

# Erebus

By Kingsley Montgomery

## Chapter Six

### Deal Well Bargained

Kat winced. “Ouch!”

Erebus paused from messaging her neck and shoulders. They had only traveled a couple kilometers before Kat had to take a break. “Too hard?”

“It hurts,” she replied sternly, “that’s why I keep saying ‘ouch’.”

Erebus grunted, and tried to figure out if she really meant it. Kat did not move away, so he continued with a softer touch. “It’s going to be sore for a while. You’re lucky though. Most people would have come out a lot worse after taking a nose dive into a rocky ravine.”

“Not like I wanted to,” replied Kat bitterly.

He gently rubbed more warm rabbit grease into her knotted shoulder, a trick he learned from a rheumatic scavenger some years ago. He caught himself staring admirably at her slender neck. Suddenly uncomfortable, he promptly moved around to face her. Her left cheek was still swollen and the eye above it sported a splotchy purple shiner, which starkly contrasted with her alabaster skin. Though managing to avoid broken bones and internal injuries, she resembled someone on the losing side of a tavern brawl.

“I told you before; there was nothing else you could have done. An energy viper of that size can cook a dog and easily scramble the nerves of a destrier. That you came around after only a few minutes was remarkable.”

She worked her shoulder slowly. “Smiley shit. I could smell somethin’ in that hole. I knew there was something in there. I should’ve said something, or been more careful, or . . .”

Erebus flattened his lips. She was tough, but seemed stuck on blaming herself endlessly, and trying to prove herself to him, something she did not have to do. And being knocked completely out of the fight before it started irked her pride. He reached out and lifted her chin with a furry hand. “Look, Kat. You need to get this straight, because I don’t want to repeat it again. You need to forget about the damn snake. Shit happens – get over it.” She locked a fiery gaze on him. He softened his voice as he turned her head to examine the bruises on her face. “Out here we only have each other, and when one goes down, the other covers until the danger passes. In the wilds, there are no saviors but your skills, your weapons, and your partner.”

She quirked a smile, then playfully slapped him on the shoulder. “That another Uncle Ollie sayin’?”

He returned the smile. “Yeah. Wise old man, my Uncle.”

“Too bad you can’t claim blood kin.” She grinned impishly.

It was early in the day and Erebus was somewhat distracted, and did not immediately react to the jest.

Deep chuckling emanated from the trees behind Erebus, followed by the coarse rustle of brush and the unmistakable mechanical click of a hammer being drawn back. Kat froze her gaze over Erebus’s shoulder. Erebus quickly reached into her partially open jacket and snatched one of her leaf-bladed throwing knives. Kat made no reaction to the move, and it seemed to go unnoticed by the intruder.

“Nobody move, and you can live to keep tellin’ jokes,” said the interloper in a deep base. “Monkey boy there can turn around slowly, but keep your damn hands where I can see them. Make me the slightest bit nervous and ghost-girl there gets to clean you off her face...and I ain’t talkin’ in a pleasant way.”

Kat eyed the gunner coolly. He was a giant of a man, tall and wide of girth, which strained against a wide belt of rough leather. His skin was ebony, with splotches of coffee, like he had been exposed to the bleaching effect of acid rain. His eyes were dark under a heavy brow, which jutted from a knife-scraped scalp that glistened in the early morning heat. Not a good looking guy, and not young, but one graduated from a hard school of life. Not a man to be messed with. A large bore revolver-action scattergun was trained squarely on Erebus’ back, which would shred Kat’s face if he let go the lead.



Erebus glanced at Kat. She made an almost imperceptible shaking of her head. There was no chance at getting the guy before he could pull the trigger. He sighed, turned slowly, hands in the air and knife tucked behind one forearm, held by a finger with practiced ease.

One of the tethered destriers snorted in irritation. Brandished guns made them nervous too. Horse meat was a delicacy to many in the Outlands, and the destriers were smart enough to realize it.

“That’s right, nice and easy,” said the black man as he took a few tentative steps closer. He glanced at the pile of rations and odds and ends just taken off the horses for the evening. “Looks like you were gettin’ ready for an early lunch. Well, nice of you honkeys to invite me.” He chuckled again.

