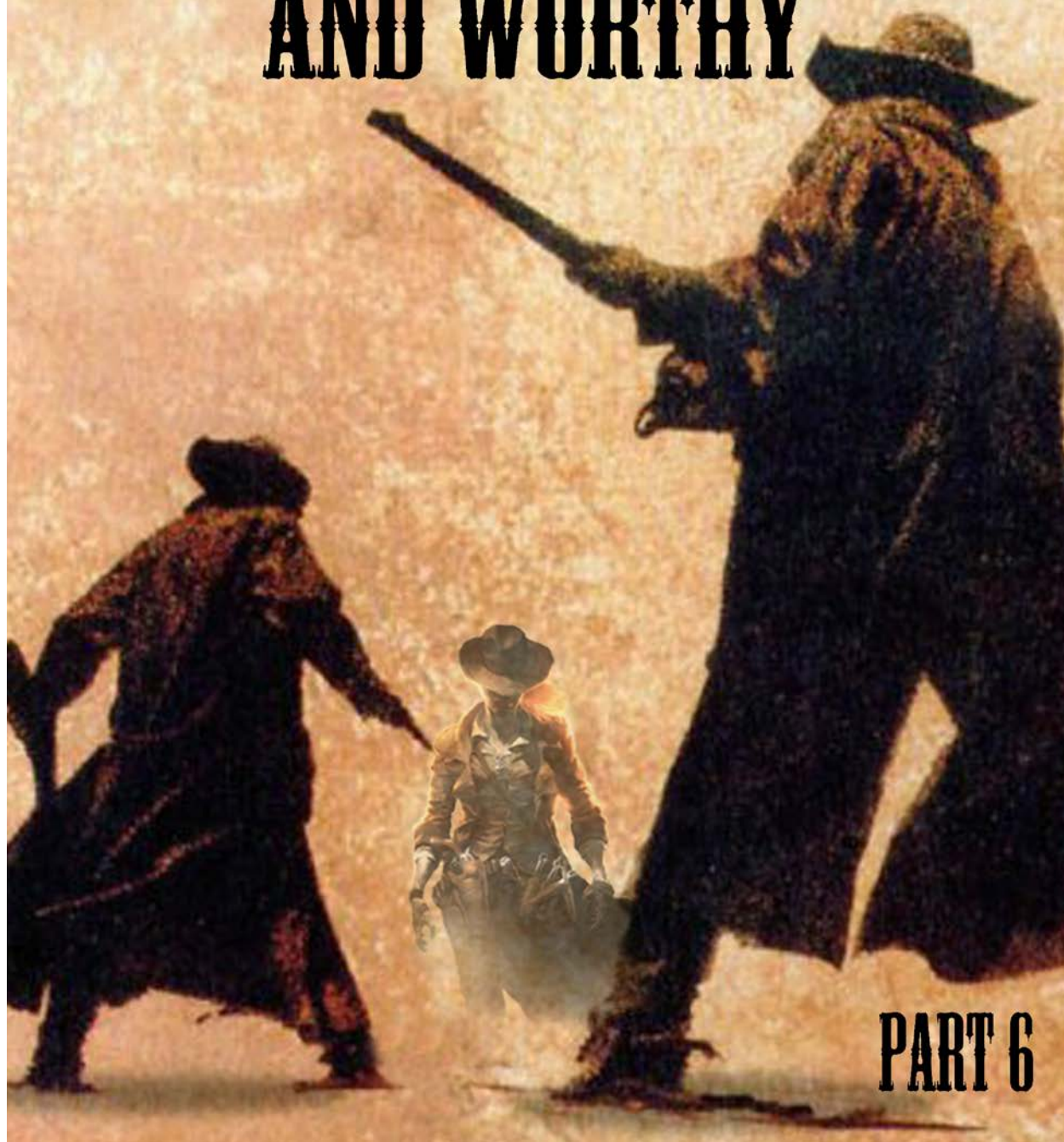


WANTED, FOUL, AND WORTHY



PART 6

Part 6

The Ruins of Roslow

The stone and ash crunched beneath Bowie's feet as he carefully made his way through the ruins. He had to move slowly along the mounds of rubble partly to avoid slipping in the dark, but also to make sure he did not miss valuables that might be hidden within them. Berifir and Jorvex corporations had demolished the town in the process of trying to destroy each other. The civilians had fled to a makeshift refugee camp, which left the remains of the city unguarded for the night. Anything that disappeared would be considered destroyed in the battle.

The grade of the ruins began to rise steeply, and he eagerly climbed up the stone slabs. The top floors of high rises often bore the treasure troves of top executives. He was so confident that more would be at the top that he didn't slow to look at what might be buried along the way.

