

# Erebus

By Kingsley Montgomery

## Chapter Four Ghost Walkers

“What do you mean we have to stay here for another day?” Kat levered herself onto an elbow. The pup tent was lightweight and easy to put up, but did not offer much in the way of headroom. Erebus stood framed by the evening light filtering through the open entrance, his mouth still partially open after being interrupted.

He put up his hands defensively. “The job should only take the night, then another day to sort out the trade. We should be out of here by the day after tomorrow.”

She glared at him for a moment, and then shook her head in frustration. “I still don’t see why you can’t let me in on the details.”

“There is enough risk with only one of us involved. If something happens then I don’t want you anywhere nearby. No offense, but I only want to worry about myself on this one. Remember, I have been doing this sort of thing a lot longer than you have. When it’s over we can head out, and be much better equipped.”

She scowled. “I don’t see why an old shirt makes so much diff.”

“It’s more than an *old shirt*,” said Erebus, his voice straining. “It is some of the best under-armor ever produced by the Pre-Fallers. You can comfortably wear it under your clothes. It’s worth a small fortune, and well worth the risk.”

“So you say,” she retorted quietly.

“Look.” He picked up his pack and threw it over a shoulder. “I don’t trust Tusk either, so I will be careful. Don’t worry. I’ll be back before noon tomorrow. If I’m not back by then, move out of here and wait for me at the station by the ruins. If I am not back by the following day, then...”

“Then I’m on my own, I got it.”

Erebus looked hard at her but she would not meet his eyes. She busied herself by pounding the small thread-bare pillow. “Yeah,” he whispered. “But I will be back. Worrying about it won’t help matters.”

“Easy for you to say,” she said softly, stretching back out on the bedroll. Kat listened to his footfalls trail away. She had a bad feeling about this. Always Men trying to tell her what to do, and what not to do. That pissed her off. Kat knew she could help with whatever the mission entailed, but he obviously only trusted her so far. That would have to change. She suppressed the urge to follow, but only by formulating her own plans. First thing was to check out this Tusk character. The trader’s hauler was not far away, only a long stone’s throw closer to Sac Hold, not far from the fuel tanks. Lots of people passing by had eyed the armored hauler with indignation. It had to be a fuel hog and everyone around the trading post knew it cost a fortune to operate.

Once outside the sentry perimeter, Erebus tensed, switching on a more cautious awareness that he used when traveling alone in the Outlands. It was amazing how fast energy drained away when being constantly alert, but it was well worth the hassle considering the many times it had saved his ass. It was no wonder animals did not live so long in the wild. Aside from being eaten by something higher up the food chain, the near constant state of alertness had to eat away at nerves.

The night was cool and dry. The wind moaned like a pin-cushioned viral zombie. Disturbing. Insects chirped and hummed through steep hills dusted liberally with pines and various hardwoods. The ground was treacherous. Broken pieces of masonry and stands of low ruins carpeted the landscape in irregular clumps. Remains of uncovered basements pockmarked the lowlands, creating man-made deadfalls and craters, ideal nesting grounds for armorats, bloodsuckers, energy vipers, and worse. Those were places to avoid. Sickly yellow light heralded the rise of the Enemy Moon, which cast faint fuzzy shadows through the gloom. The True Moon was nowhere in sight. Yellow tinted inky darkness predominated. He switched on his night vision and the world became shades of gray.

Tusk was in a real pickle, though one of his own making. He had apparently traded several small cubes of plas to a vagrant for a modest amount of furs and blankets. That was odd right off, since vagrants rarely had anything in surplus, except for fleas, and even if they did what the hell would one want with a useless plas cube? No, the vagrant was most likely a bandit, or a wandering adventurer like himself. Secondly, it was odd that Tusk traded the cubes to begin with. It was unlike a seasoned merchant to “accidentally” trade an item for well under its worth.

