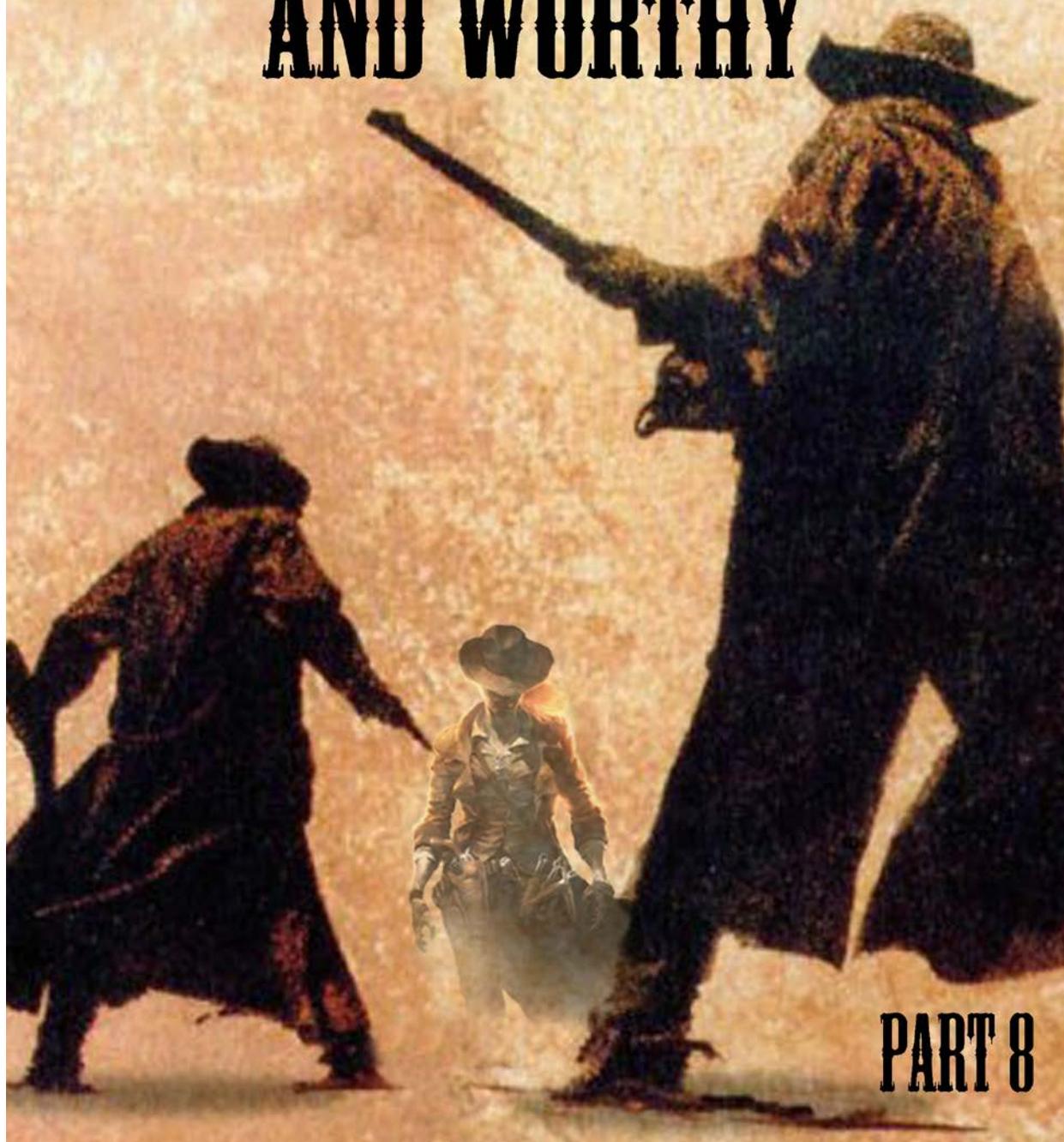


# WANTED, FOUL, AND WORTHY



**PART 8**

## Part 8 Deadlock

A road led southwest almost directly along the path they needed to go, but Jude and Dillon used it sparingly. They didn't want to make themselves easy targets to Nikos or either of the corporate armies. They primarily weaved along the scrub brush behind boulder outcroppings that separated them from the street, which always remained within a couple dozen meters. The occasional nearby sound startled them, and when they turned to look, they found it was one of the tufts of scrub brush that had lost its roots and tumbled along the deep cracks of the rocky terrain, like a marble rolling along a wedge.

They spoke very little, and when they did it was to speculate on where their mutual enemy might be, or whether a sight or a sound might be military personnel. Then, almost 20 kilometers out from the town, Jude spoke up, telling Dillon that they needed to break off from the path and go almost directly south.

"How do you register?" Dillon asked.

"I've been keeping track," Jude answered.

"You were never that good with strassing a path."

"I found our way to Sungrun where you got your infamy."

"And you lost us on our way through the Fanges."

"I had just come out of Virtua. It's disorienting."

"We all almost starved."

"You can't go an hour without eating."

"Speaking of, we should pitch a camp somewhere and..."

"Shh," Jude hushed.

