenship. They were almost all Humans. When the Brotherhood

attacked Silic lands several months back, the Republic banished thousands of Mutants for fear of spies and insurgents. Now, most of the disenfranchised eked out a subsistence level living in the satellite settlements around Central Cali, and many were now sympathetic toward the Brotherhood and their claims of Mutant superiority. Very few Mutants qualified for Immune status.

Turning the corner to the main entrance, he almost bumped into one hundred kilos of armored flesh.

“Watch where the hell you are going, mutie,” grouched the grunt.

Erebus looked him over. Human of course. Tall, light skinned, overdeveloped musculature, young, armed and armored in buffed blue-gray duraplast. A recipe for cockiness. Erebus snarled back and continued on his way, though the hairs on the back of his neck twitched as he turned his back on the man.

After entering the main lobby he started to feel less like he was being watched. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed the guard was not following. Good thing. A push through the crowd in the main lobby brought him outside and into the reddish glow of dusk. The remnants of a small chem storm flickered in the distance, multi-hued flashes of lightning splashing the usually drab crete walls of Sac Hold with eerie highlights. The lightning seemed to be driving the wispy brown and orange clouds into the desert wastes of the east, up beyond the towering cliff of the Giant Step, which was too distant to be seen through the haze from here. That was the direction he would be headed next. Toward the free city of Haven on the edge of the Vada Wastes.

The small vale around the hold was covered with a myriad of temporary structures from all manner of traders, scavengers, and travelers. Most were small tent affairs of treated leather that could easily be taken down and carried in a pack, but others were monstrous gray and black enclosures with the sheen of chem-resistant plas anchored to large armor-plated haulers. Destriers snorted and whinnied about being in such close quarters with carnivorous Striders, and milling mule and camelok pack animals cowered from both imposing mounts. Winding his way through the maze of campfires, vehicles, mounts, and tents, Erebus finally came to the base of a steep hill. Sitting right next to a lily pad infested pond was Kat, mending her overcoat. She looked up as he approached.

“Any luck?”

Erebus tossed the sack of ammo onto the ground at her feet. “Couple hundred rounds for you there. Traded the signs and pipes, and some brass casings.” He looked around their meager fire pit and small pile of belongings. They had yet to put up the tent. “What luck with the food and water?”

“Over there,” replied Kat, hooking a thumb over her shoulder.

Ereb spied the pile of bread, hard goat cheese, salted sausages, dried fruit, ear-like shrooms, and canteens lying in a neat pile. “Looks good. Enough for what? Five or six days?”

She grinned. “The way you eat? Maybe two days if we are lucky.”

Ereb scoffed. “You eat nearly as much as I do!” As he squatted he noticed two armed grunts moving through the crowd, scrutinizing the visitors and their wares. “What did you trade?” He kept an eye on them without being obvious, something Mutants perfected around the Silics. Kat took a quick sidelong glance in the soldier’s direction when she noticed her companion trying not to look obvious.

“Oh. Not much. A few of the trinkets is all. The small plas vase and two of those cans.”

Erebus scratched his neck. Felt like lice had found his fur again. Great. “That leaves the crossbow, a dozen bolts, two knives, several old plas cups, and a couple of leather pouches.”

“And that shell necklace you found in the Sauron’s pouch,” added Kat.

Erebus nodded. “Right. Plus some leftover silver. That should be enough to get us some meds and bandages, and some food for the mounts, and maybe two new ponchos. The old ones are wearing a bit thin and I don’t fancy getting doused with acid rain. We will need to make sure the mounts get scrubbed down real well too. Long ride ahead.” They had stabled their destriers at Sac Hold several days ago, before descending into the ruins where stealth was more important than speed.

Kat continued mending her overcoat. “Those pricks still coming over here?”

Erebus did not have to look. “Yeah, they are coming over now. Let me do the talking.”