Erebus squinted against the tree-filtered light. It was hard to see the man clearly. This guy knew how to take advantage of glare. He was no Silic scout, nor was he a Jeff ranger, Hellion, or bandit slagger. He wore a set of weighing scales folded up on his belt, and binocs rode high on his hip. Two bandoliers crammed with ammo and a couple skinning knives wrapped his barrel chest. He wore good traveling clothes, tough denim and leather, with what looked like part of an old Silic breastplate and armored leggings. What looked to be a well worn leather purse drooped heavily from his ample waist. The man was not wanting for much by the look of him. Presumably he had some transport nearby, though Erebus heard no sign of it.

Erebus took a stab. “What’s a trader doing all the way out here?”

For a moment the man was at a loss. Then he grinned like a smiley. Gold glittered in that smile. “Good guess, monkey boy. You some kinda mind reader?” He gave Kat an appraising glance. “What’s a fine piece like you doin’ with this mutie witch doctor?”

“He ain’t no witch doctor,” she replied. “He just real good at reading people. And he’s got more manners than your lard ass.”

Erebus’ caught his breath. The big man just snorted. “That so?” He dropped the barrel of his hand cannon a few inches. Erebus involuntarily shifted his weight to put his balls out of the way of a possible lead freeway.

“I noticed the weighing scales you carry there,” said Erebus quickly, “and you aren’t a hunter, not with your...size. Figured if you were a bandit, you would have shot us before coming out of the brush. You got a purse there that looks like it’s about to give birth, and your clothes are well worn but of good quality. And gold teeth aren’t the most common fashion, except among the Free Traders.”

The black man raised an eyebrow. “Well, your eyesight seems to be up to par, anyway,” he remarked, then flashed another gleaming smile. “What’s your name monkey boy?”

Erebus did not want to chance it. The man could still be a bounty hunter or some freelancer who was aware of his plight. “Ollie,” he said almost naturally, “and this is my girl, Kat.” Kat startled at that, but hid her reaction with a wipe of her hand. “We are heading out of Silic territory since mutants don’t seem to be welcome here anymore. Heading for Vaga, or one of the outlying towns.”

The big man grunted. “Really? The Silics never liked muties much, and it’s getting worse, that’s true. Vaga would either see you in the service of some boss or in the pits, serving up your blood. Ah, Vaga, the last great city. If you hosed it down with napalm.”

Erebus watched the man’s eyes stray slightly, as if reminiscing. He tensed his wrist where the dagger rested, but did not follow through with the opportunity. “Why don’t you let up on that boomer, friend, and share a meal with us, like you suggested.”

“Heh. Well spoken for a mutie. I like that. Well, why don’t we just test our new found friendship a bit,” he said sarcastically. “Drop all your weaps in a pile there, then strip. I don’t want to find myself with a lead diet when I think I am getting rabbit. Move faster than a snail and you get wiped.”

Erebus snickered but started divesting himself of weapons. No choice really. He nodded to Kat to do the same. One machete, three knives, a shotgun, and half a dozen sticks of dynamite later, Erebus was disarmed. He decided to keep the throwing knife tucked deftly behind his forearm. Kat had removed her combat jacket, half a dozen more knives, and the ammo for her rifle, which already lay out of reach.

“Now your clothes.”

Erebus growled. “You must be kidding.” He gestured to Kat. “There is a woman here. Have you no manners at all, friend?”

The black man put a hand to his chin as if considering. “Nope,” he said flatly, then grinned. “Not when my ass is on the line. Strip now, or I pump you full of lead and then strip you.”

Erebus carefully removed his light armored jacket, undershirt, and pants. It was getting harder to keep the blade hidden behind his forearm, and the finger doing all the work ached with the strain. Kat’s clothing lay in a pile at her feet. She crossed slender lily arms over her bare chest, though it did not seem like the black man was paying particular attention to her. Erebus, however, had trouble looking away. Both still had on shorts. When Erebus went to remove those, the black man cleared his throat.

“That’s enough, monkey boy,” he said, looking Erebus up and down. “Damn, you are a hairy motha. I really don’t want to see what you got under those skivvies.” He turned his attention to Kat. “You, on the other hand, are like a fine piece of pie. No pun intended.” His belly shook with mirth.

The throwing knife dropped four inches into place, cradled in Erebus’ palm. He kept his hands spread out to his sides. If the man so much as flinched he could have it imbedded in an eye socket at this range.