Of course the “cube” was a holocube, used by Pre-Fallers to store data. You could find them by the thousands in some ruined places, they were virtually indestructible. Sure, most were worthless, since the plas was not of the reusable kind, and the working equipment needed to read the data was scarce and the know-how to use it even scarcer. Even then, most of the time all you ended up with was a bunch of images that made for a pretty light show, but made little sense to anyone. If you were lucky you would land one that contained a holovid show. Only once had he seen one of those. He stared for hours at the three dimensional drama of Pre-Fall life as it flickered inside a holovision display that an old village techie had managed to put back into vaguely working order. If there was such a place as Heaven, he wanted it to be like that holovid, where almost anything you needed was a button press away, and the biggest problem in life seemed to be worrying over what to wear for the day. He thought he was pretty well off just to have two sets of clothing. The people in the holovid seemed to have a different set of clothing for each day.

The holocube that Tusk inadvertently traded bore some significance that Tusk would not reveal; a significance that the merchant did not realize until talking with his contact here at Sac Hold. Probably military specs or fabrication techniques, Erebus guessed. The type of data the Silics made dollar trades for. You could get entire vehicles and hundreds of gallons of fuel for one working cube with useful info on it.

Tusk did find the man again, and had tried to buy the cube back, but the vagrant would not go along, obviously coveting the cube and perhaps realizing some fraction of its true worth. When Tusk threatened him with his thugs, the man vanished into the hills. That had happened just two days ago, along the road leading from Sac Hold to the Silic Command Post several clicks to the south. Apparently Tusk had found the man in a small camp of vagrants set up just north of the Hold, and had reason to believe he would return to the camp after a day or two of living in the hills. Erebus was to find the man, get the cube back by whatever means necessary, and return it to Tusk unharmed. He hoped to do it in a non-violent manner. Right, like that was likely. Conveniently, the little merchant had some talent for sketching, and provided a nice little pic of

the man he was hunting, along with a written description of his clothing at the time. With the return of the cube, Erebus would gain the monocystal shirt, the Kevlar jacket, and a couple titanium bracers.

It only took a couple hours of tramping through the hills to find the vagrant camp. Erebus skirted the edge, inspecting the patched tents and hastily erected lean-tos. Unlike most vagrant camps, the noxious odor of sweat and excrement that kept even the Smilodons at bay most of the time, was missing. There seemed to be about two dozen structures, most no larger than a pup tent, and only a couple semi-alert figures in view. Most would be sleeping; dreaming of something other than what awaits them in their waking hours. Unfortunately, he did not see anyone that matched the sketch. His vision did not allow him to examine details like the sketch in the dark, but he had a good memory.

Well, there was only one way to find the guy.

Erebus did a quick check to make sure everything was secure, and then went down on all fours. Slowly, he crawled toward the nearest cluster of enclosures, straining his eyes. Black shadows created by the camp fires danced across the trees that dotted the shallow gully, and splashed wavering shapes onto the sides of the tents. His dark vision turned the world into a rippling tableau of whites and grays. He crept up next to a large boulder and made to peer around it, planting a hand on the boulder's surface.

