

EREBOS



**IT'S A GAME.
IT WATCHES YOU.**

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Translated by Judith Pattinson



annick press
toronto + new york + vancouver

Title of the original German edition: *Erebos*
© 2010 Loewe Verlag GmbH, Bindlach
English translation © 2012 Judith Pattinson

Copiedited by Linda Pruessen
Designed by Monica Charny
Cover adapted from the design by Christian Keller

Annick Press Ltd.

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Cataloging in Publication

Poznanski, Ursula

Erebos : it's a game : it watches you / Ursula Poznanski ; translated by Judith Pattinson.

Translation of German book with same title.

ISBN 978-1-55451-373-4 (bound).—ISBN 978-1-55451-372-7 (pbk.)

I. Pattinson, Judith II. Title.

PZ7.P7578Er 2012

j833'.92

C2011-907622-5

*Published in the U.S.A. by
Annick Press (U.S.) Ltd.*

*Distributed in Canada by
Firefly Books Ltd.
66 Leek Crescent
Richmond Hill, ON
L4B 1H1*

*Distributed in the U.S.A. by
Firefly Books (U.S.) Inc.
P.O. Box 1338
Ellicott Station
Buffalo, NY 14205*

Printed in Canada

Visit us at: www.annickpress.com

FOR LEON ~ U.P.
FOR S, J & P ~ J.P.



THREE

The apartment was empty and freezing cold when Nick got home. Mom must have been in a hurry again and forgotten to close the windows. He kept his jacket on, closed all the windows, and turned the radiator up in his room as far as it would go. Only then did he fish the case out of his jacket and open it: Erebos.

Nick grimaced. Erebos. Wasn't there some Greek god named Eros? Maybe it was a matchmaking program? That would be just like Brynne. Well, she could get that right out of her head.

He turned on the computer, and while the thing was booting up he fetched himself a blanket from the living room, which he draped around his shoulders.

He had at least four uninterrupted hours in front of him. Out of habit—and to heighten the suspense even more—he retrieved his e-mails first (three ads, four bits of spam, and an embittered message from Bethune, threatening dire consequences to anyone who skipped one more practice).

Just when he was about to open his Facebook page, Finn instant-messaged him.

“Hey, little bro. How's it going?”

Nick couldn't help but smile.

“Fine.”

“How's Mom?”

“Busy, but okay. How about you?”

“Ditto. Business is doing nicely.”

Nick refrained from inquiring more closely.

“Nicky, listen. The shirt I promised you ... You know the one?”

And how Nick knew. A shirt from Hell Froze Over, the best band in the world, according to Finn.

“What about it?”

“I can’t get your size—not in the next four weeks. You’re just too tall, baby brother. The Fan shop people have ordered it, but it’s going to take time. Okay?”

For a moment Nick couldn’t figure out why he was so disappointed—probably because he had a picture in his mind of him and Finn at the concert in two weeks’ time, both in the HFO shirt with the ice-blue devil’s skull, bellowing out “Down the Line.”

“Not a big deal,” Nick typed.

“I’ll keep on it, promise. Are you going to drop round again?”

“Of course.”

“Did you know I miss you, baby brother?”

“Yeah, I miss you too.” And how. But he wasn’t going to rub Finn’s nose in it—otherwise he’d start feeling guilty.

After the chat with his brother Nick looked in on Emily’s drawings, but nothing on deviantART had changed since yesterday. That figures, he thought, feeling a bit ashamed, and went off-line again.

An inner voice was telling him it would be better to write his English essay before he devoted himself to Erebos. It didn’t stand a chance. Nick’s curiosity was too strong. He opened the case, made a face at the sight of Brynne’s handwriting, and pushed the DVD into the drive. It took a few seconds before a window opened.

It wasn’t a movie or music. It was a game. The Install window showed a grim picture. A ruined tower could be seen in the

background, surrounded by scorched countryside. In front of the tower a sword was planted in the bare earth, a piece of red cloth tied to its handle. It fluttered in the wind, like a last memento of life in a dead world. Above that, the word Erebos arched, also all in red.

There were butterflies in Nick's stomach. He turned the volume up, but there was no music, just a deep rumbling like an approaching storm. Nick hovered the cursor over the Install button with the vague feeling he had forgotten something ... of course, the virus scan. He checked out the files on the DVD with two different programs and breathed a sigh of relief when both gave the all-clear.

The blue Install bar inched forward in agonizing slow motion. In tiny tiny steps. Several times it seemed as though the computer had crashed—nothing was happening. Nick tried moving the mouse back and forth—at least the cursor still responded, but only slowly, jerkily. Nick shifted around on his chair impatiently. Twenty-five percent—oh, come on. He might as well go to the kitchen and get himself something to drink.

When he came back some minutes later, the install was at 31 percent. He dropped onto the chair, cursing, and rubbed his eyes. What a pain.

After what felt like an hour 100 percent was finally done. Nick was already inwardly rejoicing when the screen went black. Stayed black.

