

THE
EREBUS
EQUILIBRIUM

NEIL C. CLADINGBOEL

Equilibrium Books™



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THE EREBUS EQUILIBRIUM

NEIL C. CLADINGBOEL

BOOK 1: REFLECTIONS

BOOK 2: THE ANVIL AMULET

BOOK 3: WRAITH TIDE

"DESTINY LIES BEHIND DOORS THAT STARE..."

Titles by Neil C. Cladingboel

The Erebus Equilibrium

Reflections
The Anvil Amulet
Wraith Tide
*Beloved Sons**

Bortag's Curse

Short Fiction

Tale Spin
Weatherwood
Anomaly
Ghost of Elysium

Poetry

Visions of Transition

**Forthcoming*

ABOUT THE BOOK

Suffering a devastating childhood loss, Jonathan Edward Malone becomes withdrawn and despaired, blaming himself for the tragedies that have befallen his family.

Twenty years later, the discovery of a hidden message on the back of an antique looking-glass plummets Jonathan into a subconscious adventure of mystery, betrayal, revelation and intrigue as he desperately searches for a solution to the riddle of the glass.

But, as Jonathan soon discovers, the secrets of *The Erebus Equilibrium* are only the beginning of an extraordinary and spectacular journey!

This one volume paperback edition includes the complete and revised texts of *Reflections*, *The Anvil Amulet* and *Wraith Tide*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in the United Kingdom in 1959, Neil Charles Cladingboel moved to Australia with his family in 1961, spending his early years in Woomera, the heart of the Australian Outback, before settling in Melbourne where he completed his schooling.

After an extensive background in Catering and Hospitality, which took him around the country, Neil embarked on a new career in Real Estate and Land Marketing. Having dabbled with creative writing for many years, Neil has previously published *Reflections*, *The Anvil Amulet* and *Wraith Tide*, books one, two and three of *The Erebus Equilibrium* fantasy trilogy, *Tale Spin and Visions of Transition*, a collection of short fiction, and the short stories, *Weatherwood*, *Anomaly* and *Ghost of Elysium*.

Neil currently resides in Mandurah, Western Australia with his wife, Thea. His latest work is *Bortag's Curse*, a sequel to *The Erebus Equilibrium* series.

For news and updates please visit www.erebus.com.au

FROM THE AUTHOR

Twenty-seven years ago I set about writing what I hoped would be a unique Science Fiction/Fantasy series. The project was shelved many times, for a variety of reasons, until in 1999 I dusted off the cobwebs and set about completing book one. The result was *Reflections*, finally published in November 2000.

Since then, I have completed and published all three books of *The Erebus Equilibrium* and present them here again, reprinted in one complete volume.

As always, I dedicate this work to the many relatives and friends who have helped nurture this amazing creation, and of course, to my loving wife, Thea.

Neil Cladingboel
Mandurah, September 2005.

BOOK THREE:
WRAITH TIDE

PROLOGUE

The skies burned with an unearthly, orange glow, scorching the bloodless skin of the banished immortals toiling endlessly on the wastelands below.

Clouds of sulphur rained down upon them at regular intervals, stinging their eyes and choking their lungs as they struggled to complete their designated tasks. Tomorrow, the Anvils would come again, littering the plains of Tartarus with a barrage of flaming rocks. Some would leave craters the size of oranges; others would swallow acres of the hot, desert sand. Yet, unlike their mortal-world counterparts, the Anvils of Tartarus contained no power or magic.

Anvil detail was hated by almost all of the condemned. The continual cleanup seemed to most, a complete waste of time, knowing that every week the desolate and tortuous expanses would again be littered and the collection gangs would be assigned the task of recovering the fallen rocks and filling in the numerous craters they left behind.

For now though, the igneous skies remained silent and an eerie sense of foreboding swept over the collectors, silently fearing the new day and the rain of Anvils it would surely bring.

