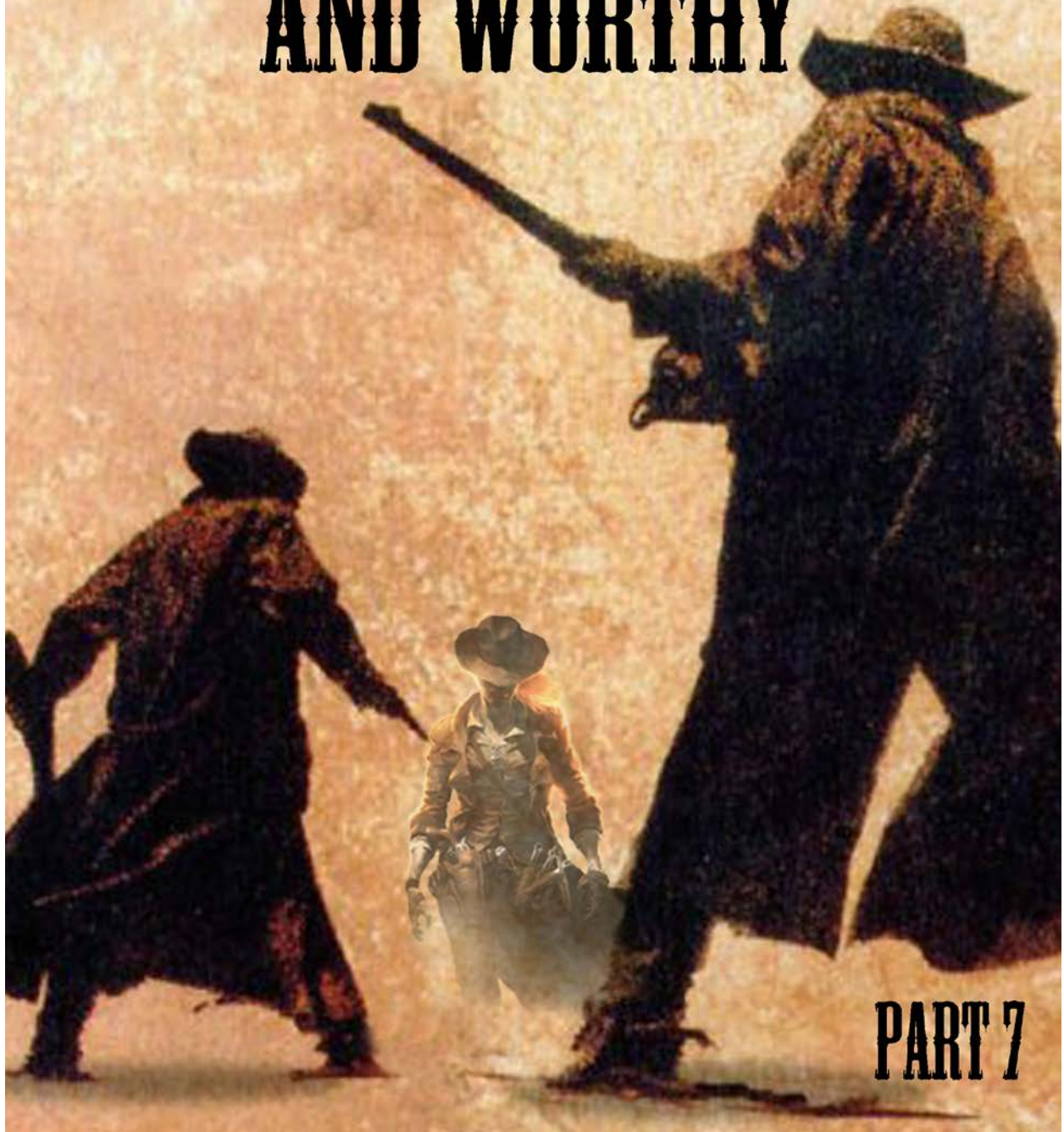


WANTED, FOUL, AND WORTHY



PART 7

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Shootout at the Ancient Courtyard

Jude led Dillon through the zigzagging alleyways in the direction she had seen the ancient structures. The walls around them were primarily connected to intact buildings, but some were walls that had crumbled a few meters up. Dillon turned his head time and again to make sure no one was behind them. They were racing the sunlight, trying to get as far along as they could before the sky was alight.

They made it to a road where they would have to cross into the open to make it to their destination; which was, in turn, an open-air plaza with scattered stone structures. They each drew their weapons.

“Any of your cybernetics working?” Dillon asked.

“Thanks to you, I only have my eye bionics. And using those gives me a headache.”