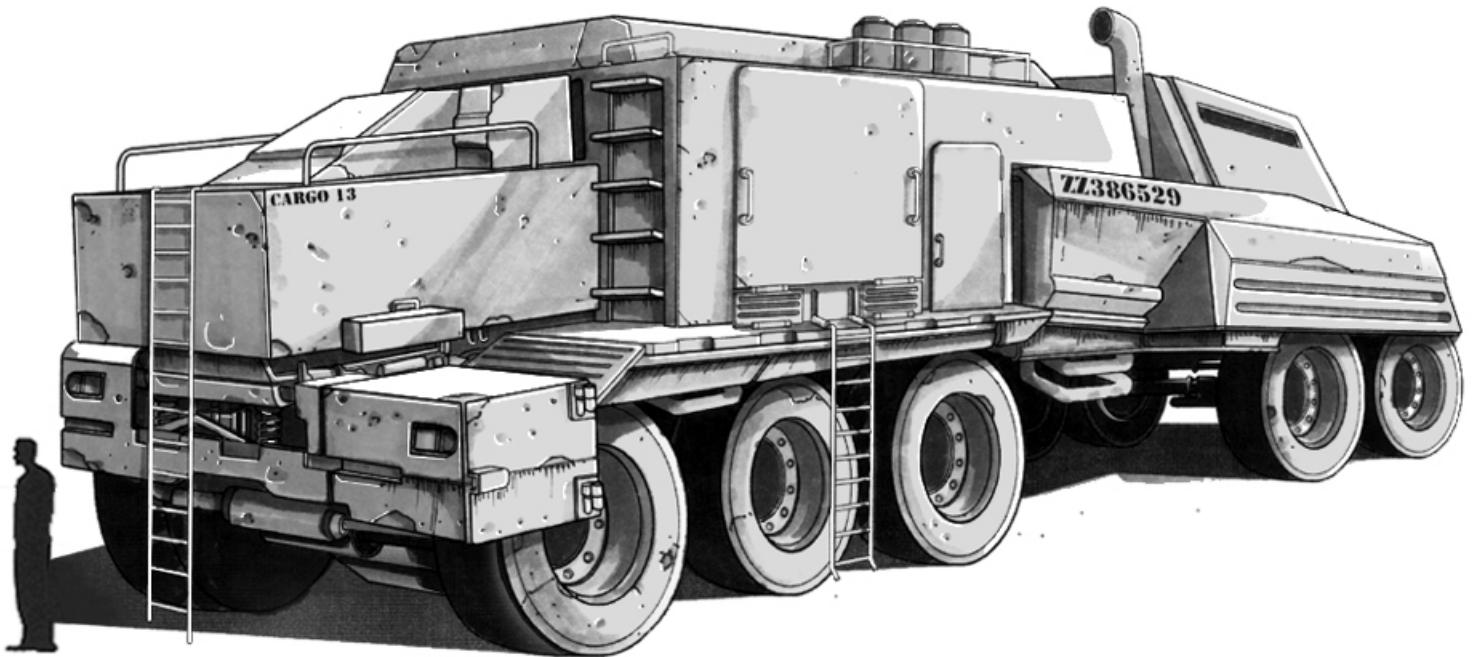
The hand met no resistance and the sudden rustle of fabric caused his heart to stop. Adrenaline pounded through his temples. He withdrew his hand as if it had touched hot coals. This was no boulder. He focused until he could make out a faintly darker edge where the object met the ground. He put his fingers under the edge and lifted. It was a tarp that was thrown over something large. Underneath, darkness was absolute, he could see nothing, and he did not want to risk lifting the tarp any further. Tentatively and silently, cursing the unexpected turn, Erebus thrust his hand further under the fabric. Within a few inches he encountered something cold and hard. Metal most like. He ran a hand along what felt like a metal frame until it stopped at another hard surface. This one was smooth and not as cool, with a dimpled texture. Like a headlight.

Erebus dropped the tarp and stared at the lump in confusion. Frantically, he looked back at the fire-light washed tents. They were not actually made of patched hide, as he had at first surmised. Now he recognized the pattern on them. The irregular blotchy pattern of synthetic woodland camouflage. He looked back at the tarp-covered lump.

*What the...*

Kat crept over to the back of the hauler, running her gloved hand down the armor-plated hull. She took one more look around, dropped, then rolled under the metal juggernaut. Slowly and quietly she wormed her way to the side where Tusk's tent met the side hatch of the vehicle. The acrid stench of diesel fuel and axle grease suffused her sinuses. The thing was leaking like a sieve. Tusk's mechanic sucked. She heard the muffled voices of two people talking inside the vehicle, but she could not make out the words. Lantern light filtered from the tent enclosure, highlighting the metal steps that folded out from the hauler's side hatch. She crawled up to the steps, positioning herself beneath them. The dimly lit chamber beyond was stacked high with crates and barrels. Brighter light from Sac Hold's floods trickled in from the tent flap on the far side, conflicting with the warmer glow of the lantern that rested on a crate nearer to the hauler.

