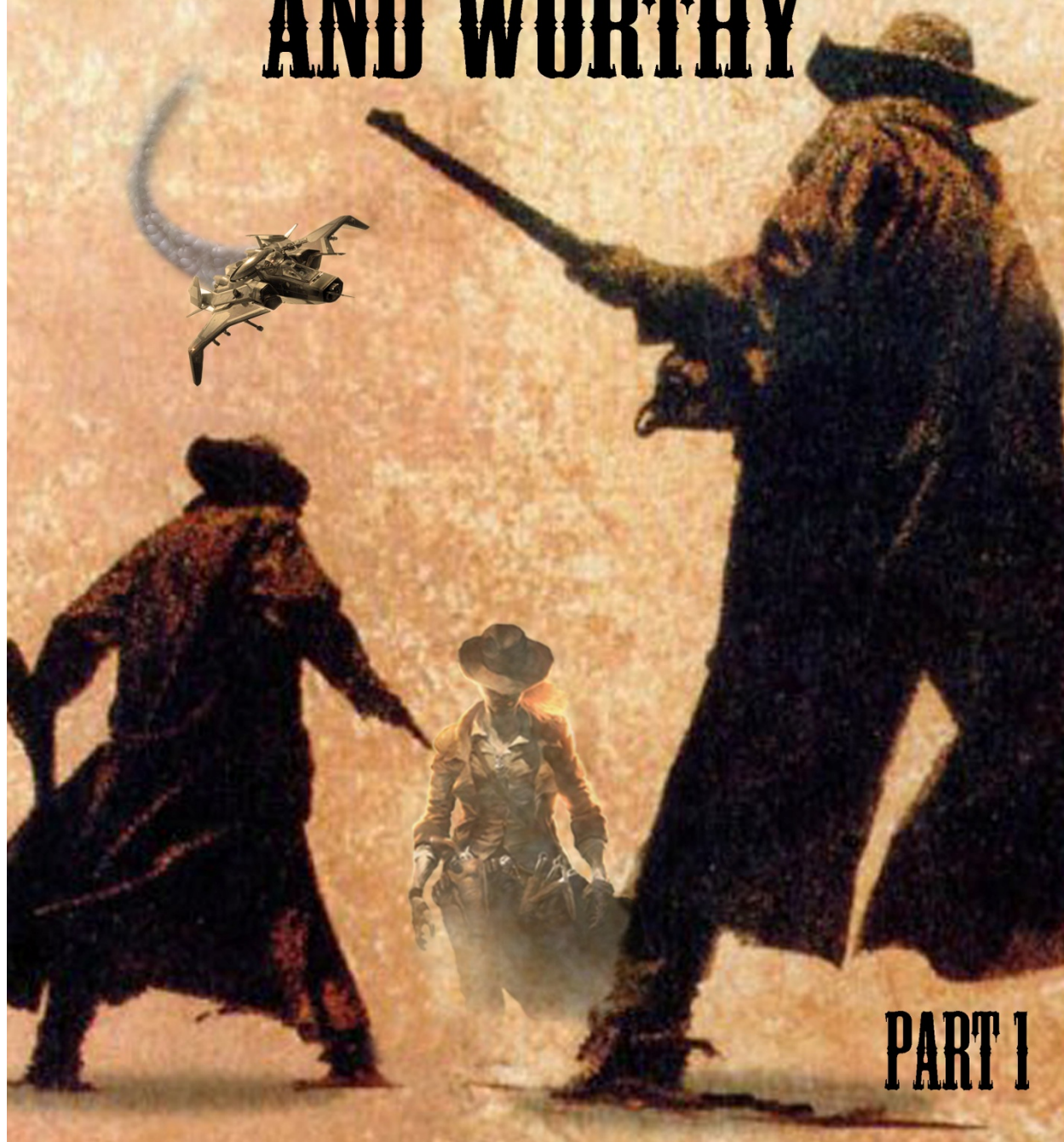


WANTED, FOUL, AND WORTHY



PART I

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 Lavau Upon Cleef, 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 come blick 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 verballed 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.

To be continued...