

# Erebus

By Kingsley Montgomery

## Chapter Five Flight

An oily column coiled up through the murky sky like a demonic serpent. Winds from the Frisco Sea flattened the upper reaches of the pillar of smoke, smearing darkness over the steep hilltops that framed Sacramento Hold's small protective valley. Bubbles of flame boiled through the billowing darkness near the base of the serpent, as if it were breaking free from Hell itself.

Pandemonium reigned around the monolithic fortress. Flashes of gunfire accented the haze and stirred the general mayhem as people fled in all directions at once. Small fires dotted the surrounding tent city, with a dozen of the temporary structures completely burned to the ground.

Even at this distance Erebus could see bodies scattered among the mess. Scores of people streamed into the surrounding hills. The watchtowers guarding the three major passes seemed quiescent, content to let the runners move away without challenge. A pair of Silic recon buggies patrolled the perimeter, and there was no sign of non-military trading vehicles. They would have split at the first sign of trouble. Traders did not like to risk their livelihoods.

He had eluded the ghost-like commandoes and their airship just to wind up at another crisis. Absently, he rubbed his tender ankle. It had been bashed on the wall of a limestone cave, in which he laid for hours as the Silic searchers passed him by. Having taken a roundabout way back, it was smarting from all the climbing through eroded hills and arroyos.

Erebus craned his neck around the large boulder that screened his silhouette from observers in the valley, but he could not make out any sign of Kat or Tusk's hauler. In fact, the area where the hauler had been was just a large smoldering hole. That was interesting. One side of the Hold was also charred, with several windows blown in. The flag flying over the place was a ragged remnant of its former glory.

A quick check behind confirmed that his back trail was still absent any obvious pursuit, though he was not wholly trusting in his sight after encountering the disturbing disappearing commandoes.

Suddenly a flicker of white caught his eye, and then vanished into a dense copse of pine trees a hundred meters along the ridge. He moved rapidly toward the cover, keeping to the far side of the hill, shotgun in hand. The cluster of pines was dense and tangled with underbrush. But he knew this area well enough to charge in headlong. There would not be any strangle creepers or poisonous brush here. Staying low, he slid deeper into the foliage, needles poking him but not piercing his dense fur.

He homed in on the soft footfalls of another who was trying to move quietly through the trees. The snap of a twig halted both parties. Erebus sniffed but all he could smell was smoke. As he prepared to move again, a familiar shape stepped out from behind a stunted tree a dozen meters ahead, leading with a long gun. He could just barely make her out in the tree-filtered light.

Smiling, he cupped his hands over his mouth and sounded a screech that was nearly indistinguishable from a corpse crow's eerie cry. Kat froze, her head whipping around to immediately lock onto his position. She had phenomenal hearing. Catching sight of him, she lowered the rifle, expelled a sigh of relief, and motioned him toward an open area discernable through the branches.

As they stepped into the glen, a startled family of hares scattered back into the trees. The animal sign reassured Erebus that they were indeed alone here.

Kat released her grip on the rifle and wrapped her elfin arms around his torso. She was covered with soot, and a shallow cut on her cheek oozed small droplets of ruby.

Erebus gently disentangled her, holding her at arms length, as he looked her over. "Good to see you too."

She looked up, shrugged off his hands, and then punched his chest. "That was a stupe thing to do, running off at the word of that snaggle-toothed son of a pig."

"Whoa," Erebus caught her hand before she pummeled him again. "What the hell happened here? I heard an explosion a while back."

She glared at him. "Your buddy had a shit-load of boomsticks stored in those tents. An hour ago he pulled that bloated rig of his out of here and blew the whole wad. Took Sac Hold's fuel depot with it. The Silics are angry as hornets. They rounded up all the Outlanders, especially muties. Some ran, got themselves gunned down for the trouble. Damn jug heads shoot first and ask questions later. The rest were just released after the grunts questioned them. Aside from asking about Tusk, they are looking for your furry ass!"

Erebus raised an eyebrow. "Me? They question you?"

