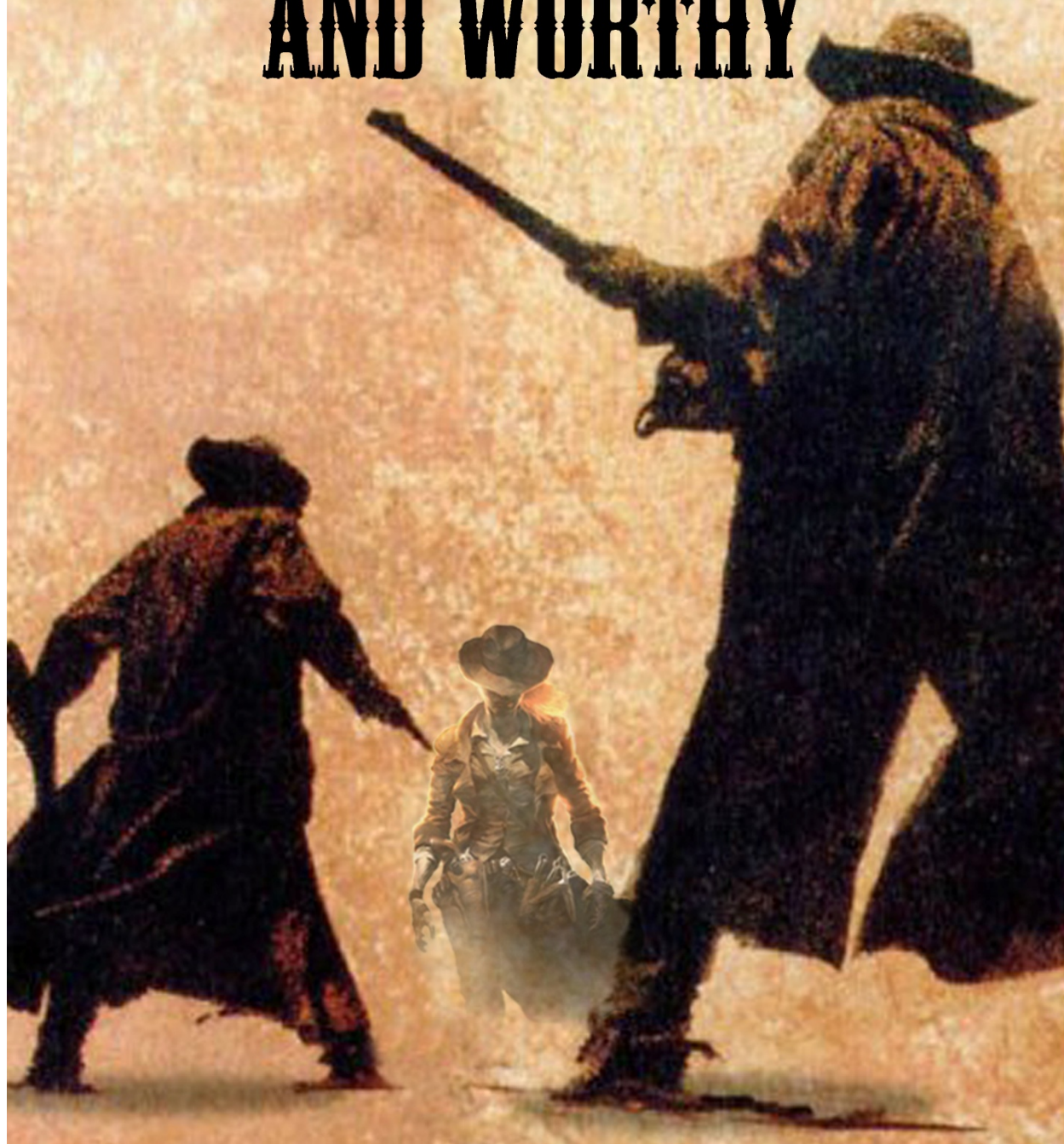


WANTED, FOUL, AND WORTHY



Part 1

The Wanted, the Foul, & the Worthy

Wanted

The wind whispered softly down the long, dusty street. Flecks of sand hitchhiked in the air and dispersed left and right, as though getting clear of the three strangers staring one another down. Two were on one end, one was on the other.

They watched each other closely, none prepared to move. The man and woman on one end were waiting for the signal from the figure on the other. They had never seen this person up close, and knew nothing about him or her; just that he or she or it would be there at this time.

This was a nearly deserted colony. Once a thriving mining settlement for the Somano Corporation, it had sucked its query dry and now its citizens had moved on to other locations on the planet or transferred to new mines off-world. Those left behind were people who refused to move on and individuals who didn't want to be found.

The figure on one end began walking forward and the other two followed suit. The rhythm of their steps matched in the crunching dirt beneath their feet. Their silhouettes grew as they neared until the details of their clothing and faces took shape. The lone figure was a grizzled man, the kind you would expect on a bounty like this.

Peeking faces had spied them from a few windows, but the body language of the three individuals had warned no one to interfere, so the street remained empty.

They stopped before the door of a depressed cantina. A perky sign with lively font described a once hopping meeting ground, but it was now a mostly empty hulk. The lone man pulled a disk from his pocket and held it before him. A holographic head appeared above it, revealing the face of their target. The other two nodded.

They all drew their guns. When the lone man nodded, they rushed inside.

A flurry of gunfire emerged. It began immediately upon entry, as though they saw their target immediately, or it had been waiting for them.

As quickly as it had started, it had ended, and there was silence for a moment... but only a moment. The window crashed open and a new man rolled out. His foot caught on the bottom frame and he tumbled to the ground, rolling into the dusty street.

Quickly he got his footing again and rose up, hot pistol in one hand, the other clutching an ivory hewn item in the other. It was an artifact of significant value he had looted fair and square. Maybe it was from an ancient site located on a planet claimed by one of the more powerful corporations, but he had taken great pains to steal it; and it was therefore his by right of skill if not might.

This was Dillon, and he knew it was time to leave this rock before more bounty hunters showed up to reclaim his prizes and serve his head to their masters. He took one look at the door to make sure they weren't coming out, then turned and dashed down the long road toward one of their hoverautos. He would hotwire theirs to get to his ship hiding in a cave in the desert. He didn't trust the old landing pads; they were too large a target.

The lone gunman that had led the assault on Dillon emerged from the building. He was staggering, barely able to move. Blood was leaking from his lips, but he had one last shot in him. He took it, but the shot went wild. Yet another in many misses to take down the infamous criminal.

Foul

The mansion stood atop the crest of the tall hill where marble rocks covered in moss and low trees rippled down to the wavering sea. In the distance, streams of the emerald aurora borealis drifted lazily on the horizon while the soft light reflection of two moons evenly illuminated everything.

A single road led out of the walled-in, private estate, watched over by guards, cameras, and robotic security equipment. Even the waterway approaches were protected in case of an unexpected amphibious attack.

The family who lived there was not used to such precautions; nor were they prepared for the sudden lavish lifestyle of privilege. Though they appreciated the resources it brought, they found it lonely and isolating. And most of all, the heightened security scared them.

Only Mauren, the father, understood fully the necessity of it all. He had told the others it was to protect them from the poor of the planet who wanted to take their home from them, but the precautions were really a result of how he acquired the wealth.

He was presently enjoying that wealth by lounging in his hot tub, one of the water jets massaging his back. He felt the cool breeze blowing against his hair as it contrasted with the heat soothing his body. He took a sip of his drink and enjoyed the moment he had worked so hard to achieve. This was the life.

Then he remembered, he hadn't opened the window.

Mauren twisted quickly and reached for his towel, splashing a tsunami of water out of the tub. As he turned, he found himself facing a well-dressed man with a sharp chin and a clean cut face leaning against a wall. It was Nikos Kazakis, the man Mauren least wanted to see; the one man his security force was hired to keep out.

Nikos didn't flinch at the man's sudden movement. In fact, he seemed pleased by it. "Hello, Mauren," he said.

"How did you get past my security?" Mauren asked.

"That's the thing about security guards," Nikos said. "They go hither and yawn based on money, and I have more." A silence followed, during which time Mauren remained still, frozen in the pose reaching for his towel. "Speaking of Electros," Nikos said, wandering from the wall to a chair where he placed one foot, "where did you sell the piece you stole from me? Looks like they paid you a might bit of plastic for it."

Nikos had exposed a part of his hip that had been covered by his jacket, revealing a holstered, ivory handled pistol with gold trim. Mauren couldn't take his eyes off it. This could be his doom. Nikos made a clicking sound with his tongue and said, "Hey Mr. Lookie Lou, my eyes are up here."

Breathing heavily, Mauren stared into Nikos's eyes. "I sold it to Flur Corp. They offered more than I could refuse. You'd have done the sa..."

Nikos clicked his tongue. "Now Mauren, you know I can't get to them. They're part of the Navarus Empire; and their spirits are about as blinged with me as mine are with you right now." This was the most frightening thing of all for him to say, for Navarus had a death warrant out for Nikos, and if he had a family, they'd be hunting them, too.

"My family had nothing to do with this..." Mauren tried to say. Nikos only shushed him, and one of his hands moved closer to his pistol. Then Mauren said, "Yes, I am a con artist who attaches himself to treasure hunting expeditions, as much as you are a looter of ancient relics." Nikos straightened slightly; both offended and a little proud. His hand got closer to his gun.

Mauren continued, "I'm good at it, too. One of the best. That's why I know about another score, far better than that worthless piece of junk I took from you."

"Careful," Nikos said. "That worthless piece of junk got your family this fine mansion."

"They call it the Mandrake Leonne. It's supposed to be worth millions."

"Hundreds of millions," Nikos said, recognizing the name, but skeptical of its source.

"I know which corporation has it, and I know what planet where it was last vided. You take me with you, and I'll show you where you can pick up its trail."

"Its trail."

"That's right. If I knew exactly where it was, don't you think I would have gotten it myself?"

"Good point."

"So I'll get dressed, and we can hypo out tonight." Mauren stood and began drying himself off. His out of shape form was not pleasant to Nikos's eyes, which were used to always resting on the most beautiful things. But they kept him in their peripheral vision while Nikos took another look at some of the decor around the room.

"You coming won't be necessary," Nikos said.

"You'll need me to show you where it is," he said. "And I'm not going to give you the location. You'll just shoot me and moze out to find it yourself."

"No, I really don't need you to come," Nikos said. "Your furniture and the framework of the windows and doors all come from Patchcon, even some of the more expensive items. That implies you have some connection with them. You have a picture of you and your wife in front of the Marricone Tower in LavauUponCleef, one of Patchcon's primary distributors. But that's not where you learned about the Mandrake Leonne. Patchcon has several operations that stretch out into the rural reaches of the planet. Most of them have different organizations associated with them."

"And if you want to aprend which one, you're going to work with me," Mauren said, trying one last time to bargain.

"No, I'm not. Your bath tub is lined with a special fusion mineral that only Baulers Corporate Conglomerate manufactures. They're working with Patchcon in one of the outposts." Mauren was staring at Nikos dumbfounded. "I don't know the name of the outpost, though," Nikos said. Mauren sighed with relief. "But I can find out," Nikos said, and he shot Mauren.

Nikos strolled about the room, looking closer at the decorations, and various photos and holo-images, making sure he had read them right. He turned to the door, his gun raised, when he heard small feet scampering to them.

It was Mauren's 10-year-old son. He had one of his father's guns at the ready, but he hesitated when he saw Mauren's body lying back in the tub. Nikos fired. The gun in the boy's hands smashed to pieces and he fell back. Nikos kept his gun steady on the boy. His mother was crying from somewhere downstairs.

"No shame in this, boy," Nikos said. "Some day when you're ready, you comeblick me out. We'll settle up then." Nikos then grabbed a couple hand photos from the desks, and showed himself out the window.

Worthy

Jude pushed her prisoner toward the exchange point. Chained both hand and foot, he cursed her as he stumbled forward across the metal ground of the space port. Five individuals in the haphazard uniforms of Seorg greeted her with formal smiles. They were unloading their ship of deliveries to the planet and making room in a cell for their new guest to stay. Two of them were balancing a group of crates overloaded on a magno-dolly that was sinking to the port's floor, one was pulling a large animal out of the pen where they would be keeping the prisoner, one was supervising the two events, and the last one was greeting Jude with a payment pad.