The two soldiers halted several meters from the pair. One craned his neck to check out the pile of food sitting next to Kat. Both hefted black enameled SIA assault rifles which looked a bit beaten up, but were perfectly capable of silencing any uproar in the tent city. Erebus turned to regard the Silics, as if first noticing them. He immediately noticed one was a sergeant and the other a private. One thing about the Silics was that you always knew who was in charge.

“Can we help you, sir?” Erebus tried not to smile.

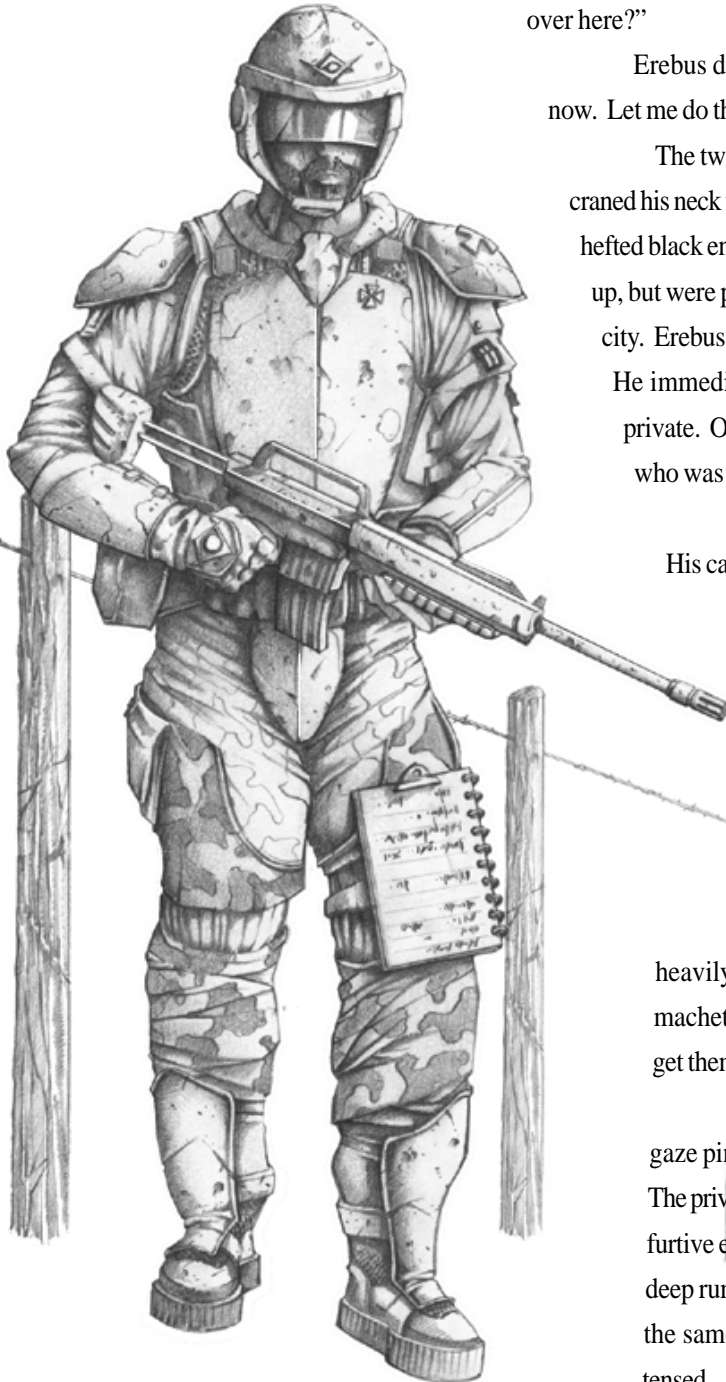
His canines often put off Humans.

“There are no officers present,” grouched the Sergeant, as if he had made the same comment a hundred times today. “You address me as sergeant, fur ball.”

“Your name is sergeant fur ball,” quipped Kat without taking her eyes off her sewing.