Once he made it close enough, he pointed his Spectrometer toward the rubble and searched. A hologram floated just over the device, revealing what was being detected. He widened its range, but not so large that the glowing bubble would attract attention. Then he increased the distance further inside. The holo-image shimmered as the ghostly mirages of rubble wiped by. He stopped briefly when he thought he saw something, but it was just the body of a casualty, so he scrolled past. About ten meters in, it faded to the point where it was hard to see anything. That would be too far to dig anyway, so he moved on.

A little further he tried again, and he found two objects of interest. One was a busted case of jewelry; the other was a doll. Neither was far down, so he dug away some of the debris to get closer. He then took his Appraisometer from his pack and scanned them. The jewelry was nice, but the metals in them were not rare enough to warrant a high price. But the doll, it had certain flaws, but just the right ones. Collectors sought this item because of its peculiar rarities. He quickly stashed the device and continued clawing away.

A bright light caught his attention as it flew down toward a flat portion of road. Bowie took cover and watched. It wasn't a warship. In fact, it appeared to be a transport of some kind. The masthead on its front was a generic design of nothing in particular, and its hull was utilitarian without windows. A prison ship, perhaps?

After it landed, the cockpit hatch opened. Bowie watched with keen interest through his Telenoculars. A lone individual stepped out. Behind him, two bodies could be spotted lying on the floor. Now with particular enthusiasm, Bowie switched on the HUD to scan the man's face to cross-reference with wanted postings. A number of entries appeared.

Bowie was no bounty hunter, but this man counted as one of the treasures he was seeking, and certainly worth much more than any trinket. He could search this city all night and not find as much value as there would be in this one man. And some corporations wanted him dead, so Bowie wouldn't even need to keep him sedated as he drug him around.

The wanted man seemed lost, and uncertain where to go. Unfamiliar with the location; that should make the hunt even better. He wandered a bit down one of the streets. Bowie followed from a safe distance, popping on his infrared goggles so he could follow from behind cover. The target reacted when Bowie knocked over some debris and it cascaded down the hill of ruins. Bowie remained still, and allowed the man to get further ahead of him so as not to attract his attention again.

They reached a part of town that was less destroyed. Several of the taller buildings even remained standing. The man found one that had been a hotel. Though the electricity was clearly out, the structure was intact, and he went inside.

Bowie watched from the outside. He could see the glow from the light fade away into the building, then it blackened all at once. He patiently waited, watching the sullen building as it provided no clues for a long while. Then one of the windows on the fourth floor began to glow. The light wobbled as it moved, then stopped in one place, where it remained, then faded. Bowie counted up, then across the grid of windows to determine where he was. He then grabbed Serggie, his pistol, and headed inside.

Dillon had drawn a bath in the room. He was tired and tense, and he needed to relax. He also wanted hot water to run over the wounds he had received inside Nikos' office. The city appeared to be completely abandoned, so he had no need to worry. He placed a towel at the head of the tub, rested one hand under it and laid his head down on it as he drifted off in the steam. He had filled it almost to the brim, so some of the water spilled out the edge. No need to worry, though. It wasn't as if the staff would complain.

He hadn't realized how tired he was until he drifted off. Dillon had gone nonstop for a couple days; and of course there was his brother. That one thought kept him from entirely falling asleep. He would be close, and then that look of judgment would appear. Dillon would shake it off, but then the face of his sister would appear. His *dead* sister. He would see her as the smiling girl she had been, and then he would see her as a corpse. And then... what she would be now; no more than a skeleton. He couldn't imagine that.

His eyes shot open while picturing this to find someone in his room. It was a scrawny rat of a man wearing little more than rags, pointing an IH-94 pistol at him. The barrel was shaking with nerves and excitement. The man's face held a greedy smile. He wasn't used to this, but he was ready to try.

"This is nothing personal," Bowie said. "A man's gotta mag a living. Especially when the business he worked for's been destroyed and every prospect he has is rolled over. I can only pick through junk for so long. And I'm also whatever you done to get yourself wanted means you deserve to die. I'm not gonna feel bad for..."

Dillon's hand whipped out from under the towel wielding his pistol and he shot the looter in the face. He then leaned out of the tub and said to the corpse, "When you have a chance to shoot someone, just shut up and do it."

* * *

Jude was sitting inside the window frame of an apartment; her leg against one side and her back against the other. The fact that she was five stories up didn't bother her; she had a great sense of balance that had returned.

Two of the mercs were in the same room pretending to play a card game. Jude could tell they were there to keep an eye on her. Their game was too sloppy to be taken seriously, and it was what she knew Nikos would do. He had injected a tracking device into her, but he didn't want her to have a chance to get very far if she did leave. Jude did not blame him. She was his only way of finding the Mandrake Leonne, the only reason he had come to this planet.