None of the condemned knew for certain where the Anvils came from. Tartarus was buried deep beneath the many levels of Erebus; itself located far below the soils of Earth. They often queried the guards of course, but their requests for knowledge brought only sardonic grins and derogatory insults. The banished need only know that the Anvils fell regularly and must therefore be collected, they were told. Nothing more and nothing less.

Rumours were plentiful and nearly every worker had a theory. Most believed they were the work of a skeletal serpent or dragon, known only as the Rock Demon, an Anvil-spewing creature with bones of gold that had been banished into the cliffs at the edge of the plains when Tartarus was first created.

Legends claimed that the creature's eyes were solid diamonds, and many souls had tried to escape to the cliffs in search of the supernatural beast and its prized bones and gems. All but one had perished on the fiery plains, far short of their destinations, and *he* had been lucky to survive his subsequent punishments when the guards eventually recaptured him.

They had since nicknamed him the Scavenger; a sallow-faced, weed of a man always searching for unusual rocks or mysterious trinkets left behind in the aftermath of the Anvils and the frequent tremors that they caused. He alone enjoyed the cleanup details, believing they offered him the chance of wealth, although most of what he discovered were only lumps of coloured rock. Occasionally though, he uncovered Anvils filled with veins of gold or precious gems.

These souvenirs had become a currency of sorts, desired by many yet afforded by few. Most, he traded with the guards in return for favours, although he could never understand their attraction or why *they* desired such things. But the pay offs allowed him all the time he needed to fossick through the plains and build his collection.

His fellow inmates began to despise him for the leniency he received, and for his obvious consorting with the easily bribed guards. Yet in truth, they were *all* happy not to

have him around. None of the banished were saints of course, far from it, yet the crimes the Scavenger had committed as a mortal afforded him little respect or acknowledgment.

The Scavenger was aware of this and it troubled him greatly, in spite of his relationship with the guards. Very few prisoners had any time for him and fewer still accepted his gifts. But he was confident that soon, his position within the ranks would change. His latest find would bring him nothing short of a King's ransom, he believed, and earn him the respect and acceptance he so eagerly sought.

When he first discovered the small fragment of glass, his heart had raced, hoping he had stumbled across a diamond. But as he sifted through the dry, red sands, more of the glass caught his eyes. He had kept the location of his find a secret, returning regularly until he had found all he could of the ancient shards.

He was left now with the daunting task of piecing the fragments together, jigsaw-like, and repairing the ornate gilded frame, most of which he had also recovered. The frame itself was of little consequence, he thought. The Scavenger's real wealth, certain respect and his only chance of escaping Tartarus would come from being the undisputed owner of such a find.

Carefully placing the pieces onto the surface of a rock, he was a little disappointed to discover that he didn't appear to have them all. Nevertheless, when he fingered the fragments into their rightful positions, they instantly fused together, reflecting more and more of his excited face. Intrigued, he watched as each new piece became momentarily liquid, filling the gaps of the missing fragments as the shattered glass and frame slowly restored itself.

The Scavenger's gleaming eyes and unshaven face stared back at him as he lowered his head towards the surface of the glass. Then, unseen by the others, he gently kissed his reflected lips before hiding the valuable prize inside his torn and dirty shirt.

TRIUMVIRATE OF EVIL

1. ICE QUEENS

Karen Ann Masterton loved to skate. As soon as she could walk, her grandmother, herself a former figure skater and champion of the sport, had put her into skates. Karen had been raised by her grandmother from the age of six months, after both her parents had been shot and killed during a bungled robbery at their convenience store while Karen slept, unharmed and out of sight in the rear storeroom.

She knew her parents only from photographs. With no siblings, she had suffered a lonely childhood, loved by her grandmother yet finding little time for anything other than ice-skating. It had become her life and passion as she trained constantly, desperate to realise her grandmother's dream of winning a gold medal at the next Olympics.

The day before her eighteenth birthday, Karen's grandmother, Jacqueline Masterton, had died. Now, eleven months later, the loss still weighed heavily on her mind and she missed her grandmother terribly, so much so that she often sensed her presence, especially when training at the rink. With her gleaming skates carving up the ice, her grandmother's voice often echoed through her ears, shouting instructions and cheering her on as if she were still coaching from the sidelines.