"You hushing me? No one hushes me..."

"Shhh!" Jude insisted, tilting her head to listen ahead. Dillon had to take a couple steps forward before he heard it, too. Large numbers of people. They weren't doing anything specific such as cheering or marching or having a battle. It was just the low rumble of thousands of voices, feet shuffling, and basic movement that comes from a massive crowd.

Jude hurried behind a large boulder and scurried up to the top. Her chest remained low to the stone, her limbs crawling like a spider. She peeked over the top to find that the noise was closer than she'd thought. Within half a kilometer began the border of a military camp. The force of a few thousand soldiers faced off against another force of equal size. They were separated by a ravine, the middle of which was a slight rise upon which sat the ancient ruins of a Parthenon with 20 meter tall cracked pillars that formed a sort of rib cage around smaller structures inside. Jude could not make out details of the structure, but she could tell it was important as little damage had been done to it, despite craters scarring the rocky landscape all around it.

Dillon climbed up next to Jude and kept his head low like hers. He immediately focused on the tall structure as well. "Is that where the Mandrake Leonne is?" he asked.

"No. It's in a mausoleum looking structure with an archway made of stantonflowers."

Dillon stared at her strangely. "Maybe the guy was delirious," he said.

"Maybe," Jude said. "But if it does exist, it's somewhere on the grounds where these armies are dug in. We have to somehow get them to leave."

No sooner were the words out of her mouth when they heard footsteps behind them. Both of them whirled around, guns already in hand. They were faced with a squad of armored soldiers

and an officer who wordlessly held out his hand to collect their weapons. Jude and Dillon hesitated, calculating the odds of surviving such a fight. But the soldiers had the drop on them. One shot from their pistols and they would be annihilated. So they both twirled them over to place the butts of the guns into their captor's hands.

"Come with us," the officer said, waving them in a direction with their own pistols. The twosome climbed off the rock and marched with their escort into the camp.

Makeshift battlements and hastily crafted trench-works zigzagged among the boulders. Weapon emplacements sat readily pointed toward the enemy upon their tripods and other stands. Temporary structures housed officers and soldiers alike. And hidden among all of it, as though tucked away by time, were solitary stone structures wedged among the rocks almost as though they were natural landmarks. Though they were primarily featureless on most sides, each had a unique architectural frontage. These structures were bypassed and worked around by the army. No one entered or left them. They belonged to aliens from long ago.

The soldiers themselves appeared battle-worn and demoralized. Those at firing posts appeared unready and uninterested to even look at the enemy, let alone fire on it. Others wandered the trenches seemingly without purpose. A select few, like the officer who had found Jude and Dillon, were eager to continue the fight, and they kept the others in line and ready for the call to action.

After a couple minutes of walking they arrived at one of the larger temporary shelters. The uniforms of the guards outside suggested it was a high ranking commander, but their casual demeanor said it was one who wasn't very particular.

Inside was no different, only one of the soldiers was that commander. He took advantage of having no superior by wearing his clothes more disheveled than the others. He turned from the opening that faced the enemy to meet his entering guests. The officer of the guard who had brought them reported in, "We found these two spies lurking in the perimeter..."

"Spies!" Dillon exclaimed. "We're refugees who have been displaced searching for warmth!"

The commander only stared at Dillon through tired eyes. Jude noticed his heavy breathing and cross referenced it with the redness on his face and realized he had been drinking. His demeanor suggested that he wouldn't care that she noticed. In fact, it seemed he didn't seem to care about much at all through his fatigue.

"Thank you for bringing them, Sergeant," he said. The officer saluted and left with this guards.

As they left, Dillon spotted smears of blood on the ground and he became frightened for their safety. Well, his own safety at least. "We would like to enlist!" he said.

Jude's head shot toward him in shock.

"You want to enlist, huh?" the commander said skeptically.

Dillon nodded emphatically. "We were curious and mugged that we want to join the winning side."

The commander's head jolted as though scoffing. He then turned to Jude. "What about you? You wanting to be on the *winning* side?"

"What's happening?" she asked.

"The same thing that's happening in every front across every damned world. We're killing them, they're killing us, just as fast as we can over some naigh piece of junk or land. This time it's that box." The commander strolled back over to the opening and pointed out across the battlefield. Jude walked over with him and looked out. She saw the large stone container the

man was referring to resting within the remains of the Parthenon. “Whatever’s inside is something the CEOs of both our sides want. Could be some new power source. Could be a weapon. Could be a bunch of ancient teddy bears. We in middle management don’t get to sav what we’re laying down our lives for. All we know is it’s some sort of powerful relic that’ll bring *them* fortune and glory. They want it so bad they’re willing to sacrifice all our lives for it.”

“Why haven’t one of you destroyed it?” Dillon asked.

“Oh! We can’t destroy the precious cargo. We can destroy each other but not the objective. That must be preserved at all costs. It’s the mantra of every battlefield in these Relic Wars. Don’t harm the goods.” The commander took a swig from his bottle, then closed his eyes tight, readying himself for something. “You got here just in time for a battle. You want to join up? Come blick what you’ll be joining.”

