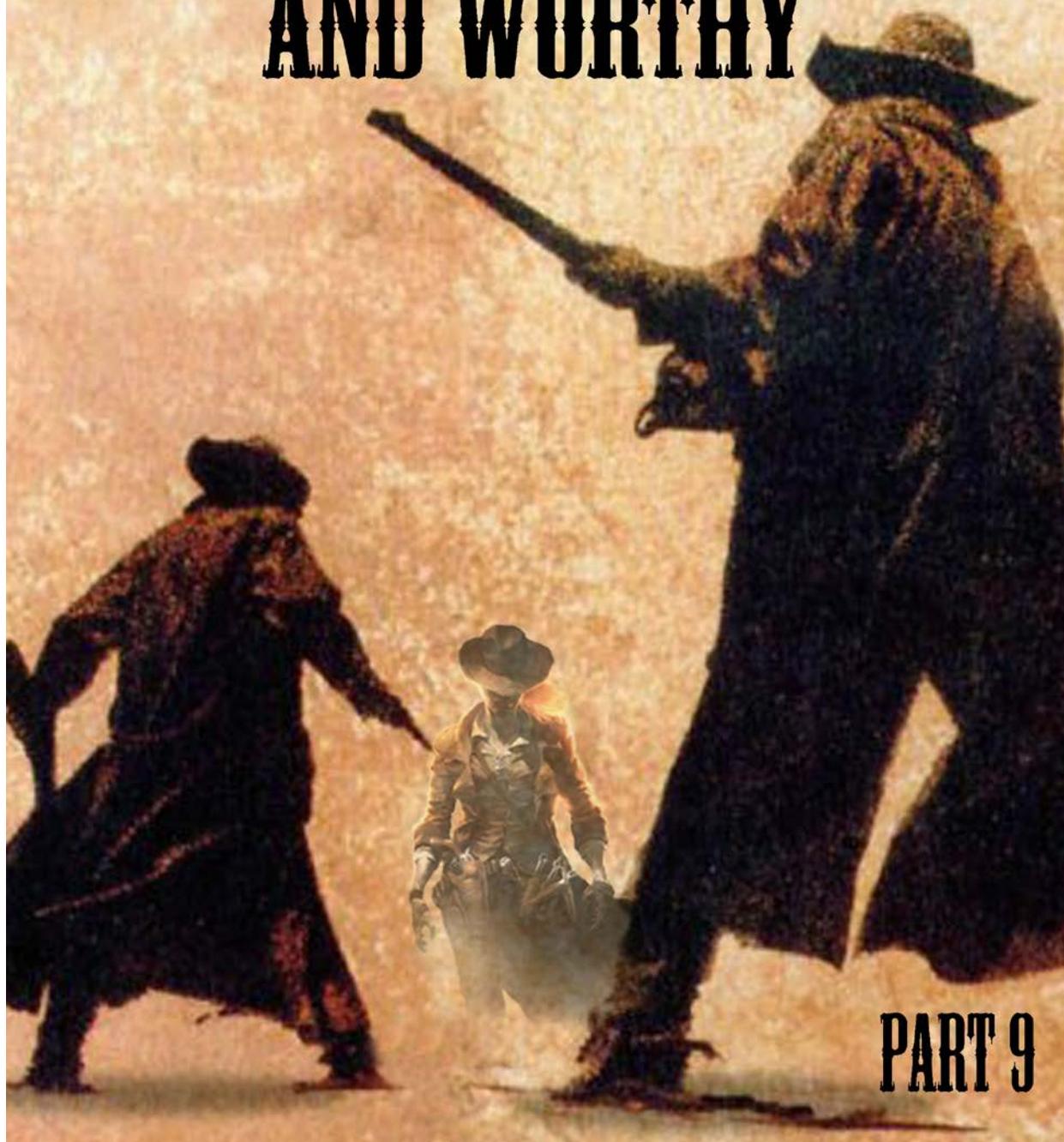


WANTED, FOUL, AND WORTHY



PART 9

Part 9

The Mandrake Leonne

The two rogues could hear the armies packing up and leaving. Transport vessels were landing and filling up with soldiers; trucks were loaded with equipment. The occasional squad came near the duo's cave in search of them. But Jude had found a small opening that led to a wider cavern into which they were able to squeeze.