With two routines still to rehearse before the Ice Centre opened to the public, Karen pushed herself to the limits of her abilities. Watching herself in the mirror-lined walls of the rink as again and again she attempted the difficult combinations of single Axel, single loop, half loop and double Salchow, determined always to land on the correct foot.

She had inherited her mother's stunning looks and her father's Negro blood. Her black, beaded hair was a stark contrast to her caramel skin and hazel eyes while her red, spandex suit hugged her svelte, yet shapely body.

As it had done so often of late, Jacqueline's coffee-coloured face smiled back at her from the glass. Karen knew she was wasn't really there of course, but just the thought of her grandmother still looking out for her comforted her somewhat and she had become used to the eerie visitations, even feeling a little disappointed if her grandmother missed a session.

Only today, Karen realised that Jacqueline wasn't watching her through the glass. Instead, she sat alone in the top row of the stand, clapping and cheering her granddaughter's achievements.

Hearing the sudden sound of the claps from the otherwise empty auditorium, Karen stopped her routine and glided to the edge of the ice, staring up at the figure seated above her.

"Grandma?" she asked, rubbing her eyes. "Is that you?"

"In the flesh, Kam," she answered, using her pet name for Karen, coined from her three initials. "In the very flesh I died with, in fact!"

* * *

The souls of the dead held a lifelong fascination for Tyler Andrews. He had been a well-respected scientist and parapsychologist, renowned for his apparent clairvoyance and practice of psychokinesis, yet forced to take an early retirement from the Philadelphia Centre of Paranormal Activities after a psycho-hypnosis experiment had gone tragically wrong, resulting in the deaths of two student volunteers.

Shunned by his colleagues and ridiculed by the profession he had all but given his life to, Tyler spent most of his time reconstructing the experiments which had cost him his position, in an attempt to prove his theories and correct his previous mistakes.

The dead came back! His earlier studies had all but proven such a claim and he had published many papers detailing his experiments and apparent successes. Only now, volunteers for his experiments were few and far between and Tyler had been forced to practice the dangerous technique of self-hypnosis he had pioneered some years before, using himself as a conduit between the mortal and spiritual worlds.

Setting up a series of video cameras to record these sessions of divination within his psychomantium, Tyler was hopeful of finally capturing indisputable evidence of the spiritual phenomena he knew to exist.

He had created his psychomantium in the darkness of his basement using two, door-sized, black-glass mirrors with one of the video cameras set up carefully between them. The mirror behind the camera was angled in such a fashion as to catch and reflect any anomalies or supernatural luminosity back towards the second mirror facing the camera, yet reflecting nothing at all of Tyler, or the chair in which he sat, whilst peering hypnotised into the glass. At a predetermined time, his recorded voice would free him from his self-induced hypnotic trance.

The second and third cameras were mounted on the ceiling above, the loop of lenses and mirrors combining to create a doorway into the afterlife; the cameras ready to record anything which manifested through the glass, spirit or otherwise.

In recent weeks, Tyler had noticed a sudden increase in supernatural activity, witnessing many manifestations with both mind and eyes alike, many of which had been captured by his cameras. Every session brought him closer to his one objective: to finally make contact with the souls of the dead he had summoned through the darkened glass.

Today, like every other day so far this week, something was acutely different. His cameras had recorded fervent activity behind the surfaces of the glass. The restless dead seemed unusually frenetic, so much so that Tyler wondered if his own experiments had somehow incensed the transitory poltergeists.

Disbelieving what his hypnotised eyes had shown him, he placed the latest videotape into the machine and played back the images from this morning's session. In spite of his experience and all he had witnessed previously, nothing could have prepared Tyler for what he saw on the tape. Horrified, he lowered himself slowly into the chair, fumbled for the remote, and then with a trembling hand, gently pressed the rewind button.