"Hell no," she blurted rather loudly, then looked around alarmingly. She leaned closer and spoke lower. "I was up in the hills looking for you after finding out that Tusk was sending you on a wild hare chase. They got both our descriptions, and those that know you by sight are helping the grunts search. They think we had something to do with this."

He grimaced. "Shit."

"Yeah," agreed Kat as she wiped blood from her cheek.

"They must have seen me talking to Tusk yesterday," he mused. "He sent me into a nest of Silic commandoes, probably thinking they would kill me outright. Question is: why would he do that?"

Kat pursed her lips. "I got to hearing the little shit talking with a Brotherhood spy near his rig. He said something about planning a diversion that would piss off the jug heads."

Erebus was not really surprised she decided to do something after he left. She was not the kind to sit around waiting for something to happen. "How do you know the guy was a Brotherhood spy?"

"He talked all high and mighty about the 'High Lord,' and that he wanted things to be stirred up around here," said Kat. "Even treated snaggle-tooth like a slagger, and I thought he was a mutant too."

“Well,” said Erebus as he picked up the rifle and handed it back to his companion. “They certainly got their diversion. Looks like they implicated me as well. Great. Probably trying to goad the Silics into pulling back their commandoes to weed out spies. And Brotherhood spies would only be mutants. I see where this is going.” He started moving toward the downhill side of the glen, away from Sacramento Hold. “Thorn and his bloodthirsty Brotherhood want to get the Silics even more paranoid of all mutants. As if it wasn’t bad enough for us around here.”

Kat shrugged. She did not even count herself among mutant kind. Like many, she was on the borderline, and her mutant status depended on the prejudice of the observer. “We still heading for Bale Hold?”

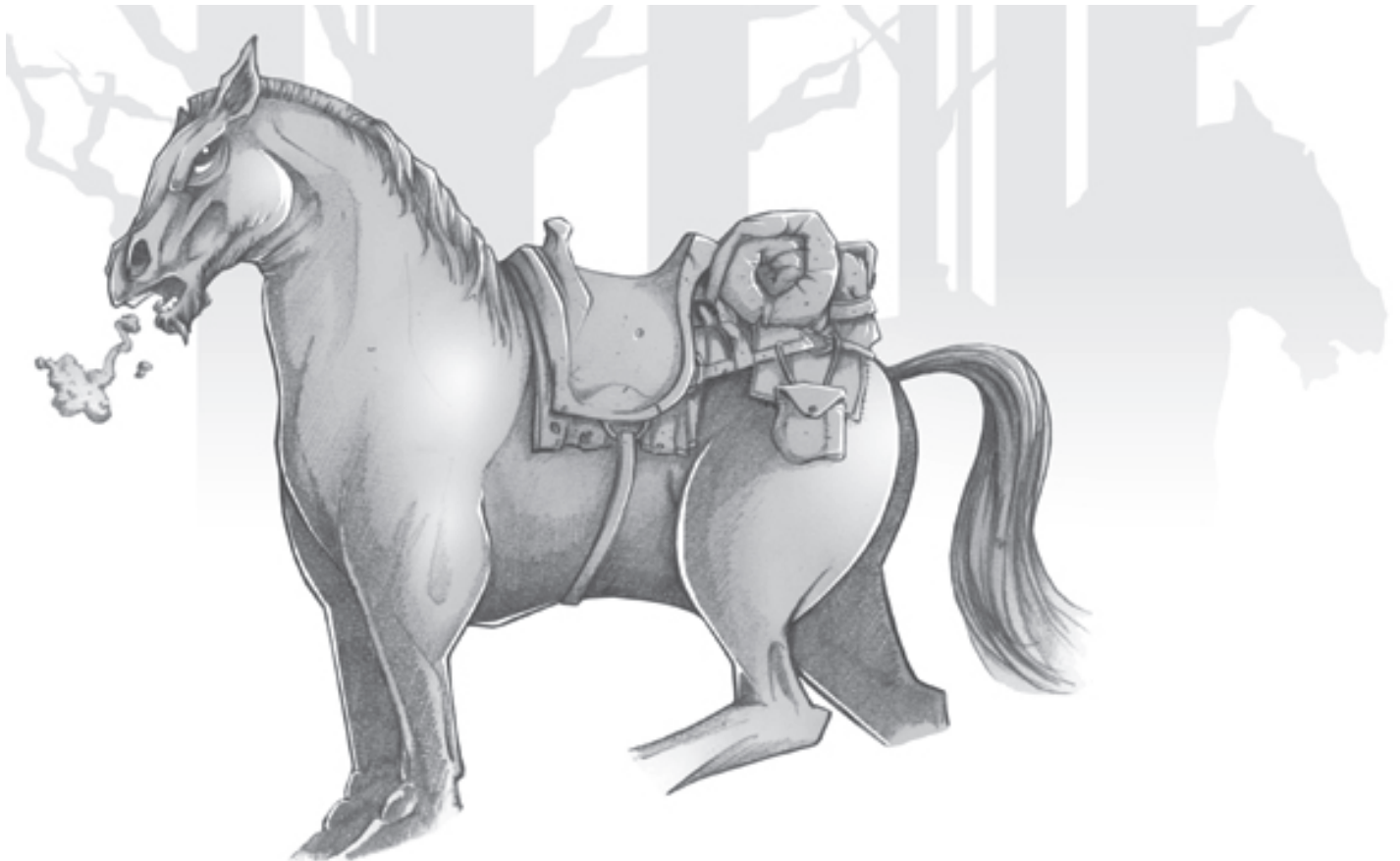
Ereb shook his head. “No way. The Silics will broadcast our descriptions to all the Holds. We need to lay low, and take the game trails to the Giant Step, then figure out a way up that doesn’t involve using the main switchback.

