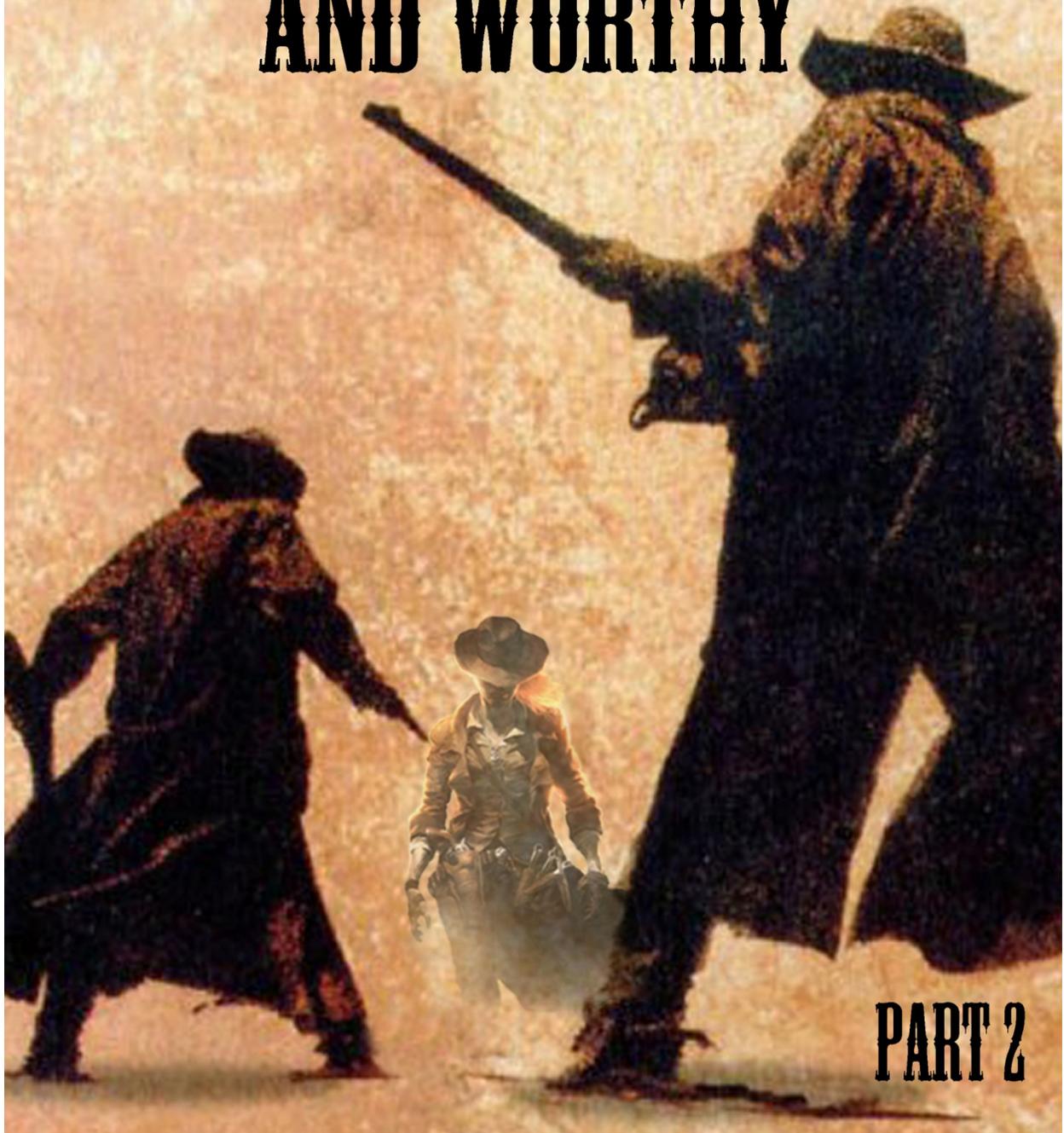


WANTED, FOUL, AND WORTHY



PART 2

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 Wallach Upon Tuco 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 Fencorp 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 vised 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 sav 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 goi..." 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.

To be continued...