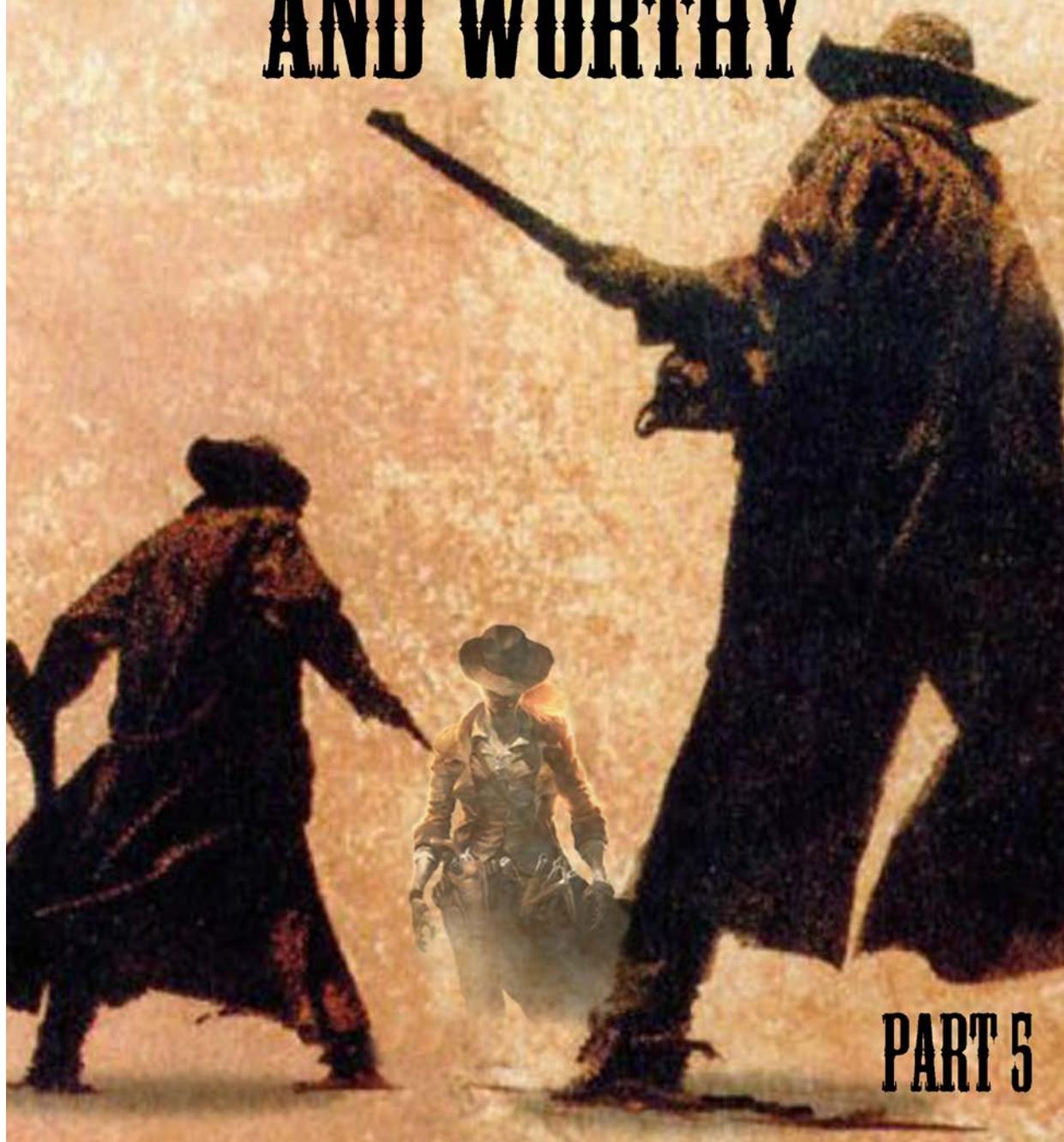


# WANTED, FOUL, AND WORTHY



**PART 5**

## 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 coqueted 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.

*To be continued...*