“I for one do not want to be around when I am on the Silic’s shit-list. We can still make for Haven though, that should be far enough away. Doesn’t look like we will be returning here for a while. The Silics will try to catch us as far as the Step, but once we get up onto the plateau we won’t have to worry about them.”

Kat snorted. “Yeah, just have to worry about slaggin’ bandits, rad mutants, Sandies, and those big bug things...” She emphasized by making mandible-like motions with her hands.

“Chiton,” filled in Erebus.

“Yeah, those. They creep the crap out of me. Saw one bite a buggy in half once.”



“Yeah, I’ve seen that too. I know how to avoid them though,” he said, trying to sound more confident than he was. Chiton were a major hazard in the wastelands, but they were fairly rare as long as you steered clear of their warrens. He eyed her sidelong as they reentered the wood. “I don’t suppose you got the mounts and equipment stashed up here somewhere?”

Kat brushed past him and took the lead. “Of course. What? You think I’m as stupe as you, taking a hike into the wilds without transport or supplies?”

Erebus snarled, and then shrugged and chuckled.

The destriers pricked up their ears but did not otherwise react when the two came down the ravine slope. The beasts were well aware of the two long before they came into view. Both were laden with provisions, blankets, tents, and ammo. Though not as fast or durable as buggies or motorbikes, the destriers were nearly self-sufficient and could travel quietly where no vehicle could tread, and they could also act as efficient sentries. The creatures seemed to sleep with one eye open.

“We better get moving,” said Erebus as he wrapped his shotgun sling around the saddle horn. “There’s a floater around here somewhere and it has night vision capability.”

Kat watched the purple and crimson clouds drifting by. It would be dark soon, but the sky did not look particularly threatening. At least they would be able to travel tonight. She was more worried about the smilodons and raptors than Silic floaters when taking the back trails through the Central Cali hills.