As they got closer, the prisoner became more desperate. Despite their present polite demeanor, their plans for him were less than savory, and he spat violent curses at Jude as he tried to get away. She pressed a button on a remote which sent painful shocks through the footcuffs, then sedatives through the handcuffs. These made him much more cooperative and he continued forward by her guidance.

“Lovely,” said the man who was greeting them, his chin pressed forward and his eyes on the prisoner. “Your work is impeccable as always, Jude.”

“You always come through with payment, so I always come through with the goods,” Jude said.

“You're both fecal leftovers and you'll rot in...” the prisoner jumped then relaxed as Jude hit the button.

The man with the payment pad smiled smugly. Behind him, the man pulling the animal down the ramp began to hit it and curse his own colorful phrases. “We verballled 50,000 for the bounty,” said the man with the payment pad.

“Plus 25 large for the speed bonus.”

“That's... right rip,” the man said adjusting the amount on his hand device. Behind him, the animal squealed in pain as the man beat its legs with his electro-stick.

Jude's cybernetic eyes focused on what was happening on the ramp, despite the monetary dealings in front of her and the fact that the others were about ready to lose their payload on the dolly.

“Very good. Now if you'll simply adjust his custody settings to my settings, we can conclude our business.”

“Payment first,” Jude said, her focus still on the man abusing the animal.

“That's not how we handle our affairs...” the man said patronizing.

“It's how you do it with me,” Jude insisted.

The man drew a deep breath, then began the payment process.

The animal wailed in pain as the man on the ramp hit it full blast with its electro-stick. Jude saw that it struggled to stand. Its handler made it more difficult by hitting it repeatedly, counteracting what it wanted the animal to do.

“Let the fillygeld get up so it can move!” Jude insisted.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at Jude in annoyance. The one making the payment said, “That was rude.”

“It is. He shouldn't be hurting that animal like that,” Jude said.

“I mean you. Don't speak to my employees like that.”

“I speak however I dango please.”

“I can attest to that,” the prisoner said. Jude hit him in the back of the head and told him to be quiet.

“Do you want to be paid?” the man with the pad said.

Jude drew in a breath and looked at the large animal struggling to its feet. She needed this payout. Much more time without income would mean she'd be stranded without fuel. So she nodded.

The paymaster began the transfer. Jude grabbed the device to transfer the prisoner from her hip bag.

“Can't say I'm gonna miss you, you dirty malfas,” the prisoner said.

The one on the ramp returned to the animal. It winced, and he began hitting it about the head.

“Okay, that's enough,” she insisted, putting back the transfer device. “You're going to let that beast go.”

“You mind your own geffaren business,” the man on the ramp said. The assistant to the paymaster put his hand on his pistol, ready to draw, and the two by the dolly turned their attention on Jude.

The paymaster stopped what he was doing and eyed Jude patronizingly. “You want your money, or do you want to make a speech. Either way, we're leaving here with our prisoner.” The animal handler now hit the beast in the back, shocking it into moving as it howled and cried.

Jude rolled her eyes as she placed a target tag on each one of them with her bionic eyes. “Fine,” Jude said. And she kicked the paymaster into his assistant as she drew her pistol and shot the animal handler. The two by the dolly scrambled for their weapons as their stack of crates came tumbling down. The assistant pushed his boss aside and shot at Jude. She fired and her laser blast knocked his shot into the paymaster. She then shot the assistant in the face.

One of the others managed to get his gun out and Jude received the necessary alarm in her peripheral vision, so she rolled aside. Her cloak-skirt flowed out above her, obscuring where exactly her body was and the man's shots went wild. Jude fired and took out her target with a single shot. The final one took cover behind the pile of fallen crates and drew her weapon. Jude launched herself with her cybernetic leg and flew up above the woman. The woman at the crates tried to follow, but was not a fast enough shot. Jude was, and she hit her square in the chest, landing right in front of the last opponent.

Others in the space port saw what was happening and were contacting the authorities, but Jude's main concern was her prisoner, who was making a break for it. Jude strode up to the animal as she pressed the remote. The prisoner froze, shaking in place. Jude released the animal from its bindings and set it free. Then she caught up to her prisoner with ease and attached her leash. He began laughing.

“What's so funny?” Jude asked, annoyed.

“You just gave away an epic bounty,” he answered. “Now there's no reason to keep me.”

“You've caused enough havoc to be wanted other places. Now get to the ship before I decide I don't want to make anything off of you.” Jude and her prisoner hurried to her ship and got away from the klaxon noise.

Part 2

Past Debts

Nikos was musing on the thought of the Mandrake Leonne most of the way to Cleef. It was said to be a metallic bouquet whose twisted handle ended in two spikes, and whose top bloomed outward like leaves. Its value came from the combination of rare precious metals, some of which could only be forged from elements in a star; and whose craftsmanship was nearly unmatched in millions of years of intelligent life. A glow was supposed to emanate from deep inside, and it was believed that a perpetual power source could be generated from within.

The relic was originally crafted by the Abnani, a civilization that had existed along the fringe of the Orion Nebula approximately 25 million years ago. Little had ever been studied about their race as it was shrouded in mystery. They were thought to have powers that seemed almost magical that other races only attained through technology. They were also the first of their epoch to be destroyed by the Siguerans.

The creation of the Mandrake Leonne was said to be evidence of their powers. Ancient texts of other civilizations spoke of the legendary item whose construction was believed to be impossible for any other species to make. Its use was unknown, and only a few were ever constructed; all being said to have perished in the wars of the time but one. There may have been updated information on the item's purpose, but Nikos couldn't care less. He was interested in its modern day monetary value.

Cleef was not within the sphere of Abnani worlds, which was curious at best, and suspicious at worst. Why it, or any clue of the device, should be here, Nikos did not know. But he supposed he would soon learn.

He was getting close, so Nikos attended to his way onto the planet. Patchcon was the primary corporation, so he brought up his forged credentials for their organization and plugged them into the electronic signature of the ship. Instead of the Avoca, his ship was now the Gold Stallion, and he was an efficiencies director who made sure the workforce was lean and who recommended layoffs. Most of his alternate IDs used this position; it caused a lot of employees to stay away, and those he approached always wanted to make him happy. (Layoffs, of course, could be deadly, as a person's employment was also their home government.)

The chromatic rip in space opened up and Nikos shot through. He traded his grav-sails for solar sails and got his bearings. The planet was nearby to the right, so he sent a hail with his accreditation. Flight control responded by asking for his destination and work assignment. Nikos recognized a small amount of fear in the flight controller's voice; the pauses before speaking. Just the reason he chose the pseudonym that he had. "I'm here to blick an inspection at the Baulers operation," he said in a polite, yet firm voice. "However, I seem to have been given improper information as the coordinates I have figures to be in the ocean."

"Please stand by," the controller said. There was a pause while Nikos scanned the planet. Just as he had heard, Cleef was made up of a major hub where Patchcon's primary business was, and smaller organizations dotted other areas of the planet in random intervals. All were connected by some form of road or rail to the main hub except those separated by an ocean, which were few in number.

At last the flight controller emerged from hold. "We are sending you the coordinates for Burgos. That's the Bauler Conglomerate's community. You will be connected with their local traffic control center." Relief could be detected in the man's voice, just the way Nikos liked it. He wanted everyone to want to pass him on to the next person in line.

Nikos followed the coordinates toward the surface. As the flames of re-entry enveloped his ship, he brought up everything his computers had about Burgos. It didn't take long before his interest was piqued by something he found. Carolyn Hiser was the local administrator. A bemused smile grew across his lips as he ran through recent information about her.

He remembered with fondness more distant information. Back then he knew more about her than any of her employees. Maybe even more than her husband, who, he hoped, had never learned what the two of them had been up to when she was on her "business trip."

Going to Carolyn would be a risk. She would likely see through his disguise, but that was only going to last so long anyway. He would need access to information only someone in authority could provide, so the gamble for her support would be worth it.

After emerging from reentry and once his communication worked again, he called the local flight control station at Burgos. They had already gotten word of his arrival and had a platform where he could land. As he neared, he spotted a small scar in the ground just outside of town where signs of ancient ruins emerged as though trying to escape from their muddy prison. They looked to be Huto to Nikos' trained eyes. Though not Abnani as he had expected, the Huto people had combined with the Abnani when both were defending themselves against the Siguerans. The alliance had created an entirely new species scientists uncreatively called the Huto-Abnani. As such, it made sense that the Mandrake Leonne, or information about it, had once been here.

He did not ask for his old friend. He wanted that to be a surprise. He just requested a meeting through the standard procedures under his assumed name, and then chuckled with delight at how he imagined she would react.

After landing he was reminded of another reason he liked this disguise; hangar personnel immediately got to work refueling and cleaning his ship. He made sure to lock it up, however. He didn't want them to see what was really in there.

Administrator Hiser straightened herself in the mirror, fussing with her collar to make sure everything was perfectly even. Just to make sure, she had a holoreflector scan done and she looked at herself from all directions as a 3D image. No dust. No wrinkles. Nothing to cause an inspector to dismiss her as expendable. Well, she thought, it was time to go. Best not to leave the man waiting.

Carolyn headed down the hall and strode into the meeting room where the man in the white suit was waiting. "Director Newburn, this is an unexpected pleasure. If we had known you were coming, we would have had..."

Administrator Hiser was cut short as Nikos turned around to face her, his signature arrogant grin permanently splashed across his face. Carolyn's jaw initially dropped, then she subsided, turning momentarily to make sure the door had closed behind her.

"You view lovely, my dear," Nikos said.

"Administrator Hiser, not dear, Nikos Kazakis," she said.

Nikos tensed inside, but made sure not to show it. Her wall was up, and he would have to break through it or he could be in some serious trouble. "You will always be dear to me," he said, stepping toward her.

Carolyn rolled her eyes and said, "Perpetually the charmer, aren't you?"

Still a wall, but she was smiling, and she made a step toward him. Nikos stopped. The seminal rule in seduction was always to get them to come to him. "It doesn't mean it's not true."

"Is that why you left sans a goodbye?"

"What would your husband register of that?"

“Figuring he’s light years away now, I can’t imagine.”

“You separated?”

“He was transferred. We didn’t have a say in it, so... But no one transfers you, do they?”

Nikos shook his head. “No one controls my fate.”

“I credit that’s what I liked about you,” Carolyn said looking down at her hand stroking the table. A sign of weakness, and an opening Nikos could exploit.

“Your spirit is no different,” he said. “Wild, like a stallion.”

Nodding, Carolyn said, “I should have ciphered the name of the ship. You always use that word.”

Nikos blushed. Not on accident; providing a moment of vulnerability was part of the seduction process. It worked. Carolyn took a maternal step toward him. “Why did you come?” she asked.

“Because I have something that’s going to bling your spirits.” Carolyn shot him a glance of ‘get real.’ She was never one for clichés, and a line like that wouldn’t work at a bar on her, let alone in an office. He looked at her the same way in protest. “Business before pleasure,” he said, and he walked away from her. “More on the note, I have something to show you right beneath your nose.”

“Here in Burgos?”

Nikos stopped walking, as though her words had commanded him, and he turned to her with a smile and a nod.

Carolyn took a few more steps toward him and asked, “What do you know about *this* place? We just do some manufacturing and a little mining.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You rule over a major metropolis.”

Carolyn chuckled. Nikos’ intent to both provide humor and denigrate her accomplishments so as to undermine her self-confidence were both working.

“I’m talking about the ruins that your people found.”

“Yeah, but there wasn’t anything of value there,” Carolyn said.

“Wasn’t there?” Nikos asked.

Carolyn took several more steps toward him until she was only a yard away. “What have you heard?”

Nikos was coy, looking her in the eyes as if to ask if she really wanted to know. Then he took a step toward her and said, “Someone under your employ may just have found something... shiny. Chances be, even something that would impress your critical eye.”

Carolyn smiled with pride and looked down. Again, part of Nikos’ plan to undermine confidence so he could be the one to build it back up. He touched her chin and lifted her face toward his. “It’s worth millions. And someone who works for you took it. I’d like to know where they went.”

The faint smell of his cologne touched her nostrils the way his nose was nearly touching hers. “We split the profits?” she asked.

Nikos nodded slightly.

Carolyn drew in a breath, then said. “I’ll find out who’s been inside and have them all questioned.”

“And while they’re being questioned...” he asked.