She crab-crawled out from under the steps and slid behind a tall stack of crates. She felt the rough wood under her gloved caress. The door to the hauler was closed securely. One of the burly guards outside cleared his throat and the other



murmured something not worth mentioning. She had noticed the two never seemed to go inside, planted like trees directly in front of the enclosure entrance. They apparently failed to consider someone sliding under the hauler. Dumb asses. But they had the look of highland hunters, probably Jeffs. They would have keen hearing, so she tried to remain as quiet as possible.

Her attention returned to the crates. They were all nailed shut. She removed a throwing knife and started prying. It was painstaking, but eventually one of the edges came up with a squeal of iron nails. Kat froze, her eyes darting between the hauler door and the tent opening. Neither portal stirred. She spent another ten minutes prying the rest of the nails out until she could lever up the crate top. Inside was blackness. Standing on the balls of her feet, she reached inside and withdrew a cylinder nearly the length of her forearm. Angling it up to the light she could see that it had a brown cardboard sheathing and a thick cordite string dangling from one end. *Dynamite*, she guessed. She reached in and withdrew another stick. The crate was full of them. There was nothing stamped on the other crates, so she assumed they all contained the same thing.

The door to the hauler slammed open, pouring a bright bluish radiance into the tent. Kat dropped behind the crates, nearly causing the lid to slam shut in her haste. She pocketed the two sticks of dynamite and frantically looked around. There was no way back out without being seen.

“I expect you to live up to your end of the bargain,” said an unnaturally deep voice, belonging to the first figure to descend the steps. His footfalls were heavy.

“Have no worry,” said the other man exiting the hauler. “Plans are in motion now. You will have your diversion, and your implication.” The man’s voice was thick with placation and Kat could imagine the small ugly mug of the merchant who owned that voice. It must be Tusk. Erebus had mentioned the little man’s stilted way of talking.

The heavy man grunted. “Just make sure you make fireworks by tomorrow evening.”

“Of course, of course,” sang Tusk. “We are all ready here, just awaiting the proper moment. Tell your High Lord that all is in hand, and that we look forward to more profitable transactions in the future.”

Kat pricked up. High Lord? Only that hulking, thorn-headed general of the Brotherhood used that title.

“Enjoy your payment,” spat out the man with the deep voice. “The High Lord is not interested in dealing with dogs such as you on a regular basis. He only agreed to this as a diversion. A means to an end. Show yourself in our lands again and suffer the wrath of the Touched. If we need you, we will find you.”

Kat peered around the crates as the deep-voiced man exited the tent. She had just gotten a glimpse of a tall, broad-shouldered man. Tusk stood by the tent flap wringing his hands and bobbing his head. She could not see the two burly guards outside, but she knew they were there. Quickly, she crossed the open space between the crates and the hauler and rolled back under the steps. Within a couple seconds she had crawled back to the far edge of the vehicle. Seeing no one, she casually slipped out from underneath and brushed off the dust, then made her way back to the camp. She moved with a purpose. As she suspected, Tusk was not to be trusted, and now she had a sinking feeling that Erebus had been sent on a fool’s errand. If Tusk was working for the Brotherhood, then nothing good would come of this.

A snap of a twig sounded off to the right. Erebus whipped his head around and squinted into the darkness. Tree branches swayed back and forth in an eerie dance. But twigs did not break by themselves. Remaining crouched but ready to spring, he quietly retreated the way he had come. This was no vagrant camp. A rustle of fabric to the left. Erebus restrained the urge to bolt and peered intently into the dark forest.