Within moments they were trotting along a dry streambed, the mounts navigating the rockier areas with surefooted deftness. The rocky and mostly barren landscape quickly gave way to scrub forest, which covered many of the hills and dales in Central Cali. The gnarled branches sported black lichen patches and angry purple and red sores from acid rain showers. Most were no taller than five meters. House-size boulders lay scattered around like the marbles of some giant child thrown about in a game. Cave entrances watched the travelers like black eye sockets of undead sentinels. The hills were easy to get lost in, and even easier to lose others in. About the only downside was that, once spotted, it was often difficult to climb out of the streambeds, which act like natural funnels in the steep-banked ravines. You also had to watch out for flash floods.

By midnight the glowing halo of the Enemy Moon became obscured, and darkness became almost absolute.

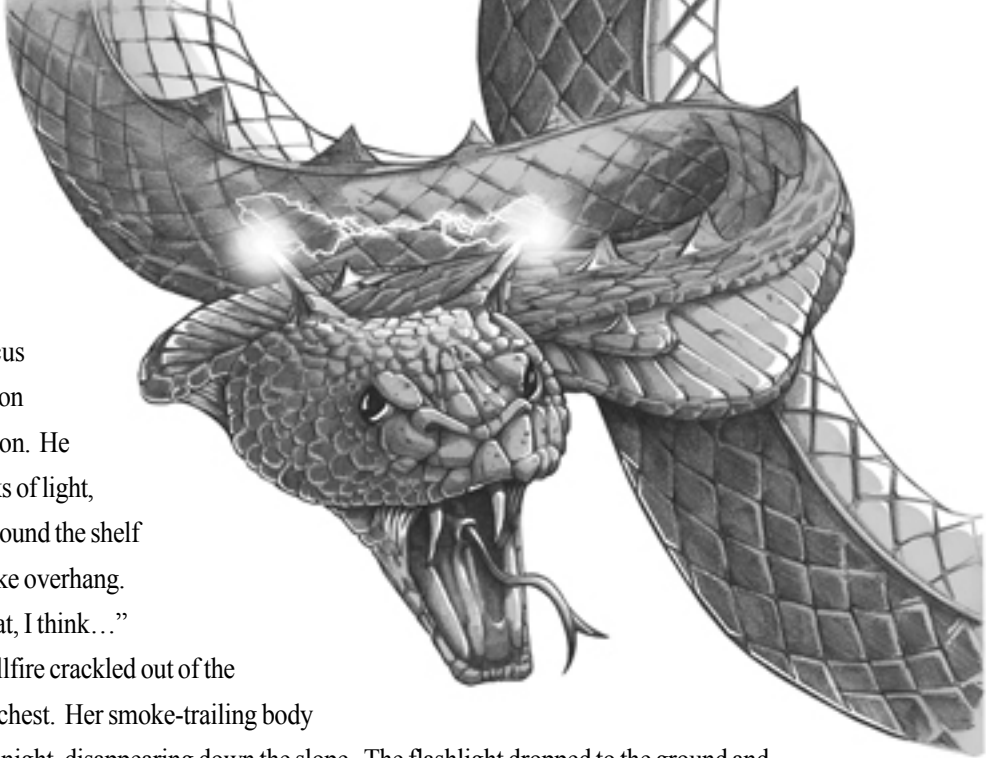
Erebus reigned in, looked about, and gently stroked the muscular neck of his destrier. “Easy, Orion,” he whispered softly into the animal’s nervously twitching ear. Orion and his mate Merope both smelled the coming chem storm, and they were skittish. Erebus scanned the hillsides with his night vision. “Let’s head up the slope there. Big cave opening up there, and we need to rest and take shelter before this storm hits.”

Kat reigned in her own mount and squinted into the darkness. “I can’t see shit.”

“Trust me,” replied the fur-covered mutant. He dismounted and threw the scattergun over his shoulder. “When we get up there, be ready.” Caves were rarely vacant. It seemed to be a natural law.

The two slowly made their way up the incline until the black gash loomed out of the gloom. Both unlimbered their weapons. The opening was broad, over seven meters wide, but only as tall as Erebus. The depth was shallow, but deep enough to allow the destriers room to stretch out.