“What kind of wine do you prefer?” she asked.

* * *

Carolyn's fon snapped her out of a numbing daze. Between the wine, the cozy bed, and Nikos's warm arm across her torso, she was in a state of inanimate bliss. But the noise was the alarm from her office, informing her that there was something she had to attend to.

Nikos barely moved, hoping that if he seemed to sleep, she would spare the reach and would just tap the device to go to speaker. She did; but she kept it low, not wanting to interrupt Nikos' slumber.

"We've categorized every employee that's entered the ruins," the voice on the other end said.

"Great. Very good. Send the list to me along with residences."

"The list isn't very long, Administrator Hiser."

"Okay then. Fine. Send it to me please."

"The problem is, the hand of people who went were an appraisal team. After them it was locked down."

"So were they from another world?" Carolyn asked.

"No ma'am. They're your employees."

"Then send the list. It shouldn't be difficult to go through."

"The vanda is, all of the appraisers were drafted into the Patchcon military. When they required a minimum number of draftees, you said to send all non-essential personnel. Appraisers were non-essential since the ruins had already been explored."

"So they're in Cleef."

"No, ma'am. Patchcon sent them on an invasion. They're on their way to WallachUponTuco to attack Fencorp for a hostile takeover." Carolyn ran her hand through her hair in frustration. "I do have a little info that might help," the assistant said.

"Okay," Carolyn said.

"You said that you wanted to know who chances could have left with something or some kind of information, so we queried people who know those workers. One of them said that one of the appraisers, a Mr. Ferguson, had bragged about having apreended evidence of the coordinates of a valuable item. Some kind of mandrake thing."

"Evidence in the ruins?" Carolyn asked.

"Yes. But it's not there anymore because he destroyed the room that had the information. Apparently he didn't want anyone else finding it."

"So now this Ferguson will be the only way to find out what that information was," Carolyn said.

"Yes, ma'am. But as I said, he's in a war zone now."

Carolyn heard movement from the other side of the room and saw Nikos was already half dressed. "Nice work," she told the assistant. "It will be noted in your yearly bonus." She hung up and turned to Nikos. "So you'll be packing up and jondering off just like that once again, huh?"

"If that man is killed, or worse, my path to the Mandrake Leonne is cut." Nikos neither noticed nor cared about Carolyn's longing and lonely expression. He just said, "I had a lovely time, though," and he hurried out the door.

* * *

The hotel was nothing to write home about; but then again, Jude had no home to write to. It was in a dusty town called Wallach on a dusty planet called Tuco. But this was where Fencorphan had their home offices, and where they'd pay top dollar for the bounty on her prisoner. Or at least the top dollar they could pay. Each successive extradition had shallower pockets.

Her prisoner was across the room, his feet and hands bound. He was free enough to feed himself, but moving at any speed was impossible. Jude would not be able to sleep tonight as she would need to keep an eye and the end of her gun on him. But the following morning should prove it all worthwhile.

The prisoner kept his eyes on her, as if in a staring contest. He willed her to go to sleep, but she wouldn't. At one point her eyelids began to lower, but the distant sound of a boom shot them back up.

Then Jude heard footsteps in the hall. She had heard others earlier; they weren't the only ones in this hotel. But these footfalls were unique. They were slow, meticulous, trying not to be noticed. Someone was sneaking up on them. Jude could tell that the prisoner heard them, too, but he was pretending not to.

Jude rose from her chair and approached the door. She stood with her feet planted firmly on the floor, spread out boldly and confidently. She blinked and brought up her infrared bionics. There were three of them. None were disciplined or even trained. They knew enough to keep their heads down, but they were indecisive about where to position themselves, and they weren't in any sort of formation.

Jude readied her pistol. Somewhere in the distance, another faint boom sounded. Jude tuned it out; not part of her immediate problem.

One of the hallway thugs knocked on her door. "Who's there?" she asked, making her position within the room as clear as she could. No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she leaped with her cybernetic legs onto the door frame, turning around 180 degrees to look down on the room.

She jumped just in time, avoiding a barrage of laser fire that cut through the door and the wall. Even the prisoner had to hop out of the way of the blasts.

After the volley, the attackers rushed into the room, two of them still firing. Jude shot one in the back as she dropped down and kicked another in the head. The third turned his gun at her and she ducked under it. Grabbing his hand, she forced him to shoot the one she had kicked in the head, then she flipped him over and shot him in the face.

A moment later, a laser blast came out of seemingly nowhere, destroying Jude's pistol. Her head jerked up in the direction of the blast, and saw it had come from the window. A man was there, crouched on the ledge, laser pistol in hand. He looked somehow familiar, but Jude wasn't sure from where. "Smart people use the window," he said.

Jude recognized the voice. "Dillon!" she exclaimed, building a smile on her face as she turned her whole body to face him. "You view... peachy neb."

"However I look it's no thanks to you. Last time I visited you, Ferdo, Carres, and you were leaving me and Dierdre to die on Dovan."

"Dierdre! How is she?" Jude said, trying to buy time as she figured out a way out of this. Somewhere in the distance, she heard loud thudding, like oncoming explosions.

"Same as you're gonna be in a moment," Dillon said, hopping into the room. "I just wanted you to see why you're losing your life before I take it."

"This really isn't about me," the prisoner said as he hobbled toward the door. "So I'll be going..." Dillon shot the man dead. Jude leaped at Dillon, her bionic legs kicking her ahead at

incredible speed. Dillon was equally fast to react, ducking under her and firing a wire around her neck. She flew at the window and he helped her out of it with a kick.

Caught in a noose, Jude flipped over out the window and came to a sudden stop. The wire tightened around her neck, digging into her throat and cutting off her breath. Her hands grabbed for the wire but it only buried itself into her skin, making it impossible to claw out. She tried to grab for the ledge but he lowered her down. She was three stories up with no hope of touching the ground.

Helpless, Jude's face was turning blue and she was beginning to lose consciousness.

Part 3

The Battle of Wallach

Jude was losing the use of her arms, and yet the wire noose was still tightening. She could even feel her eyes rolling back into her head. She had thought people were dead by the time they reached this point, but she continued to hold on a few more moments.

All along, she heard the distant booming growing closer. It seemed as though she could see billowing red explosions out of the corner of her eye, but that could just be the blood building up in her eyes; the sight of death tightening its grip on her.

Then an enormous blast exploded right next to her and she felt her body swing away from it. Chunks of iron and cement knocked against her, and she felt herself falling. The wire had snapped and she was tumbling toward the ground, but the noose was still tight around her neck. She managed to land on her feet, but without much use of her muscles, she tumbled out of control, rolling end over end, every limb hitting the ground like it was being smacked with an iron bat. She was pummeled mercilessly by debris, as if being shot with pellets, then smacked with a rough-hewn club.

By the time she came to a stop, it felt like she had been beaten half to death, and her skin had been scraped with claws. Debris continued to rain down on her, but her first priority had to be to get the noose off her neck. It had loosened just enough for blood to pump into her arms, but she still couldn't breathe. She stabbed her fingernails between her neck and the wire and pried it loose. As it came off, a rush of air filled her lungs. Like water pouring into a tub, she felt power returning to every inch of her body.

She also felt the pain more thoroughly. Jude had a bionic resistance which had gotten her through vicious tortures, but this agony overwhelmed even those measures. It felt like a couple of her limbs were broken, as well as several bones in her torso, but she knew that at least her legs were intact because she could get to her feet.

Just as she did, she was beamed in the head with a metal fragment that sent her to the ground again, causing her to cut her lip and scratch up her hands. Jude wanted to lay there and be buried under the building pieces. At least they'd stop the feeling of every bit that landed on her.

But Jude knew that she had to move. If the building didn't crush her, and the explosions didn't reach her, Dillon, if he survived, would catch her; and this time he'd just shoot her. Rising to her feet, she looked around. Already, several buildings had open faces where their walls had been stripped away by explosions. The streets were filled with rubble, the air filled with choking smoke, and fighter craft and missiles could be heard roaring overhead. She didn't know what factions were battling it out, but none of them were on her side.

Jude ran in the first direction she saw that led under a roof. As she did she took measure of which of her enhancements still functioned and which did not. Her legs wobbled, but kept her stumbling forward. If it wasn't for her cybernetics, she'd be crippled. Her arms were weakened, but still worked, and the mechanisms in her fingers and forearm still worked. That meant her holdout pistol was able to pop out of her wrist into her hand. She'd have to test the bionic additions in her fingernails to see if they were still functional, but they felt okay. As for her torso and head, she would just have to deal with the aches in them and keep her oxygen pumping to fuel what she needed.

The shaking ground and the trembling walls didn't help, and Jude had to navigate across an open room like she was on a ship in roiling waves. Nevertheless, she was still able to find her

way through a door and down a corridor. The screams of panicking civilians was deafening as they passed from room to room. A series of booms resounded and a third of the roof collapsed, crushing some of the passersby.

Jude tried to take advantage of this by leaping through one of the holes. Though the cybernetics in her legs were keeping her moving, the damage in the springs prevented the giant leap she typically counted on. The result was her arcing through the air into a wall that seemed to punch back as it shook from another explosion.

She could feel the blood from her nose dripping onto the growing lumps on her lips. The smoke-filled room now seemed to be keeling ninety degrees one way, then the other. The blurred vision reminded her that she had an option to see better, so she blinked to bring up the infrared lens. Targets appeared on all of the civilians. She blinked again and it swapped to seeing radio waves. She blinked again and it stayed on radio waves. She squeezed her eyes shut, and when she opened them they switched to the infrared.

All around her was panic and chaos. Outside, soldiers and drones were crossing in different directions, firing and dying. Inside, people were taking cover and saving one another from the rubble. Only one figure was breaking this pattern; a compact figure who was up one level and past a couple walls, weaving in her direction. Dillon.

On most days, Jude would be prepared to crush the likes of that weasel. Most days, but not today. Today it was time to run.

Jude headed for the outside, despite the battling armies. She took a couple steps into the street before a rattle of shots in front of her feet caused her to retreat back to cover. Looking both ways, Jude found that she was between enemy lines, caught in a crossfire. Neither one seemed concerned about hitting a noncombatant, and the one on her right seemed to be actively aiming at anyone who wasn't wearing their uniform.

Jude pointed a finger of her right hand in the direction of the more aggressive army, and a finger of the other hand toward the street. She squeezed the right finger first and a holographic projection of her appeared on the sidewalk charging the trigger-happy soldiers. She squeezed her other finger and... a few whiffs of mist puffed out. There would be no smoke screen for her crossing.

Regardless, it was now or never. Soldiers were shooting at her hologram, and it wouldn't take long for them to realize they were hitting her without consequence. So Jude dashed across the street as fast as she could, laser blasts whizzing by in both directions. She made it through a door and continued moving. This building was not as badly damaged, but the walls were rattling from the constant stress of the battle around it. This had been one of the more makeshift colonies that had gone up fast during a franchise's rapid expansion. The buildings weren't meant to resist strong storms, let alone a battle.

Jude headed toward the opposite side of the building. She heard less fighting in that direction. After dodging through a couple rooms, past some hiding people, she shot out a window and leaped outside to a narrow street.

She could hear machines and people moving on either side of her, but there were no explosions or laser blasts in her immediate vicinity. Slowing for a moment, she started to feel the aches in her limbs that were building up. Her pain resistance would be counted among her malfunctioning cybernetics. Jude cursed at herself. She wasn't used to being so weak. She wasn't used to her body not being able to do whatever she willed it to do.

She still wanted more distance between herself and her hunter, so Jude began across the street, searching for another door. A random explosion seemed to burst from the ground near

her. A stray mortar shot that happened to land in the middle of this street. Cursing frustratedly, Jude staggered away toward an alley next to the building she had been inside.

Regrouping her strength and catching her breath, Jude blinked a couple times to get her bearings. She felt a tear drop from the bottom as she did. 'No time for that,' she thought. Her infrared came up and she took advantage of the opportunity to look around her. The solid figure of Dillon was just beyond a couple walls. She could tell it was him by his movements. He wasn't in formation with any of the armies, he wasn't running about panicking, and he was searching for someone. Her.

Jude pressed up behind the cover of a dumpster and watched him. He knew she was out here somewhere because he was heading for a side door toward her alley. Jude decided to use this to her advantage. With one hand she projected her image down the alley, just past the door. The other hand held her pistol tight, ready to shoot Dillon when he turned to face her hologram.