Something shimmered near a tree less than ten meters away. Then it was gone, like a ghost. He placed another tree between himself and the ghost, unlimbered his scattergun, and peered toward the tree where he saw the disturbance. This time he caught sight of two pale green glowing specks. They were at about head height and moving very slowly back and forth, like a shadow searching for the living. Erebus shivered just as a fusillade of bullets slapped into the foliage around him from another direction, some whizzing by his ear like angry hornets. But there were no thunderclaps that followed. The pair of oddly glowing eyes locked onto his position. Silent fire winked repeatedly and more angry hornets slashed through the air and thudded into a nearby tree trunk.

*Shit*, thought Erebus as he launched himself into the air. He sprinted headlong into the forest, at an oblique angle from where the bullets were coming. Though he nearly pissed himself, he maintained the presence of mind not to run in the exact opposite direction, which would likely lead into an ambush. Branches flayed him as he darted through the undergrowth. He knew what hunted him now, though he had never before seen them. Only rumors. He *did* know that night vision goggles distorted the world and made running headlong through a forest pretty chancy. His night vision was better, though black and white images flashing before the eyes at dizzying speeds is no cause for comfort. He banked on being able to lose them. Like a cantankerous money lender, the whining hornet sounds hounded him all the way down a sloping ravine, over a stream, and back up the other side. Occasionally, a bullet would hit water or a rock and make more of a sound. That was not entirely encouraging, however.

After five minutes of sprinting, Erebus halted to catch his breath. He was in good shape and only lightly equipped, and could make another five-minute sprint without a problem, but he wanted to check his back trail. He had covered over a kilometer through treacherous woods, but he still tried to avoid crashing into brush or glancing off trees, both things that made for easy tracking. The ground here was high and dry, so he did not fear leaving too many footprints, though some were

unavoidable. He watched the bottom of the slope he had just climbed. A minute passed without a sound. He blew out a breath he did not realize he was holding.

That was certainly not a vagrant camp. Some kind of Silic spec ops camp, more like. He had heard other scavengers talking of ghostly soldiers moving through Sacramento. Even though the ruins could be disturbing, he dismissed reports of ghosts as the machinations of addled imaginations. Then there were rumors of Silic soldiers appearing behind enemy lines across the flats, beyond the old refinery. The Brotherhood dog soldiers were spooked enough to temporarily abandon the trench lines. The Silics must have uncovered some new tech. Nothing was impossible for the Pre-Fallers. He had seen the remains of their works for years as a scavenger. Buildings that flirted with the clouds, and the hulks of mighty metal war wagons with weapons bristling, and even what Uncle Ollie called “jets” that had once plied the skies at incredible speeds.

Had he totally misinterpreted Tusk’s directions? Maybe the Silics had run the vagrants out. They generally harassed any Outlander in their territory, but vagrants were immediately escorted to the borders and branded. If they were caught in Silic land again, they were slain. Vagrants commonly brought diseases and banditry, and the Silics tolerated neither epidemic.

Suddenly the chirping of crickets ceased. Footfalls trudging up the slope heralded the approach of the pursuers. How the hell were they tracking him in the dark? Night vision goggles were good in close quarters but rarely operated well in dense vegetation over distances – at least the types he had seen before. A large bulbous shape hove into

view around a nearby hill summit, answering the question. Even in the darkness Erebus recognized the shape immediately, since almost every major faction used some form of it. A small prop-driven airship. He watched as the gray whale-like form floated closer. Now he could hear the deep blowing of the props. It appeared to be a small recon airship, with a crew of only a couple men. Silic for sure, and most likely equipped with more night vision equipment.

“Blast,” swore Erebus as he squatted lower. He risked a peek over the lip of the ledge that served as his perch.

One of the commandoes was just below him, creeping diagonally up the hill. Erebus could see the man clearly now. He was covered from head to toe in a slick-skinned body suit, with what looked like wires crisscrossing every inch of the garment and extending to the modified SIA assault weapon he carried in ready position, complete with sound suppressor. Very strange. The man put a hand to his ear, muttered something, and then patted something on his belt. Gaping holes tore through the man, allowing Erebus to see the foliage right through him. The holes grew larger until they devoured the man, causing him to vanish from sight.

Like a ghost.

