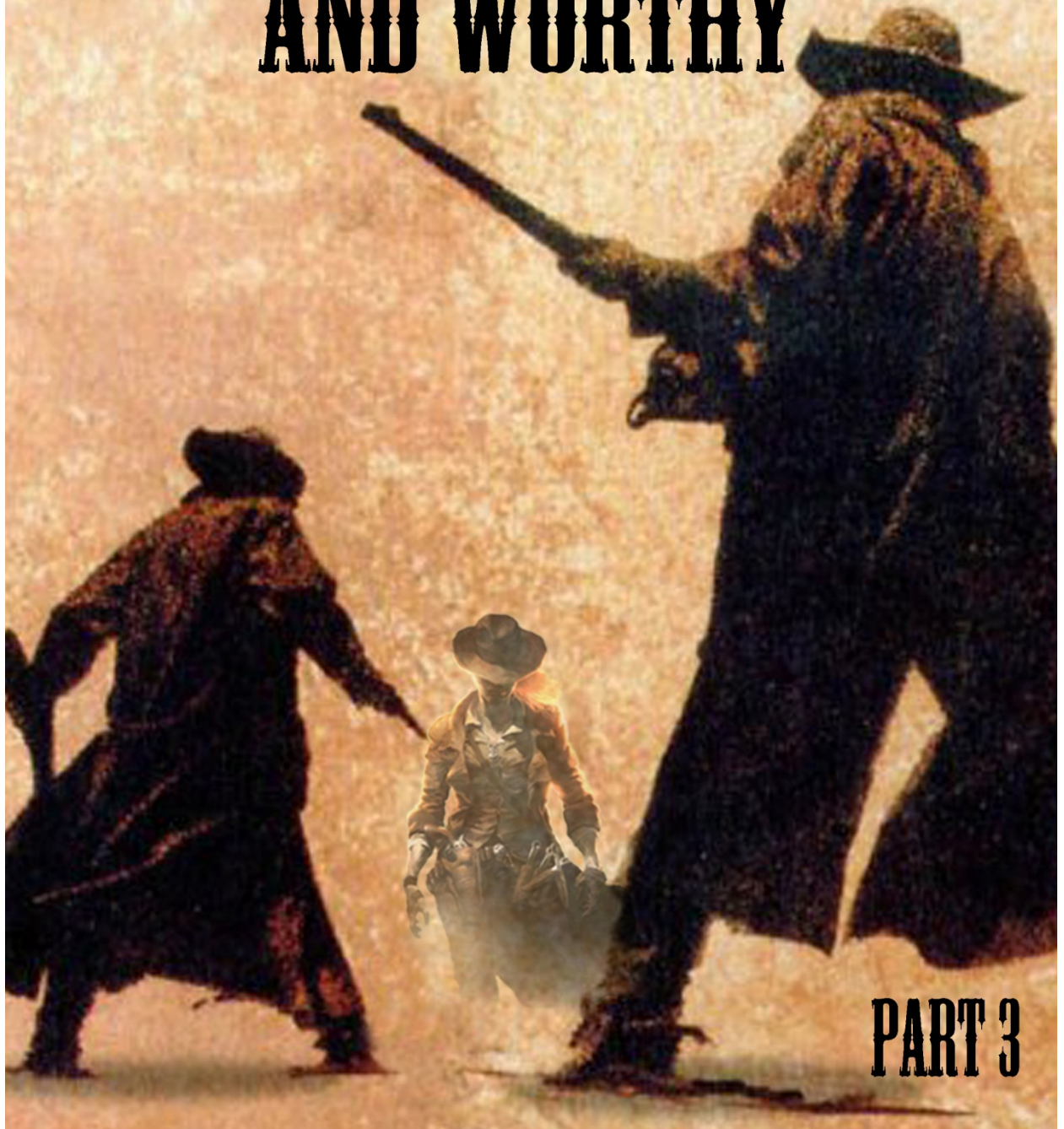


# WANTED, FOUL, AND WORTHY



**PART 3**

### **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.

*To be continued...*