The door swung opened and Dillon emerged. He immediately spotted the 3D projection. She was creeping away from him, peeking out at the street where the battle was taking place. The kicked up dirt all around helped sell the illusion. He already had his pistols out. He raised one slowly and took careful aim.

Jude took careful aim as well. She had only one chance at the surprise, and she wouldn't stand a chance in a firefight in her current condition; so she took a few moments to steady her hand from its shaking.

Dillon swung one hand back and fired, perfectly hitting the gun and knocking it out of Jude's hand. The explosion of the pistol ran shockwaves down her arm and she fell back with a shriek.

Unarmed and helpless, she lay on the dusty ground as Dillon slowly approached. Chuckling, he said, "Still using the projection trick, huh? Aren't you cute?"

Jude continued to writhe on the ground, dirt collecting in her wounds, and gathering in her red and brown hair. She was taking stock of what still worked, and was finding little that did.

"What? No snarky comeback, Red? That's new," Dillon mocked, using the nickname she had had in the group when they had known each other.

Jude's arm jolted uncontrollably. Her back arched unnaturally and a pain shot up her spine. Her cybernetics were malfunctioning and causing her muscles to spasm.

"Ooo, that views painful. Too bad," Dillon said. "I raise you wish I'd kill you to end the pain. But I'm not going to do you that favor." He snapped binders around one wrist and waited for the other to stop twitching.

Jude swiped at his leg with the free hand in a last ditch effort to free herself. He easily dodged the blow and nabbed the offending hand, twisting it behind her back. She screamed in pain as he pulled against its normal movement, nearly breaking the arm.

"You see, Jude, I'm going to sell you. There's got to be somewhere you're wanted where I don't warrant a bounty. And if not, there are plenty of no wagers who would love to have an indentured servant with a face as pretty as yours."

Jude spat blood at him. Her face was covered in lumps. "Well," Dillon added, "I'm also that'll heal in time for your execution or your purchase. Now get moving."

Dillon pushed Jude along. She had little choice but to stumble forward. Lying down would only cause him to beat her, and she wanted to retain whatever strength she had left to run when the opportunity presented itself. The battle was still raging all around them, after all.

Her eyesight was anything but clear. Her vision glitched like a view screen trying to get reception. She felt Dillon's foot kick her forward several times as they moved back down the alley, through a small building, past a dead medic... Jude turned to inspect the late doctor's supplies, but a jolt from a low power setting on Dillon's pistol discouraged her.

Jude tumbled forward, losing her balance more and more rapidly, until finally one of Dillon's kicks knocked her to the ground. She was breathing heavily, and a first attempt to get back up failed. Dillon rolled her over. The pathetic look on her face revealed she might be spent.

"Fes," Dillon sighed. "Maybe I'm going to have to settle with revenge." He adjusted the setting on the pistol to a higher, lethal amount. "Last chance to get on your feet, Red."

Jude earnestly tried. She knew he would shoot her dead right there in the middle of the street, and she'd be all out of options. But she simply didn't have it in her. What little movement she was capable of was undermined by her malfunctioning cybernetics. She faced her attacker apathetically. Somewhere in the distance, another loud booming was growing in volume.

Dillon couldn't help but feel just a little moved for Jude. It didn't change what he was about to do, but he did feel a little bad about it. He raised his pistol...

And fate once again intervened in favor of Jude; this time in the form of a smashed up space ship careening through one of the buildings onto their street. Dillon instinctively pulled Jude out of the middle of the road and they hid from debris behind a post.

The vessel fell apart as it tumbled, shedding debris into buildings. Its pilot rolled to a stop not far from the pair who were taking cover. The rest of the wreckage disintegrated into a heap.

Dillon's ever watchful eye for valuables noticed among the wreckage some pieces of debris made of precious metals. He approached them, appraising their remains by sight. This was not a military ship, this was a treasure hunting vessel!

Dillon found that he had wandered near the body of the pilot. The man's facemask was split open like a cracked egg and his face beneath was banged up and half-scorched. Then his eyes shot open. Dillon almost fell backward. That had to be some tough armor the man was wearing to keep himself alive. It was probably worth a fortune. He would have to be sure to take it after the pilot finally died.

Dillon turned back toward his prisoner. She wasn't going anywhere, and he needed to finish her off before she did. Then the gasping voice of the man spoke. "Help me," he said. Dillon did not react. "You there, help me," the man insisted before he tumbled into a coughing fit. Dillon had clearly heard the man, but he continued forward. Then the man said, "Help me and I'll... I'll tell you where... you can find the... the treasure of the Mandrake Leonne."

Now Dillon acknowledged the man. He hurried back to him and said, "What do you know about it? Was that what you were hunting next? You have a map or something?"

The man muttered incoherently. It came out like 'Ocsasm.'

"You needs speak up, friend. I can't comprehend you," Dillon said.

The man quieted, smirked slightly and said, "I wasn't born yesterday." Then he drew in a deep breath and winced in pain. Who could tell how much time he had; so Dillon told him to hang on, and he ran back to the room where he had passed the body of a doctor.

More debris had piled up that Dillon had to climb over and pull aside before he came upon the boxes of medical supplies. Dillon didn't know what any of them did or how to use them, but he guessed that he could figure them out when he returned to the wreckage with them.

Balancing the briefcases and boxes in his hands and under his arms, Dillon stumbled out the door to the street. There he spotted Jude lying next to the man. His head was pointed toward her, and she was listening to something he was saying. "Stay away from him!" Dillon shouted as he threw one of the boxes at her. Jude ignored him and continued to listen to the dying man.

Dillon rushed them, throwing another small container as he did. This time she reacted by turning her head slowly toward him with an expression of annoyance. Dillon arrived and shoved Jude out of the way. He yanked the man's head toward him and looked into his helmet. The pilot's face was ashen and his eyelids sagged over still pupils. He was dead. "What did he say?" Dillon asked. Jude didn't respond, so Dillon grabbed her and shook her violently. "What did he say?"

Jude smirked through her dazed expression. Somehow the bruising and lumps made her appear more smug. Dillon pulled his pistol and shoved it in her face. "If you don't tell me right now, I'll kill you," he said.

"But then you'll never know where the Treasure of the Mandrake Leonne is," she said. And then, having spent the last of her energy, she slumped in his hands.

"No. Don't die on me, Red," Dillon said. "Don't die. We're gonna find this thing together... Here. How do we use this stuff?" Dillon dropped Jude and scavenged through the medical containers. His search would be in vain as he had no understanding of any of it, but Jude continued breathing.

Part 4 Old Wounds and New Ones

What few medical facilities were still standing were overflowing. Each military had its own triage, but soldiers who could not make it to them found their way to civilian sites, and the people of the city who were caught in the crossfire were going to them as well.

Dillon was already familiar with much of the town of Wallach. He had been on the planet several times for various reasons. That made it easier for him to make his way to the unwanted outskirts where there wasn't much for armies to fight over. The land in this region was rocky and uneven; unfriendly to armored vehicles. Most importantly, it was home to the one place he wanted least to go.

He had wrangled up an abandoned car, leaving Jude alone for an uncomfortable amount of time. Finding her still lying on the side of the road unconscious had been a relief and a huge stroke of luck. Now she lay in the backseat while he hurried to the neighborhood he knew would still be standing and ignored by both sides for its lack of tactical importance.

The building he was seeking was plain, unobtrusive, and somehow less impressive than the buildings surrounding it in this modest little neighborhood. As he approached, he could hear the sounds and sniff the smells that revealed that others had discovered it. Rounding the corner he spotted many more vehicles crowded around the building like a swarm of bees. Those who knew this place were bringing their spill-over wounded.

It was not a hospital. The people who worked here had the barest of training in any kind of medical treatment. It was, however, a shelter, and they had beds and first aid equipment; something of which they would clearly be running low considering the number of people flocking to the place.

He took a moment after stopping to really consider whether there was anywhere else he could go. But realizing this was the best, and really only option, he got out of the car and locked it. Of course Jude could unlock it if she decided to leave, but he hoped the time it took her to figure that out in her current state would buy him the time he needed. He mostly hoped she just didn't die before telling him what he wanted to know.

Inside, the chaos was what he expected. Dodging slowly drifting, aimless patients and zipping crosswinds of recently commissioned doctors reminded Dillon of flying through an asteroid field; only this time he was searching for one specific asteroid he didn't really want to locate, but had to.

Then, there he was; giving orders to other staff members; a manager with responsibilities, his brother Jos. Dillon sucked in his pride and thought over what he was going to say. Before he was ready, his brother spotted him. He did not smile, but he also did not cringe. His face wore an expression of disappointment, but it was always sour in some way. Dillon grinned at him and approached. "I'm back," he said.

"So I see. Again."

"Uh... Looks like you have a full house."

"We serve those in need. This is the need." A distant boom was followed by a rattling of the walls and a fearful yelp of the crowd. Jos did not flinch, but kept his eyes on his brother.

"Yeah," Dillon began, "Well I'm in need, too."

"I gather. And not just because of the battle."

Dillon shifted uncomfortably, then said, "I found a young lady in the street who needed help. She's unconscious. I have her in the car..."

“Many people here have been affected by the battle. We will help all who come to us based on need...” Jos began to push past Dillon to get back to work.

“You must be running low on medical supplies,” Dillon said.

Jos paused. “No doubt you bring supplies with you that you obtained from a dubious source.”

“Why would you register that?” Dillon asked offended.

Jos turned to Dillon with an annoyed expression.

“The doctor who had them was dead. I give you my word.”

“Your word?”

“I know it doesn’t hold much dime anymore, but it’s the truth! And I need you to see to this girl quickly.”

“What house of ill-repute did you find her in? I may know her,” Jos said. Dillon looked at him surprised. Jos explained, “They come to us after abuse, or sometimes to get checked privately.”

“Oh. She’s from off-world. Sorts an old friend.”

“All your old friends are criminals.”

“Do you distinguish who you help based on their backgrounds?”

“Sometimes based on the company they keep,” Jos said, again eyeing his brother suspiciously.

Another boom in the distance made Dillon a little nervous, so he said, “Look, you want the supplies? Give my friend a place to stay and stabilize her.”

“Show me to these supplies.”

Dillon and Jos stood outside the car looking in. “See? I’d best raise you could really use whatever equipment is in those boxes.”

Jos saw the boxes of medical supplies, and he also saw a few finely crafted artifacts made of precious metals. He didn’t want to know about those, and instead asked, “What happened to her?”

“The woman? Yeah, she got a mighty bit beaten up. So I give you the equipment, you give her a place to stay, right?”

Jos stared down his brother, gathering information from his countenance. His expression said that he knew Dillon had had something to do with her current condition, but he wasn’t going to press any further. “We’ll treat her wounds, yes.” He spoke into a communicator on his wrist, requesting a suspension gurney outside while Dillon jumped for joy.

* * *

Late at night, when the fighting had at last moved on to other frontiers; the halls slowed to a hushed repose shadowed by the echoing wails of the wounded fading to sleep, and the duteous forms crossing the corridors to their infirmary chambers. There, Dillon haunted the passageways like a pacing ghost awaiting his fate. Jos found him wandering like a sleepwalker deep in thought of nothing. “Mother missed you,” Jos said.

“I somehow doubt that,” Dillon said. “How is she?”

“Passed on. Two years now.”

“I’m sorry. Chances that was hard for Dad.”

“He passed on five years ago. One year before our sister.”

“Cassandra,” Dillon said horrified.

“I’m surprised you remember her name,” Jos said.

“Those must be local years...”

“Earth standard.”

“How could it possibly have been so long?”

“You tell me, Dillon. Where have you been?”

“Nowhere that would have made them proud.”

“How did you sav I was here?” Jos asked.

“I’ve been here on and off a few times on jobs the last couple years. I... thought about coming by.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“It’s the work I do, all right? When I worked at Salcom they transferred me to the corporate spy division. I was good at it; better than anyone they had. So they sent me undercover sometimes and I worked my way up. I couldn’t tell anyone what I was doing.”

“So they had you spying on me?”

“No! I got picked up by another org. We pulled jobs for whoever paid the best.”

“Sounds on the level...”

“It paid well. How much do you make in a year in this place...”

“Choose your words carefully, brother. Your friend is in the care of our unwealthy hands.”