However, she was beginning to distrust him. They at best had had a working relationship, and she had personally witnessed his ruthlessness. Even now, she had looked through a doorway at Nikos speaking with the merc commander. When Nikos saw her, he smiled his phony grin, then moved the commander away from the door so she could neither see nor hear them.

Then she heard the shot. The sound had bounced around the ruined walls and its source was a fair distance away, far enough that the sound didn't make it into the room where the two guards were talking. But she had heard it well enough, and she recognized the specific pitch. Custom-crafted weapons that any self-respecting gunslinger carried all had a specific tone unique to themselves. Many people didn't hear it, but those who were used to the sound, or who had highly-tuned hearing such as Jude, could distinguish the minute differences. It was Dillon. He had probably gotten wind of the name of the planet, but it wasn't likely he knew where the treasure was. He would be out searching for her, but he wouldn't want her dead.

Dillon would likely find them when they started out in the morning toward their destination. Nikos had wisely decided not to travel at night. The wilderness of Ocasol was rugged terrain and a lot could happen with them falling or rocks falling on them, not to mention the fierce animals that likely lived out there. And then there were the armies who were always on alert and might mistake them for spies. At least during the daylight Nikos' band could see the battle scars from far enough away to avoid them.

Being the only person who knew where the Mandrake Leonne was, Jude was at the center of everything. She considered her odds, and the best course of action, and she sat down to play cards with the others.

As she figured, they didn't know what they were doing, so she set out to teach them Bancfresca, a game where each player tries to match a part of what they believe other players will be laying out with the hands are revealed. She presented the game with fun and zeal, laughing at mistakes she and the others made. She lost on purpose, and helped the male guard win. She, in fact, built up a resentment in the female guard enough to cause her to leave the room.

Slowly, the mercs were going to sleep. Nikos took the main bedroom for himself and locked himself away. It eventually whittled down to only a few who were still awake. They didn't have long before the sun would rise, so they were getting what little sleep they could.

But not Jude and themerc. She had won him over with flattery and her wide smile, and her ability to act like he was in on a secret with her. Then she locked eyes with him and fell silent. He looked back at her curiously. She nudged her head toward the bathroom, then hopped up and strolled quietly inside. He stood as well, and tried to be as quiet as he followed.

There, Jude was already unfastening the clip on her togablouse. He put one hand to help, and began to wrap another hand around her chest. She rolled one hand back around his neck in an embrace and laid her head back so her lips were in his ear. She whispered, "Stay quiet." Then her other hand grabbed the towel and she whipped it to the first hand. In a flash, she had the towel around his neck and had slipped around behind him. She kicked him to the ground and tugged. Low gagging noises spurted from his open mouth, but nothing more as his face turned blue. His hands clawed back at her, but they grew weak, and finally went limp. Jude made sure to lock the door, then rapidly opened the window, and climbed outside.

Five stories to the ground wasn't difficult for Jude, but it was slow; slower than she'd like. Once at the bottom, she was short on time.

She hurried down alleyways in the direction she had heard the shot. The task would have been easier when taking main streets, but these would be open to sight from Nikos' apartment building, so she avoided them.

She arrived at the back of the building where she believed the sound likely originated. Its walls were more solid than a lot of those around it, some of which had crumbled. This was the sort of place where Dillon would seek shelter.

Just as she approached one of the back doors, she heard a sound that made her realize she had gotten the right place, but that was about to be a problem. She turned to see Dillon holding two pistols at her. "Where'd you pick up that piece?" she asked.

"Where's the Mandrake Leonne?" Dillon asked.

"I don't know," Jude said.

"I'm in no mood to play games, Red."

"I just got done playing a game. It was pretty fun."

"This is your last warning."

"I don't know," she said, looking directly into Dillon's eyes.

"Then why should I leave you alive?"

"Because I *do* know where the clue is that will lead us to it. The pilot didn't know where it was either, but he knew how to find it. It was a specific distance from a spot inside this town. An ancient statue is supposed to be facing the direction of your treasure."

"So you know the distance, but you don't know the direction."

"That's right."

"What if this statue is destroyed?"

"Then we're geffared."

Dillon thought a moment, then asked, "You come here with that snob?"

"Yes."

"So why aren't you piking with him?"

"Because I know what his goons are going to do to me the moment I show them where it is. Asset management likes to liquidate their assets rather than risk someone talking."

"What makes you think I'll treat you any better?"

"Because when I'm stabbed in the back, I want it to be by someone whose moves I can better predict."

"You did a great job of predicting me before."

"That won't happen again," she assured him.

"So where is this statue?" he asked.

"When we were flying in I saw a courtyard that looked like it had a different type of ruins in it. They looked more... ancient. I'd bet my plastic it's there."

Jude pointed in the direction she was describing. Dillon looked toward it. Sunlight was beginning to crawl across the rubble and the street. Somewhere out there, Nikos' goons would be searching for them. They needed to move fast.

To be continued...