“Got something over here,” said Kat as the beam of her pocket flashlight probed the inky depths of a much smaller and deeper hole within the cave.



Erebus kept his scattergun trained on the half-meter diameter opening as he approached. His eyes strained to focus on the ground in front of the hole, his vision blurring between regular and night vision. He noticed the reflection of tiny pinpricks of light, like winking diamonds scattered around the shelf that defined the floor of the gash-like overhang.

He beetled his brow. “Kat, I think...”

A searing bolt of blue hellfire crackled out of the hole, catching Kat squarely in the chest. Her smoke-trailing body flailed back out into the darkening night, disappearing down the slope. The flashlight dropped to the ground and bounced, but remained active, its beam cutting a diagonal swath to the uneven ceiling. Erebus cursed as he flattened himself against the wall.

He watched in horror as a thick-bodied serpent streamed out of the cave hole, intent on retrieving its prey. Several meters of the snake slid out before Erebus pulled the trigger on his scattergun.

The lead pellets shredded one side of the creature, sending hundreds of translucent scales into a cloud that winked like a starry night in the pale beam of the fallen flashlight. In a hissing fury, the creature coiled up with phenomenal speed, compressing its body into a writhing mass of muscle and scales as it brought up its craggy horned head. The sides of its head fanned out, spreading its hood to menacing effect. Color patterns inside the hood focused attention to the eyes.

“Son of a...”

Erebus stared at it, transfixed by malevolent reptilian eyes. Lights danced within the depths of its glassy pupils. Its nostrils flared, sending out tendril-like sensory organs to accompany its darting forked tongue. The head was as big as a destrier’s. It was a living nightmare.

Erebus shook his head and pulled the other trigger on the double barreled scattergun. The weapon spat heavy metal death and flame, but the serpent weaved its triangular head at the perfect instant, avoiding most of the blast. The report of the gun boomed inside the cave, deafening Erebus and sending the giant snake into a fit of bobbing.

Erebus dropped back, almost stumbling on a cluster of rocks. He fumbled the flap on his ammo pouch. The viper reared, scraping its craggy head on the ceiling. Electricity danced between two horns sprouting from its angular head.

The hairs on Erebus’ body tingled. He rolled to the side just as a bolt of bluish brilliance lanced out to blacken the ground where he was just standing. The mutie viper hissed its displeasure. It shook its monstrous scaly head and made a chewing motion as it tried to build up another charge.

Erebus raced it, reloading the scattergun in two seconds. He slowly leveled it at the creature’s bobbing head. “Chew on this,” he said calmly as he discharged both barrels. The viper’s head vanished in a spray of dark fluid. The body continued to thrash violently, slapping the ceiling and walls with the force of a pile driver. Chunks of stone knocked loose and buried much of the twitching coils.

The slope was slick as the acid rain shower drizzled from the softly glowing clouds. The rain would not bother him much, but Kat was sensitive to it. He found her splayed along the slope, head down toward the gully. She was still out. Energy vipers, even ones as big as that monster, seldom killed their prey with the lightning blasts. They preferred living meals. But the stunning power of a good jolt was overpowering for most human-sized victims. And that monster was one of the largest vipers he had seen this far from the Vada Wastes.

He knelt beside the unconscious woman and probed under her light flak jacket for any broken ribs. She seemed to be breathing steadily, and the burning did not penetrate the jacket. Gently, he hoisted her over a shoulder and trudged back up the slope to the sheltering cave. He gave a wary glance over to the hole, which was now mostly covered by rock. The viper still twitched occasionally.

With her safely under shelter, the destriers still had to be coaxed up the slope and into the cave.

When Kat came to, she leapt like a tigress onto all fours, looking around crazily. Her pale ponytail whipped around her head like a flail. Her eyes struggled to focus.

“Easy,” said Erebus, holding up his hands.

Sight and recognition quickly flooded back into her consciousness. “What happened?”

Erebus grinned toothily, motioning to the small concealed camp fire and the roasting skewers of meat. “You found us some dinner. Though you did it the hard way.”