“She was one of them,” Dillon said. “We pulled jobs together until... one day they magged that we wouldn’t anymore. And I got kicked into a tower prison.”

“And you’re out now.”

“Yes, thanks to a prison riot I’m out. And pulling whatever bounties I can get while avoiding getting one pulled on me.”

“The galaxy is finite,” Jos said. “You can run out of places to hide.”

“Don’t you think I credit that better than you?”

“Then stop running,” Jos urged. “Find your corner and make a home.”

“Like you did?”

“It’s comfortable. And I didn’t have to leave behind my family.”

“I’m sorry about Cassandra.”

“She asked for you. It had been an accident that put her in a coma, but she recovered one time long enough to ask for you.”

“She was probably delirious,” Dillon said.

“She didn’t ask for me,” Jos finished.

Dillon was quiet for a moment, then said, “That ungrateful dirty malfas...”

Jos slapped him. Dillon reacted with a fist, but didn’t punch back. He cooled himself down and asked, “How is my friend doing?”

“Partially due to the medicine you brought in, she will recover. But she needs rest.”

“Not too much,” Dillon said. “We need to thruster out soon.”

“Moving on... again,” Jos said.

Dillon got the judgment and stopped himself from reacting. Instead he said, “It’s good to see you again, Jos,” and he walked away.

* * *

Jude half woke into a drowsy delirium as the sky was beginning to lighten. It was not the light that had roused her, the windows were not large, but chaotic noise of people, vehicles, and tools. Her ears adjusted to the sounds, and she dozed off to sleep. The noises got louder, this time mixed in with people of the shelter scurrying about, and Jude faded into consciousness, then faded out again. The next noises that woke her came from inside the building. Rushing feet and barked orders reverberated through the corridors. Anxiety and fear was palpable, even to the half-conscious Jude.

Under normal conditions, she would be out of bed with adrenaline pumping into her cybernetics ready for action. But today she had no such energy. She was like one paralyzed, unable to get commands to her limbs to move. The numb warmth of her body sank into the cushioned mattress, and she fell into the dark embrace of sleep again.

By the time she emerged from slumber once and for all, the tumult had died down. But something seemed off. Though primarily unconscious throughout the night, Jude had sensed her surroundings as though through a distant tunnel. There was something different in the background noise, as though someone had changed the channel on their Teleholo.

Jude peeked through thin eyelids to see if anyone was inside her room. It was small, barely large enough for the four other beds. All were full, two of them with two patients in each. Jude quickly checked her own bed to make sure no one else was in it. She was alone.

One of the people in a paired up bed saw her looking, and said, "You just cost me five electros."

"What?" Jude asked with a raspy voice.

"We'd made bets. He registered you was in a coma. She registered you were dead."

"What did you register?" Jude asked.

"I wagered you were alive, but would die. I surm I could still win that bet."

"You stay away from me," Jude said as she swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"We got taken over by the Patchcon Army," he told her. "They're the ones you should be afear'd of. If they mag they want your bed, they might just win my bet for me."

"Or chances be they'll take your bed," she said.

"Easier to kill one than two," he answered. "And I don't plan on telling them my bunkmate is already dead." Jude glanced over to see that indeed, the other person lying in the bed of the man talking to her was lying motionless. There had been a lot of those through the night, and now the army had brought their troubles here.

Jude peeked out the door. She was confused to see a plain-looking corridor rather than a sanitized décor of a hospital, and wondered where Dillon had taken her. Then she wondered if it had been Dillon at all. She had drifted in and out of consciousness and had pretended to be out the whole time, but she had to admit that she could have easily been delusional for much of it. The hall was populated by soldiers standing guard and plain-clothed orderlies attending to the rooms. They were dressed like monks or cultists, Jude couldn't quite tell.

Jude closed the door, took note of the windows, and muttered, "I need to get out of here."

"That'll be fun for you," the man said. "Patchcon has made this into a combo medical and prison center. Everyone here is the property of their interests until appraised and disseminated."

"And who does that?" Jude asked.

* * *

Nikos Kazakissat back in the office that had been granted to him by the base manager; another connection that owed him some favors. Nikos made a point of finding people with ambition. He would then help achieve their goals so they would pay him back with larger dividends.

Nikos kicked one of his feet up on the desk and stretched back in his chair as if to emphasize the luxury of his position while he waited for his first guest to be brought before him. Someone here must know about the Mandrake Leonne, or at least the deserter who had run away with the information, and he was determined to find them. This first individual had been driving a car that had items from the deserter's ship. Not a lot to go on, to be sure, but it was a definite start.

The door opened and Dillon appeared along with two guards who ushered him inside. "Mr. Dillon MacavarLocke Davis," came the voice of a man at the table inside. "You were a wunderkind on Rilar, expected to do great things with your inventions you imaged when you were ten. Even got picked up by Salcom Corp where you developed spy equipment. That is, until you turned that equipment on Salcom itself and just about got executed. Then Unterorg took you on and used your talent until they got rubbed. You did odd jobs with some of your co-workers until they abandoned you and left you to rot in prison. Until you crafted a prison riot. And now here you are in front of me."

"And you must be Mr. Exposition," Dillon responded, eyeing the room and noticing the table full of food laid out on one side of the room.

Responding to Dillon's curiosity about the food, Nikos said, "Good information never reveals itself on an empty stomach. Have a seat. I hope you like caratos."

Dillon approached the table suspiciously, but eager for a solid meal. Serene, echo-classical music waved into the room from omni-wall speakers that made it feel like the sounds were part of the air itself. Dillon glanced around with surprise.

"I insist on the installation of the best sound systems wherever I work," Nikos said. "It soothes the soul for more efficient results."

"I surm if feeling a chill down your spine and every other part of your body is your jist of relaxation." His eyes rested on the food again.

Nikos noticed, so he reached forward with his fork and stabbed into some of the caratos on Nikos's plate, then ate them to prove they weren't poisoned.

Only half convinced, Dillon gingerly pulled out the chair, studying it for traps before carefully sitting on it. He had noticed that his own cybernetics had been disabled; perhaps something in the vibro-music that messed with the electronics. He didn't rely on them as much as Jude did, but he was still at a distinct disadvantage without them. But Nikos hadn't killed him yet, so he decided to go along with it, and he began to eat.

"You and your friend are not here as part of this battle," Nikos observed, not looking up from his food. "You're not in the army and you're certainly not part of a ship crew. My best raise is you have no skin in this war. Yet here you are. So I'm ever so curious to know why you were found with equipment from one of the Patchcon shuttles."

"Can't a guy have souvenirs to remember home by?" Dillon said, also focusing on his food.

Nikos' demeanor dropped. Appearing defeated, he dropped his fork on his plate and stood disappointedly. Dillon eyed the man across from him as he turned and strolled away from the table. That seemed too easy.

It was. Two large men grabbed Dillon's arms from behind, and a third tossed a mask over his face. The mask sucked the air out of his mouth and nose, emptying his lungs. He could feel the shriveling within his body. The pain was excruciating. Then the most horrifying part of all; the mask pumped just enough air back in to keep him alive... and conscious; so the pain could continue indefinitely.

His wide eyes revealed the horror. Nikos turned so he could see them. There was an uncivilized part of him that he hated to admit actually enjoyed this part. He said, "These gentlemen will be removing the mask shortly, and when they do, you will either answer this question, or you will wear that for a full local day, which on this world is nearly 40 hours, before I give you a chance to answer again. So are you ready to cooperate?"

Dillon could read the sadism on Nikos' face. He'd seen it before. The calm ones were always the most dangerous. He nodded.

"Good. I want to know what you appended on that shuttle," Nikos said.

The mask was removed. No sooner had it left Dillon's lips than he told Nikos everything, which wasn't much. He described the ship, the pilot, where it had crashed and what faction it had belonged to. He also told him about the Mandrake Leonne. "I could have waited for him to tell me where it was, but the man needed medical attention. So I ran for some, but when I regressed, he was dead."

"So where is it?" Nikos asked.

"That's what I'm telling you. He died before he could tell me."

Nikos sighed with annoyance, then nodded to his men. They started to put the bag over Dillon's head again.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Dillon shouted. "Red! She knows. The girl I was with. That pilot told her."

"The lady's name is Jude," Nikos said impatiently.

"Yeah, Jude!" Dillon spat. "You know her?"

"We used to be colleagues."

"Great. Then bring her in here. Use that thing on her and get her to tell you."

Nikos strode up to Dillon, his eyes leveled on his. He clenched his fist and a metallic bar shot out from his ring across his knuckles, then he punched Dillon across the face. "Don't ever tell me what to do with my guests," he said. Dillon focused on some blood on the floor that had knocked out of his mouth. This meeting had taken several turns he had not expected, so he thought silence was now the better part of valor.

Nikos waved the guards to take him out, and as they neared the door, Dillon decided that there was one thing for which it was worth pressing his luck just a little more. "Hey, what about the meal?"

A tense silence followed. Faced away from his captor, Dillon could not see Nikos' expression. Then he heard, "See that he ports double the meal we provided."

Smiling as he was removed from the room, Dillon called out, "Thank you!"

* * *

When Jude was led in a half hour later, an employee was wiping the blood off the floor. She focused on it rather than Nikos, and said, "He dead?"

"Not yet," Nikos said. "My benevolence is my tight rope to future misfortunes, I'm afraid. What would you have me do with him?"

“I’m more concerned with what you’re going to do with me.”

A tense silence followed. The last time they had had any contact, Jude had stolen trade secrets from Nikos and gotten him on the wanted list with a major corporate barony. She was solely responsible for him going from a position of authority to one of a vagabond.

“You are to be my traveling companion,” Nikos said as he offered her a place to sit further away from the blood stain. A porter was bringing a couple plates of food. “We’ll be riding the cosmos together once again.”

Nikos sat, and Jude remained standing, staring at him through strands of hair that drooped in front of her face. Nikos looked to his porter and asked, “Why does no one trust our food?”

“Let’s cut through the clutter,” she said. “You want me dead.”

“Nonsense,” Nikos said. “Okay, perhaps a little. But I’ve never placed vengeance over profit.”

“And how do you credit I can be profitable to you?”

“Let’s not play coy. You know the whereabouts of the Mandrake Leonne. I need you to show me where it is. You need me to not kill you.”

Jude saw the logic in him keeping her alive well enough to take a seat. She stared at him a moment before picking up a fork. She then reached across and stabbed into one of his caratos, pulling it to her mouth and eating it. Nikos switched the plates so she could eat from his, and she began eating more vigorously. This was certainly better than what they were serving at the infirmary.

“If I go with you,” she finally said, “I choose the music.”

“But you enjoy vibra-notes.”

“You really need to aprend the difference between vibra-jazz and omni-classical,” Jude said.

“I’m certain you’ll teach me.”

Jude nodded her head at the wiped up blood stain. “What about him?”

“There are a few places where he’s wanted. He’ll go up for auction among them. Is that a problem?”

Jude bobbed her head. “Not at all. It’s about time for a road trip.”

Part 5 En Route

There were approximately half a dozen prisoners in all on the detainment transport ship. They were all heading toward bounty sales where they'd be purchased by whatever corporation wanted them the most for their prison sentence. Those who couldn't be sold were occasionally freed, but were usually killed. A single laser blast to the chest was cheaper than the vengeance the prisoner sometimes brought upon the captor.

Two guards watched the prisoners from seats on a slightly raised platform while the pilots sat just beyond a locked door. Dillon noticed that one of the guards fidgeted, seeming to be searching for an excuse to walk among the prisoners. He decided to give him one. "When do we get to pee?" he asked. Though the one guard twitched, neither responded. "Hey, when do we get to pee?" Dillon reacted. When there was still no response, he went into child mode. "I had a lot to drink and I really got to go and it's really uncomfortable and I don't want to soil the bench, you know this is really uncomfortable and it's gonna smell a lot and come to figure it I might poo 'cause I had a big burger and..."

"Shut your yapper!" The order came not from the guard, but from one of the prisoners, the one next to him.

"But I gotta pee," Dillon said pathetically.

"Then hold it in," the prisoner retorted.

Dillon built upon the mentally deficient character he had established. "I won't be able to 'cause I can't put my hands behind so the pee will slip onto the bench and flow over to you and..."

The other prisoner smacked him with his bound hands. They were all wearing magnacuffs on their wrists and ankles, so the iron bindings left a mark on Dillon's face. Dillon cried out like he was hurt, but took note of the fact that the one guard had been on his way toward him when the prisoner took care of the problem.