Erebus froze, eyes darting between the two heavily armed men. His hand casually crept over to his machete handle. What the hell was she doing? Trying to get them both killed?

The sergeant stood motionless for a moment, his gaze pinned on Kat. Suddenly she looked up and smiled. The private fingered his weapon nervously, matching Erebus’ furtive eye movements. Suddenly the sergeant broke into a deep rumbling laughter and slung his rifle. The private did the same with an obvious air of relief. Erebus remained tensed.



“You’re a funny one,” remarked the sergeant jovially.

Kat shrugged. “Gotta keep it light around here what with all the itchy triggers around. People don’t never laugh enough, that’s what my ma always said.”

The sergeant shook his head in agreement. “Aff to that. Sounds like your mother had a good head on her shoulders.” He made a show of unclipping the small ring-bound ledger dangling at his waist. “I will need to check idents to make sure everyone is legal.”

Erebus relaxed and produced the small pamphlet-like ident pack with plas coated pages. Kat did the same. The sergeant eyed them casually and consulted his ledger. Without another glance he handed both back.

“Everything appears to be in order,” said the sergeant amiably. “Welcome back to our little piece of heaven.” He smiled down at the woman. Then he swung his gaze back to her companion. “Erebus, I see you have enough credit to apply for Immune status. Would you like to apply now?”

Erebus frowned. This was the third time he had been asked to apply in the last few months. Tensions were getting high over Mutants in the Republic. One of the reasons he was heading to Haven and out of Silic-controlled land was to avoid any related complications. If he registered as an Immune he would be compromising some of his other relationships. Word spread pretty fast among the trader and scavenger grapevines about who had joined up with which factions. That kind of knowledge was power, and often sought and traded. Becoming an Immune would make things a lot easier for them in Silic lands, but harder in others. Just being offered Immune status was an exception for a Mutant – owing to his Uncle’s letter of recommendation and the couple times he had taken and delivered on bounties for outlaws and bandits. Not jobs he particularly enjoyed, though. The problem here was that Silics often took offense to anyone who turned them down.

Erebus cleared his throat. “I appreciate the opportunity, Sergeant, but I have been entertaining the idea of signing up with the Leaguers.” He winced slightly at that. “They are a bit more open to Mutants, as you know, and are more in line with my profession.”

The sergeant pursed his lips and nodded his head slowly. “Very well, that is your option, I suppose. You know the Free Traders owe their safety in large part to the Republic. If you change your mind, let us know. Make no mistake though, if things heat up here on the borderlands you may be in an awkward position. The Brotherhood has spies everywhere and the Senate is getting itchy about the whole mess. I don’t personally have a problem with Mutants. I had a friend a while back who was a Mutant.” Erebus raised an eyebrow at that. If he had a shell for every purebred that claimed to have a Mutant friend, he could buy his way into the League for real.

The fact that the Brotherhood had spies everywhere was the main reason he did not want to accept the offer. He would become a marked man almost immediately in the eyes of the Brotherhood, and several other groups that he encountered in the Outlands. He would be considered a traitor to his heritage, in their eyes. “I appreciate the warning, Sergeant. We will be heading into the Outlands tomorrow, and will hopefully be far away from any potential...unpleasantries.”

The private guffawed. “You think being in the deep Outlands is ‘away from unpleasantries’?”

The Sergeant glared at his subordinate until the other man dropped his eyes. “As you wish, Outlander,” he said to Erebus. Then he glanced down again to Kat. “Good luck in the Outlands. I hope you know what you’re doing.” With that and a quick nod he left, the private sneaking another admiring peek at Kat before following.

Erebus put his hands on his hips. “What in the seven hells did you think you were doing?”

“Saving us some trouble,” she replied quietly, deflating his outburst. “I saw those two messing with some other Mutants over there. I also saw the big sizing up the girls.”

Erebus sputtered something, and then clammed up. She was right. And he was impressed. Now he was torn over whether to admit it and shower praise, or pretend at disappointment about her overstepping bounds. Every team needed a leader, and breaking that only puts the entire team more at risk.