“Forgive me,” said the black man, his voice suddenly becoming less menacing. He took the supporting hand off the scattergun, but kept it aimed squarely at Erebus, and then snatched a stained rag that was looped through the back of his belt and tossed it to Kat. “Cover yourself with that. Sorry for the scare, but one can never be too careful out here.” He moved closer, one foot kicking the pile of sundries until he was satisfied nothing would explode. He eyed the recently killed rabbit and licked his lips.

“Name’s Patch. You can kinda tell how I got the name.” He indicated the lighter colored skin stains on his face. “I’m a trader, very true, though not a rad-blistered Freebie. Use to work for them, but they got too greedy and are now

more outlawed than not. I'm an Independent. You two happened upon my camp, which is just behind those trees. Made so much damn noise, you never noticed me watching you when you caught that hare and started rubbing at each other." He smiled suddenly. "I was expectin' to get a good peep show for my troubles."

Kat's skin actually filled with a little color. Erebus stayed the knife, for now. "I was tending her shoulder. She was hit by a viper blast a few clicks west of here, and the shock knocked her down a ravine. Nearly broke her neck."

Patch seemed to accept that and shouldered the stumpy boomer. "Bastard vipers! Well, I don't mean to bury you two as long as you behave. You don't seem like flesh eaters, bandits, scabs, Brotherhood crazies, or junkies. So that makes you fellow travelers as far as I am concerned. You can get dressed now."

Erebus breathed a sigh of relief, but kept the knife handy and out of sight as he and Kat put their clothing back on. Patch waited, and then extended his hand to Erebus. Erebus shook his hand, noticing the strong calloused grip. Kat did the same.

"You really headed to Vaga?"

Kat glanced at Erebus, which Erebus knew would tip off the man. Time to make a decision on trust. "No, at least not immediately," said Erebus as he made to itch his back and in doing so tucked the knife under his belt. "We are headed for Haven, on the border of Vagan territory."

Patch wiped sweat from his head. "Hah! I knew it. You didn't seem the type to want to go to Vaga. I've been to Haven several times. Nice place, almost as nice as the Angel cities or Zona down south."

Kat perked up as she struggled with a strap on her cross-belt harness. "You've been to the Angel holds?"

"Oh, many times. Use to be based there when I worked for the Free Traders. They are not as neat and organized as the Silic holds, but they are large, and the people there are far more open to other points of view. And you can get just about anything there without getting scammed.

Unlike Vaga, they actually try to keep standards on the trading."

Erebus nodded. "I have heard that. Perhaps we should strike out for there. Who controls the Angel holds?"

"They call them the Angel Free Cities," corrected Patch as he settled down to the ground. He kept his boomer handy but yanked his boots off. "Ahhh, that's better. The Free Cities are governed by an elected council, and each city is run by the head of the council, called a mayor."

Kat's eyes widened. "Who elects them?"

Patch grinned. "The citizens. Well, the ones who can vote anyways. They have some complex rules on that. Basically anyone born in the cities or marries into them can vote to some degree. The more useful you are to the community, the more your vote counts."



Kat smirked. “The people vote for the leaders? People don’t agree much. How the hell do they get anything done?”

“They also do that in Zona to some degree, or so I’ve heard,” remarked Erebus. “And a few of the Outland settlements also do it. I’ve even heard that there is voting among the Hell Rider gangs.”

Patch nodded. “True, though not quite in the same way. With them you are as likely to get a knife in the back.”

“Sounds weak to me,” stated Kat.

“That is what I originally thought as well,” said Patch. “In some ways it is slow, but those people defend their cities like no other. And they do pretty well for themselves. Their tech rivals Vaga’s, but maybe not quite on par with the Silics. What with all the ruins nearby, they have a massive scavenging operation that supplies them with many things. But, to answer your question, they do have another group that helps to keep the peace, other than the local magistrates. They are called the Revenant Brigade. They are a bunch of highly organized mercenaries that have taken a liking to the place. Been serving the Angels for years now.”

Ereb raised an eyebrow. “What’s stopped them from taking over?”