Dillon looked at the guard, who was now sitting down and cried out, "He hit me! That's out of perif, he hit me! Aren't you gonna do something about this? Where's the justice?"

As the others laughed at him, Dillon used his cybernetic eye to scan the guard. He found a holdout blaster ticked in a back pouch in addition to his standard sidearm. He locked onto that, then looked at the other guard. "Aren't you going to do anything about this? This isn't right!" The other guard laughed, and Dillon locked onto his faceplate, the weakest point. "I can't believe it! There's no just..."

The other prisoner hit him again. Then the one on the other side hit him in the back. They didn't have much maneuverability, but they used what little they had to make it hurt. The guards sat back and watched.

"Guess I can't expect any justice. Not from a pretty little princess like you," Dillon said. Now the prisoners were laughing, and the fidgety guard reacted. "After all, you wouldn't want to get your sister's armor scuffed up." Now the other guard started laughing. Everyone was laughing at the one guard, who now stood and started toward Dillon. "Careful mosing off that platform. Your high heels might break." Everyone now roared with laughter.

The guard reached Dillon, and stared at him a moment. There was no need to rush. The prisoner wasn't going anywhere. The other guard leaned back in his chair, looking forward to watching the mouthy one get a beating. The standing guard raised his rifle with the butt facing

the prisoner. Dillon folded over in his seat, presenting his back to the beating. Just as the guard swung down, a beeping noise sounded from near the prisoner's ankles.

It was the sound of the magnacuffs releasing both his hands and feet. Dillon lurched forward, dodging under the blow and hugging the guard. Before anyone knew what was going on, Dillon had the holdout pistol in his hand. It snapped in the direction he had recorded in his cybernetic eye and he fired. The shot went directly through the facemask of the sitting guard. The standing guard broke free so he could fire his weapon, but Dillon fired into a weak spot on his armor, taking him down.

The other prisoners were now on Dillon's side, asking him to free them. He ignored them and started for the cockpit. He could hear gas shooting into the chamber. The pilots were aware of what they were doing.

Dillon stepped atop the platform and approached the door to the cockpit. He studied it only a moment before raising his wrist to the control. There was no reason to check the door; he knew it was locked. It was time to use his second, and only remaining, EMP. The first had released the magnacuffs, so if this didn't work, he would be stuck falling unconscious with the lowlifes.

The control panel flashed a moment, then fizzled, and the door came loose. Dillon pressed up against the wall, then shoved open the door. Laser blasts shot out from the pilots. Without looking inside, Dillon whipped his hand around the corner, firing at the console. He knew that doing so would distract the pilots and cause them to look forward. When the firing stopped briefly, he leaned in and shot them both down.

The other prisoners were still calling out for Dillon to free them. He stepped inside the cockpit and sealed the door behind him. Shoving the bodies out of the way, he sat at the controls and looked them over. He found where the gas controller was and saw that a neurotoxin intended to knock out the prisoners or anyone else they didn't want in the hull of the ship. 'This is too light,' Dillon mumbled, and he turned up the toxicity to a lethal dosage.

He then turned to the maps and searched for anything resembling Ocsasm, the word that the doomed pilot had muttered when Dillon found him during the battle. He found Ocasol, a close enough likeness, and one that the corporations were fighting over. It was likely enough that someone who worked for one of those businesses had heard about a treasure on one of these planets. So he laid in the coordinates and the prison ship was on its way.

* * *

Jude was riding in style on Nikos' ship the Golden Stallion... or whatever name he had switched it to now, she didn't want to keep track. She was stretched out in his lounge watching the swirling shades of black through the transparent portion of the floor. Two mercenaries were on the other side of the room watching a holoshow. Patchcon had sent them, and three others, as an escort to both aid Nikos and make sure he brought back a share of the profit to the home office.

Nikos entered and strode across the clear part of the floor, purposely making himself appear to walk over open space. "Have you found every amenity your heart could desire?" he asked.

"Do you have a hair stain station?" she asked.

"I must admit that that is a luxury item I do not yet possess," he answered.

"Too bad," she said, running her hand through the long strands of her hair; first red near the roots, then brown, then back to red at the tips.

“Do you prefer to switch it for every planet?” he asked, slipping into the bar section of the lounge.

“This shade brought me bad luck.”

“You don't strike me as a woman who relies much on luck.”

“Oh, I believe in luck,” she said. “All of life is playing the odds. You just want to weigh the dice on your side before you roll them.”

Nikos smiled as he filled the dinks inside the leavening condensers. He didn't ask her what she wanted. Jude's attention was focused on one of the animal heads Nikos had hanging on his wall.

“I regret that we cannot repair your enhancements,” Nikos said, as he brought the drinks over to her. As he walked, he made a subtle motion to the two mercs to leave. “But something tells me that your share of the treasure you're leading us to will be more than enough to buy some of the most powerful cybernetics you've ever had.” He sat close and she took the drink.

“Leastways the Devil Jackson was able to stop the spasms,” she said, and then chugged half the drink. Nikos stalled, then tried to match her speed, but had to stop at little more than a sip. Jude pretended not to notice and crossed her legs on the sofa, one of the legs folding over his knees flirtatiously.

He then said, “Something sways me you can do well enough without the enhancements.”

“I can rec by,” she replied.

Nikos rested one hand on the knee folded over his leg and asked, “How did you get so good at what you do?”

Jude paused a moment. Nikos could feel her muscles tighten. He had hit a nerve; something that was difficult to do with Jude. Then she answered, “I trained with the Irreto Organization.”

Nikos' eyes jumped wide. Surprising him was not an easy task either. “That doesn't figure like the sort of organization you would belong to. Weren't they strict?”

Jude shrugged. “I surm like any military organization.”

“The Irretowere not just any military organization. They didn't even hail to any one entity. Their students were some of the most ruthless and disciplined...” Nikos looked at Jude and recognized the tension in her face. Her glass was empty. He handed her his and asked her what it was like.

Jude downed what was in the glass and said, “They gave you a poozoo when you entered.”

“I heard. Your animal companion that you train throughout your schooling. Is it true they made you kill it when you graduated?”

Jude bobbed her head a little, and Nikos noticed a slight smile. He took her glasses and asked her to explain.

“I named her Maxine. Mad Maxine. They didn't tell us what we were going to do to them at the end... But I had a suspicion. Still, I trained her every day. They gave us tricks we were supposed to teach them; exercises both to help us remember what we'd aprended, and so they could play the antagonists to our training sessions. The others, they would teach their poozoos their tricks, then play with them a touch of time. It was their only link to humanity. All the rest of the while we were too busy, and the trainees were mocked if they had fun with each other. We were still kids, and we had an instinct to play, so they spent what little free time they had rolling around with their poozoos. Not me. I finished the lessons we were taught to train, then we worked on more lessons. Maxine whimpered and begged for free time, but I wouldn't

let her. I snapped my fingers and demanded more lessons. She aprended, despite herself. She looked at the other poozoos with envy, wishing she had time to play like they did. But she was not allowed. When the butchering time came, you could vis more tears from the other students than during all their whippings in the three years we were there. They had raised them from the time they were one year old, and now we had to be their killers. Students who refused were flogged, then made to watch as their poozoos were tortured and killed. Then the student was marked with a tattoo that said dropout across their foreheads, and they were regressed to their families in shame. The rest... most of them anyway, gave their pets a swift death. You could see their hearts die through the look in their eyes.”

“Most of them?” Nikos asked.

“There were a few... sadistic ones that had been anxiously awaiting that day. Those poozoos suffered. Those students were promoted to teachers.”

“I need another drink,” Nikos said, standing and walking to the bar. “So what did you do?”

Jude's eyes remained inert, as though she was watching herself all over again. “I arrived at the headmasters' on the day of my graduation. We were supposed to have the collars of our poozoos with us to prove we had passed our final exam.”

“I give that you had done it quickly,” Nikos said as he filled the glasses.

“No,” Jude said. Nikos froze, staring at her. “I arrived at the headmasters' with Maxine in tow.”

“I'm abso that went over well,” Nikos said.

“They were shocked. The others had tried to smuggle their pets out, or tried to free them. I took mine with me at the end of a leash. They asked me why I had brought it. One of them gave me the benefit of the doubt and surmed that I would be killing it in front of them to show how tough I had become. After all, I had my sgian-dubh knives with me sheathed across my arms. I silenced him by saying that was not true. The lead headmaster then asked why I had brought it, and I explained that I had found a better use for the animal. She was not amused, and she told me I was expelled, and would be branded. Two of the four guards in the room approached me... You're spilling the drinks.”

Nikos was holding the glasses, and his shaking was causing the liquids to fall out the sides. “Sorry,” he said, and he put them down. “I don't scry a brand across your face. So what passed.”

“Training,” she said. “Poozoos have some of the strongest back legs in the galaxy when they're allowed to develop correctly. They can spring across a fifty foot cliff in just over one second if allowed. I allowed her to go at the lead headmaster. She ripped her head off in just over two seconds. As for the guards going after me... Did you know that Azami armor has a weak spot in its nose plating? A small dagger flung at high velocity from a low angle can puncture the armor and send the cartilage directly into the brain. The other two guards took a touch bit more work, but the organization had trained me well. And I had trained Mad Maxine well, too.” A smile of pride grew across Jude's face as she remembered. She described the sight, of one headmaster after another trying to defend itself, and Maxine shooting through them like a bullet with teeth, tearing off limbs and throwing body parts into more of them before disemboweling them.

“She did everything I trained her to do,” Jude said. “But some of the headmasters were armed. This didn't make much of a difference at first as there were more headmasters than poozoo, and they didn't want to shoot each other. But when it came to only a few remaining,

they were able to fire at her without fear of hitting one another. They wounded her, and the last one took her down. I removed that man's eyes before making him taste every inch of death.”

Nikos had downed both drinks now, and filled the glasses again. “So that's why the school closed.”

“Oh no,” Jude said, a half-crazed smile now across her face. “No, they could have replaced the headmasters and continued. But as I held the lifeless body of my beloved Maxine in my arms, I realized how many others must have cogeted this practice. The other teachers, the president, the owners of the school. This graduation requirement was no secret. I hunted them all down; one by one. I used every lesson they had taught me against them; the most important one being never let them know you're coming. That's why I did it all in one day, before anyone could aprend what had happened in the convocation hall. When I was done, I could not re-enter regular society, which is why I joined Unterorg... You gonna let me drink one of those?”

Nikos had downed a glass and a half again. “Sorry. I'll get you another one.” He rapidly placed the glasses back into the leavening condenser.

Part 6

The Ruins of Roslow

The stone and ash crunched beneath Bowie's feet as he carefully made his way through the ruins. He had to move slowly along the mounds of rubble partly to avoid slipping in the dark, but also to make sure he did not miss valuables that might be hidden within them. Berifir and Jorvex corporations had demolished the town in the process of trying to destroy each other. The civilians had fled to a makeshift refugee camp, which left the remains of the city unguarded for the night. Anything that disappeared would be considered destroyed in the battle.

The grade of the ruins began to rise steeply, and he eagerly climbed up the stone slabs. The top floors of high rises often bore the treasure troves of top executives. He was so confident that more would be at the top that he didn't slow to look at what might be buried along the way.

Once he made it close enough, he pointed his Spectrometer toward the rubble and searched. A hologram floated just over the device, revealing what was being detected. He widened its range, but not so large that the glowing bubble would attract attention. Then he increased the distance further inside. The holo-image shimmered as the ghostly mirages of rubble wiped by. He stopped briefly when he thought he saw something, but it was just the body of a casualty, so he scrolled past. About ten meters in, it faded to the point where it was hard to see anything. That would be too far to dig anyway, so he moved on.

A little further he tried again, and he found two objects of interest. One was a busted case of jewelry; the other was a doll. Neither was far down, so he dug away some of the debris to get closer. He then took his Appraisometer from his pack and scanned them. The jewelry was nice, but the metals in them were not rare enough to warrant a high price. But the doll, it had certain flaws, but just the right ones. Collectors sought this item because of its peculiar rarities. He quickly stashed the device and continued clawing away.

A bright light caught his attention as it flew down toward a flat portion of road. Bowie took cover and watched. It wasn't a warship. In fact, it appeared to be a transport of some kind. The masthead on its front was a generic design of nothing in particular, and its hull was utilitarian without windows. A prison ship, perhaps?

