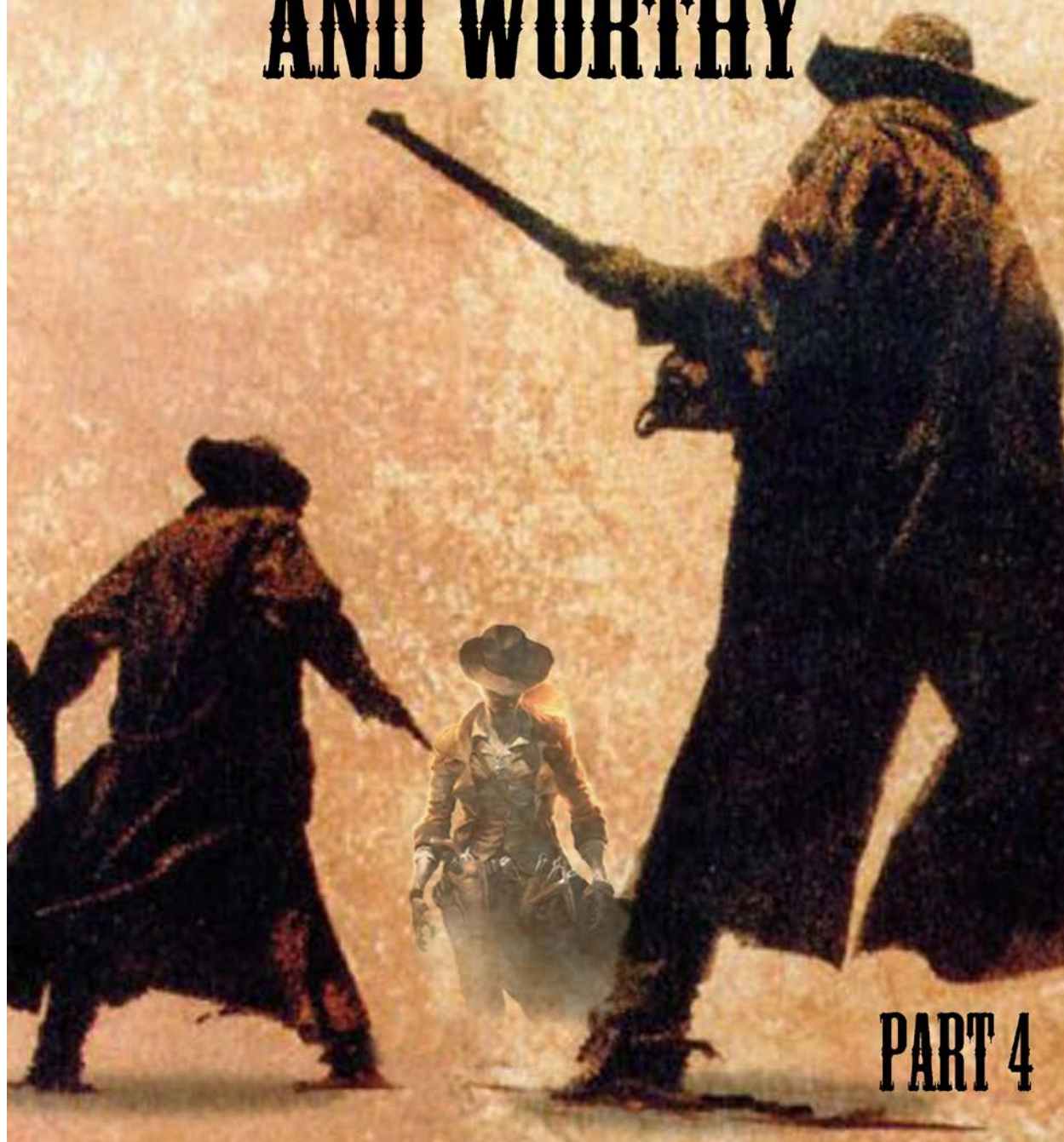


# WANTED, FOUL, AND WORTHY



**PART 4**

## 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.”

*To be continued...*