Nothing helped. Not banging on the case, not all his key sequences or his angry outburst. The screen displayed nothing but unrelenting darkness.

Just as Nick was about to give up and press the Reset button, though, something did actually happen. Red letters were emerging out of the dark, words that pulsed as if a concealed heart were supplying them with blood and life.

Enter.
Or turn back.
This is Erebos.

Finally! Tingling with anticipation, Nick chose “Enter.”

The screen went black again—what else was new?—for several seconds. Nick leaned back in his chair. Hopefully the game wouldn’t stay so slow. His computer couldn’t be at fault—it was pretty much state of the art. His processor and graphics card were lightning fast and all the games he had ran without a problem.

Gradually the screen lightened up, revealing a very realistic-looking forest clearing, with the moon above. A figure was standing in the middle in a ragged shirt and threadbare pants. No weapon, just a stick in his hand. Presumably that was supposed to be his game character. As a test Nick clicked a spot to the right; the figure leapt up and moved to exactly the spot he’d selected. Okay, the controls were idiot-proof, and he would have the rest figured out before long. It wasn’t exactly his first game.

Right then. But—which way should he go? There was no path, no indication. A map, maybe? Nick tried to call up an inventory or a game menu, but there was nothing. No indication of quests or goals, no other characters in sight. Just a red bar for the life meter and a blue one underneath. Presumably it indicated stamina. Nick tried various key sequences that had worked in other games, but they didn’t do anything here.

The thing was probably rotten with programming errors, he thought grumpily. Just to test, he clicked directly on his shabbily equipped character. The word “Nameless” appeared over his head.

“Even better,” muttered Nick. “The mysterious Nameless.” He got his ragged character to walk straight ahead for a bit first, then

left, and finally right. There wasn't even a hint as to which way to turn. Every direction seemed to be wrong, and there was no one around he could ask.

"It's incredibly awesome," he mimicked Brynne's voice in his thoughts. On the other hand ... Colin seemed to be keen on the game too. And Colin was no fool.

Nick decided to make his character walk straight ahead. He figured that was what he would do if he were lost. Keep on going in one direction. He'd eventually come across something or other, and every forest had to end somewhere. He focused his attention on Nameless, who was skilfully dodging trees and pushing aside the branches in his path with his stick. You could clearly hear each step the game character took: the undergrowth snapped, dead leaves rustled. When the character climbed over a rocky outcrop, small pebbles came loose and rolled down.

On the far side of the outcrop the ground was wetter. Nameless wasn't making such good progress anymore, since his feet kept sinking up to his ankles. Nick was impressed. It was all extremely realistic—when he was wading through the mud it even made a sucking noise.

As Nameless struggled on, he began to pant. The blue bar had shrunk to one third of its length, so Nick allowed him a rest at the next rock. His character rested his hands on his thighs and bent his head down, obviously trying to get his breath back again.

There must be a stream somewhere around. Nick heard it gurgling and cut short the rest stop. He sent Nameless a short distance to the right, where he did in fact find a small watercourse. His character stopped short of it, still panting.

"Come on, drink." He pressed the down arrow on his keyboard and was delighted when Nameless actually bent down, cupped his hand, and drank water from the stream.

After that he made better headway. The ground was no longer damp, and the trees weren't as dense either. But he still didn't have any points of reference, and gradually Nick began to worry that his go-straight-ahead strategy was a dead loss. If only he had an overview—maybe a map or ...

Overview! Nick grinned. Let's see ... maybe his virtual self could not only bend down, but climb as well! He chose a massive tree with low-hanging branches, positioned the figure in front of it and pressed the up arrow.

Nameless carefully put his stick aside and pulled himself up on the branches. He stopped as soon as Nick released the arrow key, and started climbing when it was pressed again. Nick sent him up as high as possible—until the branches became too weak and he nearly slipped. Only when the figure had a secure foothold did Nick venture a look around. The view was fantastic.

The full moon was high in the sky and shone its light on a seemingly endless greenish-silver sea of trees. To the left the foothills of a mountain chain could be made out; the plains stretched out to the right. The landscape straight ahead was hilly; dots the size of pinpricks on a few of the hills revealed settlements.

See, Nick thought triumphantly. Straight ahead *is* the right way. He had his finger over the down arrow when a gleam of warm yellow light between the trees caught his eye. That looked promising. If he corrected his route a bit to the left, he would come across the source of the light within a few minutes. Maybe it was a house? Impatiently he sent his figure back down to the ground, where it took up its stick again and walked on. Nick chewed on his bottom lip, hoping he had fixed the direction correctly in his memory.

It wasn't long before he thought he could make out the first weak glimmers of light between the tree trunks. Almost at the same

moment he struck an obstacle: a crevice that was much too wide for his character to jump over. Damn! The crevice stretched a long way in both directions and disappeared somewhere in the darkness between the trees. To go around it would cost Nameless a lot of time—and possibly his bearings.