After it landed, the cockpit hatch opened. Bowie watched with keen interest through his Telenoculars. A lone individual stepped out. Behind him, two bodies could be spotted lying on the floor. Now with particular enthusiasm, Bowie switched on the HUD to scan the man's face to cross-reference with wanted postings. A number of entries appeared.

Bowie was no bounty hunter, but this man counted as one of the treasures he was seeking, and certainly worth much more than any trinket. He could search this city all night and not find as much value as there would be in this one man. And some corporations wanted him dead, so Bowie wouldn't even need to keep him sedated as he drug him around.

The wanted man seemed lost, and uncertain where to go. Unfamiliar with the location; that should make the hunt even better. He wandered a bit down one of the streets. Bowie followed from a safe distance, popping on his infrared goggles so he could follow from behind cover. The target reacted when Bowie knocked over some debris and it cascaded down the hill of ruins. Bowie remained still, and allowed the man to get further ahead of him so as not to attract his attention again.

They reached a part of town that was less destroyed. Several of the taller buildings even remained standing. The man found one that had been a hotel. Though the electricity was clearly out, the structure was intact, and he went inside.

Bowie watched from the outside. He could see the glow from the light fade away into the building, then it blackened all at once. He patiently waited, watching the sullen building as it provided no clues for a long while. Then one of the windows on the fourth floor began to glow. The light wobbled as it moved, then stopped in one place, where it remained, then faded. Bowie counted up, then across the grid of windows to determine where he was. He then grabbed Serggie, his pistol, and headed inside.

Dillon had drawn a bath in the room. He was tired and tense, and he needed to relax. He also wanted hot water to run over the wounds he had received inside Nikos' office. The city appeared to be completely abandoned, so he had no need to worry. He placed a towel at the head of the tub, rested one hand under it and laid his head down on it as he drifted off in the steam. He had filled it almost to the brim, so some of the water spilled out the edge. No need to worry, though. It wasn't as if the staff would complain.

He hadn't realized how tired he was until he drifted off. Dillon had gone nonstop for a couple days; and of course there was his brother. That one thought kept him from entirely falling asleep. He would be close, and then that look of judgment would appear. Dillon would shake it off, but then the face of his sister would appear. His *dead* sister. He would see her as the smiling girl she had been, and then he would see her as a corpse. And then... what she would be now; no more than a skeleton. He couldn't imagine that.

His eyes shot open while picturing this to find someone in his room. It was a scrawny rat of a man wearing little more than rags, pointing an IH-94 pistol at him. The barrel was shaking with nerves and excitement. The man's face held a greedy smile. He wasn't used to this, but he was ready to try.

"This is nothing personal," Bowie said. "A man's gotta mag a living. Especially when the business he worked for's been destroyed and every prospect he has is rolled over. I can only pick through junk for so long. And I'm also whatever you done to get yourself wanted means you deserve to die. I'm not gonna feel bad for..."

Dillon's hand whipped out from under the towel wielding his pistol and he shot the looter in the face. He then leaned out of the tub and said to the corpse, "When you have a chance to shoot someone, just shut up and do it."

* * *

Jude was sitting inside the window frame of an apartment; her leg against one side and her back against the other. The fact that she was five stories up didn't bother her; she had a great sense of balance that had returned.

Two of the mercs were in the same room pretending to play a card game. Jude could tell they were there to keep an eye on her. Their game was too sloppy to be taken seriously, and it was what she knew Nikos would do. He had injected a tracking device into her, but he didn't want her to have a chance to get very far if she did leave. Jude did not blame him. She was his only way of finding the Mandrake Leonne, the only reason he had come to this planet.

However, she was beginning to distrust him. They at best had had a working relationship, and she had personally witnessed his ruthlessness. Even now, she had looked through a doorway at Nikos speaking with the merc commander. When Nikos saw her, he smiled his phony grin, then moved the commander away from the door so she could neither see nor hear them.

Then she heard the shot. The sound had bounced around the ruined walls and its source was a fair distance away, far enough that the sound didn't make it into the room where the two guards were talking. But she had heard it well enough, and she recognized the specific pitch. Custom-crafted weapons that any self-respecting gunslinger carried all had a specific tone unique to themselves. Many people didn't hear it, but those who were used to the sound, or who had highly-tuned hearing such as Jude, could distinguish the minute differences. It was Dillon. He had probably gotten wind of the name of the planet, but it wasn't likely he knew where the treasure was. He would be out searching for her, but he wouldn't want her dead.

Dillon would likely find them when they started out in the morning toward their destination. Nikos had wisely decided not to travel at night. The wilderness of Ocasol was rugged terrain and a lot could happen with them falling or rocks falling on them, not to mention the fierce animals that likely lived out there. And then there were the armies who were always on alert and might mistake them for spies. At least during the daylight Nikos' band could see the battle scars from far enough away to avoid them.

Being the only person who knew where the Mandrake Leonne was, Jude was at the center of everything. She considered her odds, and the best course of action, and she sat down to play cards with the others.

As she figured, they didn't know what they were doing, so she set out to teach them Bancfresca, a game where each player tries to match a part of what they believe other players will be laying out with the hands are revealed. She presented the game with fun and zeal, laughing at mistakes she and the others made. She lost on purpose, and helped the male guard win. She, in fact, built up a resentment in the female guard enough to cause her to leave the room.

Slowly, the mercs were going to sleep. Nikos took the main bedroom for himself and locked himself away. It eventually whittled down to only a few who were still awake. They didn't have long before the sun would rise, so they were getting what little sleep they could.

But not Jude and themerc. She had won him over with flattery and her wide smile, and her ability to act like he was in on a secret with her. Then she locked eyes with him and fell silent. He looked back at her curiously. She nudged her head toward the bathroom, then hopped up and strolled quietly inside. He stood as well, and tried to be as quiet as he followed.

There, Jude was already unfastening the clip on her togablouse. He put one hand to help, and began to wrap another hand around her chest. She rolled one hand back around his neck in an embrace and laid her head back so her lips were in his ear. She whispered, "Stay quiet." Then her other hand grabbed the towel and she whipped it to the first hand. In a flash, she had the towel around his neck and had slipped around behind him. She kicked him to the ground and tugged. Low gagging noises spurted from his open mouth, but nothing more as his face turned blue. His hands clawed back at her, but they grew weak, and finally went limp. Jude made sure to lock the door, then rapidly opened the window, and climbed outside.

Five stories to the ground wasn't difficult for Jude, but it was slow; slower than she'd like. Once at the bottom, she was short on time.

She hurried down alleyways in the direction she had heard the shot. The task would have been easier when taking main streets, but these would be open to sight from Nikos' apartment building, so she avoided them.

She arrived at the back of the building where she believed the sound likely originated. Its walls were more solid than a lot of those around it, some of which had crumbled. This was the sort of place where Dillon would seek shelter.

Just as she approached one of the back doors, she heard a sound that made her realize she had gotten the right place, but that was about to be a problem. She turned to see Dillon holding two pistols at her. "Where'd you pick up that piece?" she asked.

"Where's the Mandrake Leonne?" Dillon asked.

"I don't know," Jude said.

"I'm in no mood to play games, Red."

"I just got done playing a game. It was pretty fun."

"This is your last warning."

"I don't know," she said, looking directly into Dillon's eyes.

"Then why should I leave you alive?"

"Because I *do* know where the clue is that will lead us to it. The pilot didn't know where it was either, but he knew how to find it. It was a specific distance from a spot inside this town. An ancient statue is supposed to be facing the direction of your treasure."

"So you know the distance, but you don't know the direction."

"That's right."

"What if this statue is destroyed?"

"Then we're geffared."

Dillon thought a moment, then asked, "You come here with that snob?"

"Yes."

"So why aren't you piking with him?"

"Because I know what his goons are going to do to me the moment I show them where it is. Asset management likes to liquidate their assets rather than risk someone talking."

"What makes you think I'll treat you any better?"

"Because when I'm stabbed in the back, I want it to be by someone whose moves I can better predict."

"You did a great job of predicting me before."

"That won't happen again," she assured him.

"So where is this statue?" he asked.

"When we were flying in I saw a courtyard that looked like it had a different type of ruins in it. They looked more... ancient. I'd bet my plastic it's there."

Jude pointed in the direction she was describing. Dillon looked toward it. Sunlight was beginning to crawl across the rubble and the street. Somewhere out there, Nikos' goons would be searching for them. They needed to move fast.

Part 7

Shootout at the Ancient Courtyard

Jude led Dillon through the zigzagging alleyways in the direction she had seen the ancient structures. The walls around them were primarily connected to intact buildings, but some were walls that had crumbled a few meters up. Dillon turned his head time and again to make sure no one was behind them. They were racing the sunlight, trying to get as far along as they could before the sky was alight.

They made it to a road where they would have to cross into the open to make it to their destination; which was, in turn, an open-air plaza with scattered stone structures. They each drew their weapons.

“Any of your cybernetics working?” Dillon asked.

“Thanks to you, I only have my eye bionics. And using those gives me a headache.”

“Well, you're going to need to negotiate a headache if we're going to rec there alive. You ready?”

Jude answered by heading out into the street. She blinked her infrared into one eye and targeting into the other. They made her dizzy and she had to walk carefully, trying to step where she had already looked at the road to make sure it was clear.

Dillon watched behind them, almost walking backward, as he also glanced ahead to double check her view. His one cybernetic eye was set for high res analysis. It was the same trick he had used when he took down Jude. Snapshots were constantly being taken of likely hiding locations and being analyzed for targets. If one was found, he could target the spot and point his arm without even looking at it.

They made it more than halfway down the street and were nearing the plaza on the opposite side. The antique walls stood out from the other ruins both because of the stark difference in architecture, and because they had an artificial appearance to them; like they were plastic set pieces. Jude knew they weren't. Old alien buildings had a look to them that was so foreign they seemed unreal. Still, they caught her attention...

...and for too long as she missed the merc leaning out a third story window, gun pointed and ready to fire. Dillon caught the man just in time and fired. The shot went through him and his own shot fired off into the distance. Jude eyed Dillon with surprise, and said begrudgingly, “Thanks.”

“Keep your eyes on the targets,” Dillon said.

They took a step down into the courtyard. It looked like a giant, empty shallow pool with archaic decor littering the grounds, and crumbled, synthetic mortar walls framing the sides. Somewhere among them would be a statue pointing them in the correct direction. Jude blinked her eye out of infrared and into detail enhancement since the light was getting brighter all around them. She winced in pain as she did, and the strain of keeping the cybernetics running were getting to her.

Dillon orbited Jude as they went, covering every angle. They passed partial columns whose toppled tops made for low hiding locations. They passed partially rotted sculptures whose forms had worn and smoothed over the millennia. They rounded a facade that had once belonged to a building that was now long gone, and they passed over decorative reliefs in the floor. All of it would be fascinating to one who studied long-lost cultures, but the two former enemies were trying to not become part of the exhibit.

Just as Dillon moved to Jude's right, one of the mercs appeared around a pillar to her left. Neither spotted him. He aimed directly for Jude's head and had a clear shot. But Dillon's high res detection kicked in and found him. His hand snapped in the direction of the attacker and fired. The merc ducked back around the pillar just in time.

Dillon chased after him hurrying for a better angle. Jude turned to see what was happening, but the sudden movement made her dizzy, and she lost track of them as Dillon weaved behind the downed part of the pillar.

Jude took a couple steps in the direction Dillon had gone, and found that she was facing two of the mercs standing under an archway, their guns drawn. Jude's targeting was taking a moment to land on them, but she didn't have time to wait. She dodged to one side and avoided a volley from them. Then she shot the archway above them and it came tumbling down. Both mercs dodged out of the way, but one of them did so closer to Jude. That was his doom, as she shot him in the chest.

Dillon's merc retreated, and he chased him around a corner. There he was met by the merc who had survived Jude's attack, and she fired and hit Dillon in the shoulder. Surprised, he stumbled back, and his own shot went wild. He went for cover, but the woman was on him. Firing once and just missing, she adjusted directly onto his back. The other merc backed her up and they both fired.

The shots were deflected out of the air. They looked up to see Jude standing atop one of the monuments. Her legs were shaking and she grimaced in pain, the result of using cybernetics that weren't fully healed, but she remained steady, and she shot them both down.