“Don’t know really. They are a strange bunch, and they keep to themselves. I’ve heard tell that they descended from some Pre-Fall warrior clan that spent many years wandering the Outlands before settling in the Angel area. There are many rumors connected to them. Use to work for the Vagans way back, but were betrayed by the bosses. Been bitter enemies ever since. They are very structured, like the Silics, but they admit mutants from time to time and do not seem to be overly concerned with controlling everything under the sun. But, make any move against the Angel cities, and they are on you like flies on shit. And they got a lot of big guns and plenty of tanks.”

“Tanks?” Kat looked to Erebus out of habit.

Erebus smiled. “Like the Silics’ armored buggy.”

“Yeah,” confirmed Patch. “Sorry, spent too much time in the south. People in the Vaga, Zona, and Angel areas call any armored wag a ‘tank.’ Probably because they suck so much damn fuel they need big fuel tanks.”

Kat nodded her head. That made sense.

Thunder peeled in the distance. The trio automatically scanned the sky, but there was no immediate sign of a brewing chem storm. Erebus walked over to the destriers and unfettered them. They immediately started grazing the brush and grass. If a storm was coming, it would be best to get the horses fed first.

Erebus eyed the portly trader. “So, where are you headed?”

Patch smiled. “Heading to Vaga, actually, though I have some goods to trade to the Sandmen up on the plateau, and I want to pick up some beadwork from them. Beadwork fetches a high price in Vaga.”

Erebus nodded. “What kind of transport do you have?”

Patch eyed Erebus for a moment, and then hooked a thumb back over his shoulder. “In a little dale over yonder I have a small hauler. Was following the trails instead of the blacktops or trade ways. I like taking my chances with beasts that go ‘meow’ and have claws instead of the ones that go ‘give me all your jack’ and have guns.”

Kat chuckled at that, and Patch joined her. Suddenly Erebus felt like mining some of that jaw gold with his fist. What the hell was that? Jealousy? He quickly repressed the unsettling urge.

Kat placed a hand on his arm. "You okay, Erebus?"

He stared dumbly at her. "Uh, yeah, was just thinking about something," he stammered lamely.

"Erebus?" Patch had stopped chuckling, suddenly serious. "That some kind of play name with you two, or is your name not really Ollie?"

Erebus almost flinched. He totally missed the slip up. Kat flicked her gaze around and chewed her lip. Erebus smiled. "Erebus is my real name. Ollie was my adoptive uncle's name." He waited a second to see if the trader gave any reaction to the name. There was nothing that was readable in the man's dark eyes, and the boomer stayed where it was. "Sorry, there was some ruckus in the hold we just came from, and the Silics blame us for it. Though we are innocent, they don't seem to be interested in hearing about it. Figured there was a chance you might be working for them."

Patch scratched his head. "You figured wrong. But I would have done the same. No harm done. You didn't look like an Ollie anyway." He looked over at the girl. "You, on the other hand, I could buy as a Kat. Suits you."

Kat smiled and nodded. "That's my name. I don't make shit up like lover boy here," she said, poking Erebus in the ribs. Erebus chuckled mirthlessly.

Patch kept his attention on her. "You two being hitched also made up?"

"No," said Erebus, a bit too quickly. "That much was true. So don't get any ideas."

The bald man threw up both hands in mock surrender. "Hey, no problem, Erebus. Just making sure I get things straight is all. You do want to make me a deal, eh?"

Erebus drew in a deep breath. There was no putting anything by this guy. As most traders were, he was sharp and could read people well. "Yeah. You can take our destriers into the nearest hold and sell them to the Silics. We should be pretty close to New Highlands or Ever's Tradeport. You keep the proceeds in return for transporting us to Haven and getting us safely by Silic patrols."

Patch considered for a while, cupping his chin with one large hand, and then he eyed Erebus. "You two do whatever foraging and hunting we need along the way, collect all the wood, and make the fires. If we come under fire, you defend with all you got."

"Deal," said Erebus, extending a fur covered fist, palm down.

Patch lightly tapped his own fist to Erebus in the universal gesture of a deal well bargained. There were not many things one could count on in the world, but most civilized folk took bargains very seriously, it was what enabled trade to take place. Along with condemning the wanton slaying of people, it was one of the few rules taken seriously by nearly everyone. Of course, what one group considered wanton slaying was another group's justifiable homicide. But most sane people tried their best. It was the cold hearted killers and slagers, who cared nothing for others, which were a pox upon the scattered pockets of civilization.