Kat narrowed her eyes. “Would not hurt to tell me I did good. I would not have done it if it didn’t seem the best thing.”

Observant. Maybe she was a psi mutie and reading his mind. For a moment the suspicion lingered. What the hell. “You did well,” he blurted. “Good work.”

Erebus stalked off, leaving behind a smiling and humming Kat as she went back to work on her sewing. He made his way over to one of the tents that had caught his eye earlier. It was a large plas tent with several smaller outrider enclosures attached. The entire structure was anchored to the broad side of a huge hauler that had hydraulic forks at the front, the type often used by heavy salvagers or long haul traders. But that was not what had caught his eye. Hanging on display in front of the tent were several near full sets of various armors, watched over carefully by two burly looking men armed with cudgels.

“Good evening,” said Erebus as he approached the two men. He gestured to the merchandise. “Mind if I take a look?”

“Look but no touchin’,” barked the burlier of the two, and by far the uglier. Sores on his face indicated recent radiation exposure. The other looked him up and down, a smirk peeking through his rather abundant whiskers. “I trapped and sold worse furs than what you got,” commented the other dryly.

Erebus smiled, making sure to show his fangs. These two were real scabs. Casually, he popped out a small spike-like claw and itched his neck. “I would rather not part with mine, if it is all the same to you,” he said. The two men exchanged glances, probably surprised at his well mannered speech more than his physical attributes.

“Deal is, you touch without askin’, and we get to skin ya.” That was the uglier one.

Erebus shrugged. “Fair enough. If you would be so kind, please tell the trader that I am interested in what he has to say about these,” he said gesturing to the armor. The big guy jerked his head toward the tent. The bearded one grunted and then disappeared under a tent flap.

The armor was quite an assortment, all well used. Dried blood surrounded a bullet hole through the steel breastplate. The polycarbonate armor was riddled with stains and pits reminiscent of a bad chem storm. Erebus tried not to think of what the ochre colored stains were around the edges. There was a good pair of plas boots and several decent bracers made from what appeared to be titanium. A Kevlar jacket also caught his attention.

“What can I do you for?” The voice was squeaky and a bit irritating.

Erebus turned to respond, then found himself looking down at a very short Human...if a Human he was. The man was little over four feet tall, and had no observable hair, other than what was growing out of his ears. His hands wrung together nervously, but his beady eyes twinkled with craftiness. The hand wringing was a ploy to throw off customers into thinking he did not know what he was talking about, most like. Erebus had seen the tactic before. Funny thing was that most merchants that employed the deception did it habitually.

“You interested in the armor, eh? I am Tusk, and will be pleased to deal with you.”

“Sure,” replied Erebus, noting the snaggletooth tusk that jutted from his lower jaw when he opened his mouth. Would be considered a mutie by the Silics. “The Kevlar jacket, that bracer, and . . . that polycarb there. What are their histories?”

Tusk walked over to the Kevlar, waving his hands over it as if to conjure some story of mythological proportions. Erebus rolled his eyes. “This I acquired from a peddler in the great city of sin, Vaga, jewel of the wastelands. It was the personal jerkin of one of the famed,” he glanced around at the Silic grunts standing nearby, no friends of the Vagans, “but villainous, Enforcer Captains . . .”