Nick discovered the fallen tree only after he'd spent some time cursing. If he could get it into the right position ... The space bar was the key to success. Nick's game character dragged, pulled, and pushed the trunk in every direction the cursor specified. By the time the tree was lying across the crevice, Nameless was gasping for breath and the red life meter wasn't looking so good.

With the greatest care Nick made his screen hero balance on top of the tree trunk, which turned out to be a very precarious bridge. On his fifth step it rolled slightly to the right, and Nick only just got his figure to safety with a daring jump.

The beam of light was stronger now than before, and it was flickering. Straight in front of Nick was a tiny forest clearing, in the middle of which a fire was burning. A solitary man sat before it and stared into the flames. Nick released the mouse button, and Nameless immediately stood still.

The man by the fire didn't move. He wasn't carrying any weapons Nick could see, but that didn't mean anything. His long black cloak indicated that he might be a mage. Perhaps clicking on the character would reveal more. Nick's cursor had hardly touched the man when he lifted his head, revealing a narrow face with a very small mouth. A dialogue box opened at the same time at the bottom of the screen.

"Greetings, Nameless One." The silver-gray letters stood out against the black background. "You were quick."

Nick walked his figure closer, but the man didn't react; he only pushed the pieces of burning wood in his campfire together with

a long branch. Nick was disappointed. He'd finally encountered someone in this forsaken forest, and all he'd come out with was a meager greeting.

It was only when Nick spotted the blinking cursor on the next line in the window that he understood he was expected to answer.

"And greetings to you too," he typed.

The man in the black cloak nodded. "It was a good idea to climb up the tree. Not many nameless travelers have been so resourceful. You are a great hope for Erebos."

"Thanks," Nick typed in.

"Do you think you would like to proceed?" The man's small mouth twisted into an expectant smile.

Nick wanted to type in "Sure!" but his counterpart wasn't finished yet.

"Only if you ally yourself with Erebos will you be any match for this game. That is something you should know."

"All right," Nick answered.

The man lowered his head and poked his stick deep in the embers of his campfire. Sparks flew up. That looks real, Nick thought; it looks so real.

He waited, but the man didn't make any move to continue the conversation. Presumably he'd already reeled off all the text assigned to him.

Curious to see whether he would react if addressed, Nick typed "p#434<3xxq0jolk-<fi0e8r" into the text field. That seemed to amuse his virtual companion. He raised his head briefly and smiled at Nick.

He's looking me straight in the eye, Nick thought, and tried to suppress his disquiet. He's looking at me as if he can see right through the screen.

Finally the man turned back to his fire.

Only now did Nick notice that music had started to play softly—an intricate but insistent melody that was oddly moving.

“Who are you?” he typed.

Naturally, there was no answer. The man simply put his head to one side, as if he needed to think. However, a few seconds later, to Nick’s stupefaction, words appeared in the dialogue window.

“I am a dead man.” Again the character looked at Nick, as if he wanted to test the effect of his words. “Just a dead man. You, on the other hand, are alive. Nameless, admittedly, but not for much longer. Soon you will be able to choose a name, a vocation, and a new life.”

Nick’s fingers slipped from the keyboard. That was unusual—no, it was scary. The game had given a meaningful answer to a random question.

Maybe it was a coincidence.

“Dead people don’t usually talk,” he typed, and leaned back in his chair. It wasn’t a question as much as an objection. The man by the fire wouldn’t have any appropriate response programmed in for that.

“You’re right. That’s the power of Erebus.” The man held the stick into the flames and drew it out again, alight.

Even though he didn’t want to admit it, Nick felt a bit alarmed. He checked whether his computer really was off-line, or whether someone was playing a joke on him. No. There was no Internet connection. The branch in the dead man’s hands was blazing fiercely, and the reflections danced in his eyes.

Nick’s fingers typed the next sentence almost by themselves. “What is it like to be dead?”

The man laughed—a gasping, panting laugh. “You are the first Nameless One to ask me that!” He threw the rest of his stick into the fire.

“Lonely. Or full of ghosts. Who can say?” He brushed his hand across his forehead. “If I asked you what it’s like to be alive, how would you answer? Just as everyone lives his own life, so too everyone has his own death.” As if wanting to underline his words, the dead man pulled the hood of his cloak over his head, throwing a shadow over his eyes and nose—only his small mouth remained visible. “No doubt you will find out one day.”

No doubt. Nick wiped his damp palms on his pants. He wasn’t feeling comfortable with this subject anymore.

“How must I proceed?” he typed, and realized to his own amusement that he was expecting a meaningful answer.

“Do you really want to proceed? I’m warning you: it’s not a good idea.”

“Of course I want to.”

“Then turn to the left and follow the stream until you come to a ravine. Walk through it. After that ... you will take it from there.” The dead man withdrew deeper into his cloak.

“And watch out for the messenger with the yellow eyes.”