Dillon sighed with relief, but then his own enhancement caught a glimpse of the merc leader bearing down on Jude. He didn't hesitate to warn her, he just fired, and hit the commander in the face.

Smiling with pride, Dillon looked up at Jude to see her weapon pointed at him. She was breathing heavy and had a crazed look in her eye. He couldn't tell if she was bearing down on him for some plan, or because something snapped. He had heard the bionics sometimes played with the mind. He said, "If you're going to kill me, it better not be half way. 'Cause anyone who tries to rub me into the ground and fails will soon be regretting they did."

Jude blinked. Her cybernetics disappeared from her eyes, and she put her pistol away. She looked in the direction they had been walking and pointed. "Found it," she said.

Dillon kept his pistol ready as they marched forward. "Your friend is still out there," Dillon said. "You're going to want to stay armed."

"He only wants you dead. He needs me," Jude said, and they came upon the statue. It was a winged edifice; perhaps the Abnani version of an angel, or possibly of a bird. The platement, which held the alien structures together over millennia still had its limits, and many of the details had faded over time. The fact that it was alien made it all the harder to discern what various minutiae were supposed to be.

But the most important aspect could not be missed. One of its wings was pointing toward the southwest.

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.

Part 9

The Mandrake Leonne

The two rogues could hear the armies packing up and leaving. Transport vessels were landing and filling up with soldiers; trucks were loaded with equipment. The occasional squad came near the duo's cave in search of them. But Jude had found a small opening that led to a wider cavern into which they were able to squeeze.

Neither needed to risk watching either. Armies were not known for their discreetness and the amount and types of noise described how far away they were from finishing and being gone. It was just an achingly long wait. The day ended, nighttime passed, and the following day came and went. Dillon had brought a thermos of water, but that was gone by the time the sun set. They had no food. This had to resolve itself soon.

And so, regardless of the risk, they crawled out when they could see it was dark. Dillon was first, and he immediately noticed that all the artificial lights were gone. Only the reflected light from the enormous moon splashed over the scenery, which was covered in trash and discarded equipment, but no people. This was the excrement of a corporate army; they left behind garbage and craters.

Behind him, the scraping of stone and tumbling gravel told Dillon that Jude was coming out. He turned to find her squeezing out like she was birthing. This could take a little while, so he took advantage of the moment and hurried away.

The ancient buildings were more visible now with all the army structures gone. None were particularly large, a few meters tall by less than ten wide and deep. Exact measurements were difficult as they had mostly merged with the rocky surroundings. Details were difficult to see in the harsh moonlight, despite its brightness. So he ran close to the entrances, looking over their doorways to see if any of them matched what Jude had described.

Jude at last made it out, and she spotted Dillon dashing madly through the cloisters. He was doing the work for her. So she watched him while she strolled a little way into the former camp.

Her attention was grabbed by a noise within one of the wider trenches. She looked down to see a wounded soldier lying on the bed. He might have been forgotten, but it was more likely that he had been deemed unprofitable. Jude had seen soldiers discarded like this in the past. Around him lay some abandoned medical supplies, a glowing metal bouquet, a couple bottles of some kind of whiskey, and the man's pack.

His breathing was heavy and erratic. He didn't have much longer. Jude climbed down into the trench. He watched her wordlessly as she grabbed one of the bottles of whiskey and took a swig. Then she held it out to the dying man. His arms were too weak to hold it, so she held it up to his mouth and poured it into his lips. He sipped gratefully. Then he visibly slipped into unconsciousness.

Jude lifted her head and looked for Dillon. He seemed to have found the right structure. A doorway hid within the overhang of an archway upon which floral reliefs framed the interior. He felt the bottom of the arch as though to confirm it was real, then he felt the door. He brushed aside age-old dirt from the edges. The frame around it had small, decorative spikes, and one metal hook that looked like a pot which seemed to have once held something about the size of his arm. The doorway had an embossment that was too worn from time to be distinguishable anymore.

Dillon couldn't care less. He felt around the door for a handle, and at last found something. One part of the embossment had a thin gap beneath it under which he was able to squeeze his fingers. He lifted, and a latch pulled out, then the door pushed inward with a loud scraping of stone. Dillon cringed. He had not wanted Jude to hear, but he figured there would be no avoiding that, so he pressed inward quickly to make the sound last a shorter time.

As soon as he could squeeze in, Dillon rushed inside. The air was stale and his skin crawled with nerves of both excitement and fear. It was too dark to see, so he pulled out his Spectrolight and pumped it up to full brightness in a 90 degree arc, and headed down the corridor. A couple others branched off right and left. He explored the one to the right first, winding down a pair of paths in that direction. He passed markings of ancient burials but paid them no mind. Unless they were containers that held the Mandrake Leonne, he didn't care.

Coming to dead ends, he doubled back and tried more corridors. He found that they spread out like spider webs, leading only to basic burial sites; no shrines, no treasure chests. Frustrated, he moved faster and faster. The walls became a blur to him as he tried one hall after another, until suddenly, a wide, round chamber opened up in front of him. In the dim light, he seemed to detect valuable décor, so he widened his light and stepped inside.

A sunken stone floor sat in the middle 20 meters in diameter. At the opposite end rested a platform bearing a small collection of valuables and what appeared to be a shallow, thin sarcophagus. Along the periphery stood pillars supporting a walkway approximately a meter above the center floor. Within the walls were faint lines and indistinguishable reliefs that looked like drawers which may be the belongings or perhaps the remains of those who were buried here.

Dillon couldn't care less what was buried in here unless it was the Mandrake Leonne. He jumped all the way down the stairs, not touching any of the unevenly laid steps. As soon as his feet touched the ground, they were already running for the opposite side. He jumped on the platform and knocked over the smaller treasures, desperately trying to find his goal.

He was so focused that Jude had to clear her throat to get his attention. She was at the head of the stairs looking down at him, her hand near her pistol. "We're supposed to do this together," she said.

She had the drop on him, so it was no use for Dillon to go for his own weapon. "We are, red. I'm just finding it for us."

Jude strolled down the steps, her hand perpetually near her pistol. "You're not going to have much good fate with those."

"Isn't this where it's supposed to be?"

Jude took her time to answer, then just nodded at the rectangular rise in the platform that looked like a sarcophagus.

"Here?" Dillon asked, turning to it.

Jude nodded.

Dillon grabbed the edge and began to pull. It slowly began to slide off. "Little help," he grunted.

"Yes, Jude. Why don't you help him?" came a familiar voice from the entrance. The eyes of both rogues whipped over toward it, and they saw who they expected; Nikos. His pistol at the ready. "You can then hand it over to me, and avoid becoming a permanent part of this site."

Jude stared at Nikos passively. He placed his own Spectrolight on the ledge of one of the pillars with its omni setting on high. The room was lit up as though it was daylight. "We could have shared it, Jude. Just you and me."

“And your five goons,” she said.

“They were hired minions. They got their pay and that was that. You and I could’ve split this fortune.”

“You would’ve turned on me before we pinged out,” she said.

“You’re wearing on my patience, Jude,” Nikos said. “Give me my prize.”

“It’s not here,” Jude said, and she kicked the lid the rest of the way open. All that was inside was a lever, which she then flipped with her foot. A trap door slid open in the middle of the floor.

Nikos tried to peer into the hole but saw only darkness. Dillon shined his light inside and it revealed rows of skeletons laid out in shelves. “Catacombs,” he muttered.

“Kilometers of them,” Jude said as she strolled toward one of the pillars. “A seemingly endless labyrinth. Anyone going in there will likely join the bodies after they get lost for days.”

Nikos looked at her and said, “But you know where to go, I take it.”

Jude peeled off a loose piece of stone from the pillar as she nodded. She then used one of her cybernetic fingers to fire a low-level beam to burn a message into the stone. “I’m writing the directions the pilot told me. Whichever one of us earns it, gets it.” Jude finished writing, eyed both men, then laid the stone face down near the middle of the floor.

She then backed away toward the periphery, one hand nearing her pistol. Getting the message, both men backed up to the higher platform along the rim. Nikos already had his pistol out, but while they were talking he had let the hand drop to his side. He had a decided advantage by his weapon not being in its holster, but that was countered by the fact that he was the worst gunman in the room. He typically allowed someone else to do his dirty work.

Dillon knew this, and he eyed Nikos contemptuously. But he had to keep his eyes on Jude as well. She was a sneaky one and likely was ready to exact revenge on him.

Jude meanwhile began moving around the perimeter toward Nikos and the entrance, her eyes always on her opponents. He moved away, and Dillon moved in turn. They instinctively paced themselves to create an equal distance between them. Their arms tensed, ready to strike. Their eyes studied every tiny movement of their opponents. Each disappeared for a moment when they moved behind a pillar, but then reemerged on the other side, still ready to attack.

Dillon twitched when Jude went behind a pillar, ready to draw on Nikos, but Nikos was completely focused on him, so he waited. He then prepared to fire on Jude when she emerged, but her eyes were focused on him as though she was ready for that.

Jude had just passed the first pillar after the entrance when she stopped. The others stopped as well. This was where they would draw first and aim true, or die. All three had to guess what the other two would do. Whoever drew first would have the initiative, but they would also give an opening to one while firing on the other.

Nikos concentrated on Jude. They had been friends once. Surely that meant something more than a man who had tried to kill her. But she only watched him with a blank stare. Dillon had the same thoughts as Nikos. The two old friends had probably set him up. Made him find the tomb while they waited. He couldn’t think of that now. He had to choose which one to shoot. Of course he had both targeted with his cybernetic eye, but Jude would certainly have hers ready, too. He concluded that Jude was probably waiting for one of the men to draw and she would finish up the other; because Nikos wouldn’t shoot at her, and she probably knew Dillon would go after the easier kill..

Then Dillon noticed that her visage was fading, as though the light was dimming just around her. Nikos noticed the strange look in Dillon's eyes, and looked over just in time to see Jude fade to blackness. Then they heard the outer door slam shut.

"The hologram!" Dillon shouted, and he began sprinting for the corridor. Nikos sighed. He knew the trick, and he knew it was now too late. While Dillon banged on the door and shouted threats, Nikos strolled toward the center and picked up the stone. Written on the back was, "The wounded guy had it."

Outside, Jude could hear distant banging from the doorway she walked away from it. Next to the door was a now useless hook where the Mandrake Leonne had once rested. Someone had taken it from there and given it to a wounded soldier. After all, it did look a bit like a metallic bouquet. Someone thought it would be appropriate for a dying man who needed comfort to have.

Jude thought about the irony of so many soldiers dying for the army to capture a treasure, when they had a more valuable one in their possession the whole time. She had had it free and clear earlier when Dillon was searching for the right tomb; but she knew that Nikos still had the tracker on her, so she had needed to get him out of the picture as well.

She hopped into the trench, scooped up the Mandrake Leonne, then climbed out with the treasure in tow. It would take her about a day on foot to make her way to the refugee center where they were loading up people onto transports to take them wherever they might be able to resettle. She would be long off the planet by the time Nikos and Dillon learned to work together and either blasted their way through the wall or the door, or risked the catacombs to find another exit past the walls. Regardless of how they did it, Jude knew that their combined cunning minds would get them out. And then she would once again have to watch her back.

* * *

Mika Sinovi exited the classroom after all her students to find Jude standing outside leaning against a wall. She did not know the fortune-hunter well, but she knew that trouble often followed her, so she nervously asked why she had come.

Jude answered by pulling out the Mandrake Leonne from a large pack she was carrying. Jude stepped toward it wide-eyed and asked, "Is that what I think..." Jude was already nodding. "How did you..." Mika began, then, "I don't want to know, do I?" Jude shook her head.

"How much can the museum pay for it?" Jude asked.

"Not as much as you could get elsewhere," Mika admitted.

Jude shrugged her shoulders. "How much?"

"We'll talk to the head curator, but we won't insult you."

Jude nodded and put the piece back, then said, "There's another reason I came. We have a mutual acquaintance in the form of one of my past employers."

"Nikos," Mika said distastefully.

"That's him," Jude said. "I had a little time alone with his fon when I pick-pocketed it off him on his ship. Past all the things that show what a sad little life he leads, I found something else that you might find to be an eye full. So I scanned it into my own device."

Jude pulled out a 3D projector and shot a hologram into the hallway. Mika's eyes grew wide.

THE END