The commander drew his weapon and led his staff outside. There they signaled the troops, and prepared to charge. Jude and Dillon watched out the opening. They could just make out the soldiers on the opposite side preparing themselves as well. Then, on the commander’s signal, the army pushed forward covered by mortar fire and heavy laser cannons. The other side did as well.

The valley flooded with armored soldiers and the skies filled with rockets and small fighter craft. But everyone avoided damaging the Parthenon. When squads made a dash for the box, only enemy snipers fired, surgically taking them out one by one until a single frightened individual tried to hide for cover, and was extracted with a beam weapon that demolished the cover and sliced through the soldier’s armor.

Jude turned away from the battle. Scanning the room, she spotted where the commander kept his spare uniform. Looking back outside, she spotted the body of one of the armored soldiers nearby. “Dillon,” she said. “Drag that body in here and take his armor.”

“You are really sick, you know that, Red?” he said.

“Trust me, I have an idea.

The mortar team was working as fast as it could. They had to be careful with the ordinance; it was based on an energy compound that was extracted from another alien site. The size of the explosion could be adjusted based on the needs, but it was also unstable, and could explode within their own trench.

A red headed officer and her escort strutted into their trench and began barking orders. It took them a couple tries to hear her over the roar of battle, but she was telling them to join the fight.

“We are firing!” the crew chief shouted.

“No, join the charge!” she shouted. They looked at her confused. “We don’t need explosions, you’re just going to hit our own soldiers. We need more bodies in the fight. Grab your guns and strass down there!”

The crew looked at each other, baffled. They had no guns.

Dillon realized the dilemma, and he hurried over to where a couple soldiers had fallen. He grabbed their guns and brought them back. He then handed over the rifle of the soldier whose uniform he had stolen. One of the members of the mortar crew noticed the blast marks and breach in his armor.

“Now take these weapons on to victory!” Jude shouted.

They moved only hesitantly. One of them, tears in his eyes, tumbled toward the fight. Another one backed off, then threw the gun away and ran from the fight. Her friend saw that the officer wasn't chasing, and ran as well.

Jude and Dillon let them go, and took over the mortar. Dillon pointed at the 'Caution' written on the container and said, "That views promising."

Jude went about aiming the mortar. Dillon removed the arm pieces from his armor so he could more carefully hand her the explosives. They moved slowly, carefully sliding the glowing globules into the tube. Jude had to let it go near the bottom and she cringed as it fell into place.

"Try not to blow us half to Hades," Dillon warned.

Jude nodded, sighing with relief, and she looked the tube over. Locating the trigger, she grabbed it, and accidentally knocked the trigger. The mortar fired, and they watched the glowing streak arc into the air, then fall down into the fight. The blast exploded far above them. "We need more time on the charge," Jude said. "And more power."

Dillon studied the explosive, locating the time on the charge and the intensity. His hands shaking with nerves, he adjusted both and handed it to her. She put it in, aimed, and fired...

And it exploded a second into the air. Both of them dove to the ground, their faces in the dirt to keep from blinding themselves.

"What are you doing!" shouted one of the voices from another nearby mortar.

"We got this!" Dillon shouted, raising a hand in the air. "Just a misfire!"

"Well don't misfire in our direction!" the voice called.

Dillon looked back at his partner. Her eyes were burning at him angrily. "Wrong direction, I know," Dillon said. He grabbed the next globule and twisted it the opposite direction while showing her. She grabbed it and shoved it into the tube, then aimed and fired.

The blast seemed to be closer to their destination, but it barely sparked. "You set the intensity lower, too," Jude said.

"Okay, I got this. I got this," Dillon said, grabbing the next one.

On the battlefield, a couple of the officers noticed how close the mortar had gotten to the objective. "Who's firing that!" one of them said.

The commander looked toward them through his Vizros. He spotted the familiar red hair bobbing just above the trench.

The other officer tried calling them over the communicator but was being ignored. Another shot arched down from the same mortar and exploded within the Parthenon, blasting away the top of one of the pillars.

"I'm strassing up there to get their heads!" the officer said, heading toward them.

"You'll do no such thing!" the commander ordered. The officer looked at him with some confusion, and he continued, "That line is wavering over there. See to it they don't break." He pointed toward a unit of soldiers slowly making progress through the cover of boulders.

The officer glared at her commander bitterly. She had an idea of what he was doing, and she would write about it in her report. But for now, the best she could do was follow his command, and she headed down toward the infantry unit.

Like every other battle, this one was going nowhere. There was a great deal of firing and killing and suffering and dying, but little was being accomplished. Eventually one side would simply run out of people and the few survivors would walk up and take the prize to get their promotion.

Then a giant explosion blasted from the middle of the Parthenon. Everything within disappeared in a bright flash. The pillars were cut through as if by a scythe and they crumbled within themselves. The entire structure blasted out from the bottom, and imploded from the top.

Everyone on both sides stopped, as if frozen in time, and watched; some in horror, some in amazement, some with delight. Many even stood out of cover, the danger to them gone, and the need to kill ended.

Jude and Dillon hurriedly dashed from the trench, dodging among the rocks, searching for somewhere to hide.

*To be continued...*