“Well, you're going to need to negotiate a headache if we're going to rec there alive. You ready?”

Jude answered by heading out into the street. She blinked her infrared into one eye and targeting into the other. They made her dizzy and she had to walk carefully, trying to step where she had already looked at the road to make sure it was clear.

Dillon watched behind them, almost walking backward, as he also glanced ahead to double check her view. His one cybernetic eye was set for high res analysis. It was the same trick he had used when he took down Jude. Snapshots were constantly being taken of likely hiding locations and being analyzed for targets. If one was found, he could target the spot and point his arm without even looking at it.

They made it more than halfway down the street and were nearing the plaza on the opposite side. The antique walls stood out from the other ruins both because of the stark difference in architecture, and because they had an artificial appearance to them; like they were plastic set pieces. Jude knew they weren't. Old alien buildings had a look to them that was so foreign they seemed unreal. Still, they caught her attention...

...and for too long as she missed the merc leaning out a third story window, gun pointed and ready to fire. Dillon caught the man just in time and fired. The shot went through him and his own shot fired off into the distance. Jude eyed Dillon with surprise, and said begrudgingly, “Thanks.”

“Keep your eyes on the targets,” Dillon said.

They took a step down into the courtyard. It looked like a giant, empty shallow pool with archaic decor littering the grounds, and crumbled, synthetic mortar walls framing the sides. Somewhere among them would be a statue pointing them in the correct direction. Jude blinked her eye out of infrared and into detail enhancement since the light was getting brighter all around them. She winced in pain as she did, and the strain of keeping the cybernetics running were getting to her.

Dillon orbited Jude as they went, covering every angle. They passed partial columns whose toppled tops made for low hiding locations. They passed partially rotted sculptures whose forms had worn and smoothed over the millennia. They rounded a facade that had once belonged to a building that was now long gone, and they passed over decorative reliefs in the floor. All of it would be fascinating to one who studied long-lost cultures, but the two former enemies were trying to not become part of the exhibit.

Just as Dillon moved to Jude's right, one of the mercs appeared around a pillar to her left. Neither spotted him. He aimed directly for Jude's head and had a clear shot. But Dillon's high res detection kicked in and found him. His hand snapped in the direction of the attacker and fired. The merc ducked back around the pillar just in time.

Dillon chased after him hurrying for a better angle. Jude turned to see what was happening, but the sudden movement made her dizzy, and she lost track of them as Dillon weaved behind the downed part of the pillar.

Jude took a couple steps in the direction Dillon had gone, and found that she was facing two of the mercs standing under an archway, their guns drawn. Jude's targeting was taking a moment to land on them, but she didn't have time to wait. She dodged to one side and avoided a volley from them. Then she shot the archway above them and it came tumbling down. Both mercs dodged out of the way, but one of them did so closer to Jude. That was his doom, as she shot him in the chest.

Dillon's merc retreated, and he chased him around a corner. There he was met by the merc who had survived Jude's attack, and she fired and hit Dillon in the shoulder. Surprised, he stumbled back, and his own shot went wild. He went for cover, but the woman was on him. Firing once and just missing, she adjusted directly onto his back. The other merc backed her up and they both fired.

The shots were deflected out of the air. They looked up to see Jude standing atop one of the monuments. Her legs were shaking and she grimaced in pain, the result of using cybernetics that weren't fully healed, but she remained steady, and she shot them both down.

Dillon sighed with relief, but then his own enhancement caught a glimpse of the merc leader bearing down on Jude. He didn't hesitate to warn her, he just fired, and hit the commander in the face.

Smiling with pride, Dillon looked up at Jude to see her weapon pointed at him. She was breathing heavy and had a crazed look in her eye. He couldn't tell if she was bearing down on him for some plan, or because something snapped. He had heard the bionics sometimes played with the mind. He said, "If you're going to kill me, it better not be half way. 'Cause anyone who tries to rub me into the ground and fails will soon be regretting they did."

Jude blinked. Her cybernetics disappeared from her eyes, and she put her pistol away. She looked in the direction they had been walking and pointed. "Found it," she said.

Dillon kept his pistol ready as they marched forward. "Your friend is still out there," Dillon said. "You're going to want to stay armed."

"He only wants you dead. He needs me," Jude said, and they came upon the statue. It was a winged edifice; perhaps the Abnani version of an angel, or possibly of a bird. The platement, which held the alien structures together over millennia still had its limits, and many of the details had faded over time. The fact that it was alien made it all the harder to discern what various minutiae were supposed to be.

But the most important aspect could not be missed. One of its wings was pointing toward the southwest.

To be continued...