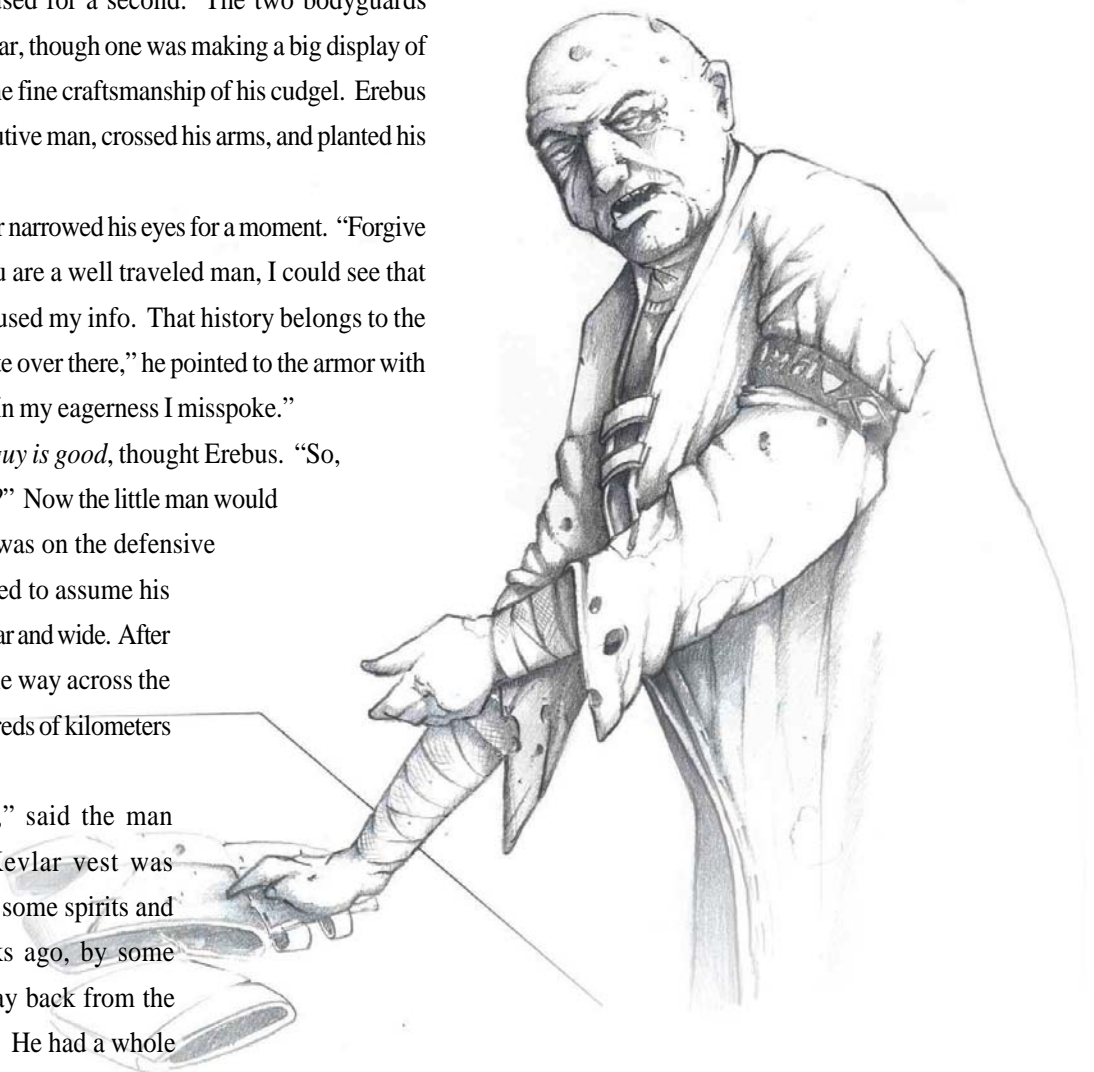
Erebus put up a hand. “That is nuke shit,” he said almost casually. The merchant made to reply but Erebus continued before he could squeak out a reply. “I have been to Vaga City and the Enforcers all use polycarbonate armor, made by the Shackle Cartel and also used for their prized gladiators. I am no commuter or Outland skinbag. Deal straight or there will be no deal.”

Tusk paused for a second. The two bodyguards pretended not to hear, though one was making a big display of intently studying the fine craftsmanship of his cudgel. Erebus glared at the diminutive man, crossed his arms, and planted his feet firmly.

The trader narrowed his eyes for a moment. “Forgive me! Of course you are a well traveled man, I could see that right away. I confused my info. That history belongs to the polycarb breastplate over there,” he pointed to the armor with the ochre stains. “In my eagerness I misspoke.”

Oh, this guy is good, thought Erebus. “So, what of the Kevlar?” Now the little man would deal straight. He was on the defensive and would be forced to assume his client had traveled far and wide. After all, Vaga was all the way across the Vada Wastes, hundreds of kilometers away.

“Ah yes,” said the man slowly. “This Kevlar vest was bartered to me for some spirits and meds a few weeks ago, by some Leaguer on his way back from the Angel Free Cities. He had a whole



wag full of the stuff. It is in excellent condition, as you can see. Padded inside too.”

Erebus thought that likely. “May I,” he asked, fingers floating over the jacket. Tusk nodded. The bearded bouncer looked disappointed. He inspected the garment inside and out. It was a bit heavy. “Post-Fall construction, quadruple layered. Not as lightweight as Pre-Fall stuff I have scavenged.”

Tusk stopped wringing his hands. “All true. You know your armor, mister...”

“Erebus.”

“Mr. Erebus, you have a fine eye. I can see you have been around and have had more education than most,” the little man said as he squinted up at his customer. You could almost see the light bulb pop over his head. “I have some other trinkets someone of your stature may be interested in.”

Erebus stopped examining the Kevlar. “Trinkets?”

“Yes, yes. Come with me.” Tusk parted the tent flap that led deeper into the tent maze, and held it open for his customer.

Erebus passed warily though into the dim lighting of the next chamber, his dark vision immediately enhancing the shadows. He half expected to be mugged. Cautiously, he wandered into the middle of the enclosure. There were piles of wooden crates and stained plas boxes, along with heaps of clothing, blankets, and what appeared to be mechanics tools. Off to one corner where the tent met the steel armor of the hauler stood a large tripod-mounted machine gun. Erebus whistled.

Tusk followed his gaze. “Looks impressive, but it needs a complete overhaul before it functions again. I have a wiz of a weapon smith from up north. Give him meals, a warm place to stay, and occasional women, and he is as happy as a chiton after molting.” He cackled. “This is what I wanted to show you.” He dialed in the combination to a long locker and flipped open the door. He withdrew a dark long sleeve shirt that had an oily sheen to it, much like satin.

“Is that what I think it is?”

Tusk’s eyes twinkled. “Pre-Fall monocrystal fiber. More protection from flying lead than Silic Kevlar, and wears like a cotton shirt under other armor. Guaranteed to take a bullet from nearly any pistol, and most rifles to boot. Almost impossible to tear.”

Erebus ran his fingers over the thick silky material. It was flawless. “Where in the wastelands did you find this?”

“Hah,” blurted the merchant. “Can’t tell you that, and you know it. If you want to test it, I can arrange it.”

“No,” replied Erebus with a sigh. It was a rare find indeed, and it looked flawless. Even with his enhanced vision he could not detect any patch work done to it, something he learned long ago could compromise even the best materials. One of the reasons why this kind of armor was so rare is that few people existed who could expertly patch it.

Erebus snarled. “I would love to barter for this, but I honestly have nothing to offer for it at the moment.”

Tusk beamed and again started wringing his hands together. “Ah,” he drawled dramatically. “But I have a job for you. If you can complete it, this is your reward.”

Erebus quirked an eyebrow. “I am intrigued, but I am not an assassin.”

“Tsk, tsk. I don’t want you to kill anyone. I want one thing, a small thing that you may be able to get for me. It is a dangerous job, but is capable of fulfillment without bloodshed if you are careful enough.”

Erebus watched the man’s behavior and decided he was unlikely to get the complete truth from him. But that monocry shirt was worth several good trips into the ruins and weeks of time and danger. “Okay, I am listening.”

The merchant bobbed his head in excitement or nervousness, Erebus could not tell which.