Neither needed to risk watching either. Armies were not known for their discreetness and the amount and types of noise described how far away they were from finishing and being gone. It was just an aching long wait. The day ended, nighttime passed, and the following day came and went. Dillon had brought a thermos of water, but that was gone by the time the sun set. They had no food. This had to resolve itself soon.

And so, regardless of the risk, they crawled out when they could see it was dark. Dillon was first, and he immediately noticed that all the artificial lights were gone. Only the reflected light from the enormous moon splashed over the scenery, which was covered in trash and discarded equipment, but no people. This was the excrement of a corporate army; they left behind garbage and craters.

Behind him, the scraping of stone and tumbling gravel told Dillon that Jude was coming out. He turned to find her squeezing out like she was birthing. This could take a little while, so he took advantage of the moment and hurried away.

The ancient buildings were more visible now with all the army structures gone. None were particularly large, a few meters tall by less than ten wide and deep. Exact measurements were difficult as they had mostly merged with the rocky surroundings. Details were difficult to see in the harsh moonlight, despite its brightness. So he ran close to the entrances, looking over their doorways to see if any of them matched what Jude had described.

Jude at last made it out, and she spotted Dillon dashing madly through the cloisters. He was doing the work for her. So she watched him while she strolled a little way into the former camp.

Her attention was grabbed by a noise within one of the wider trenches. She looked down to see a wounded soldier lying on the bed. He might have been forgotten, but it was more likely that he had been deemed unprofitable. Jude had seen soldiers discarded like this in the past. Around him lay some abandoned medical supplies, a glowing metal bouquet, a couple bottles of some kind of whiskey, and the man's pack.

His breathing was heavy and erratic. He didn't have much longer. Jude climbed down into the trench. He watched her wordlessly as she grabbed one of the bottles of whiskey and took a swig. Then she held it out to the dying man. His arms were too weak to hold it, so she held it up to his mouth and poured it into his lips. He sipped gratefully. Then he visibly slipped into unconsciousness.

Jude lifted her head and looked for Dillon. He seemed to have found the right structure. A doorway hid within the overhang of an archway upon which floral reliefs framed the interior. He felt the bottom of the arch as though to confirm it was real, then he felt the door. He brushed aside age-old dirt from the edges. The frame around it had small, decorative spikes, and one metal hook that looked like a pot which seemed to have once held something about the size of his arm. The doorway had an embossment that was too worn from time to be distinguishable anymore.

Dillon couldn't care less. He felt around the door for a handle, and at last found something. One part of the embossment had a thin gap beneath it under which he was able to squeeze his fingers. He lifted, and a latch pulled out, then the door pushed inward with a loud scraping of stone. Dillon cringed. He had not wanted Jude to hear, but he figured there would be no avoiding that, so he pressed inward quickly to make the sound last a shorter time.

As soon as he could squeeze in, Dillon rushed inside. The air was stale and his skin crawled with nerves of both excitement and fear. It was too dark to see, so he pulled out his Spectrolight and pumped it up to full brightness in a 90 degree arc, and headed down the corridor. A couple others branched off right and left. He explored the one to the right first, winding down a pair of paths in that direction. He passed markings of ancient burials but paid them no mind. Unless they were containers that held the Mandrake Leonne, he didn't care.

Coming to dead ends, he doubled back and tried more corridors. He found that they spread out like spider webs, leading only to basic burial sites; no shrines, no treasure chests. Frustrated, he moved faster and faster. The walls became a blur to him as he tried one hall after another, until suddenly, a wide, round chamber opened up in front of him. In the dim light, he seemed to detect valuable décor, so he widened his light and stepped inside.

A sunken stone floor sat in the middle 20 meters in diameter. At the opposite end rested a platform bearing a small collection of valuables and what appeared to be a shallow, thin sarcophagus. Along the periphery stood pillars supporting a walkway approximately a meter above the center floor. Within the walls were faint lines and indistinguishable reliefs that looked like drawers which may be the belongings or perhaps the remains of those who were buried here.

Dillon couldn't care less what was buried in here unless it was the Mandrake Leonne. He jumped all the way down the stairs, not touching any of the unevenly laid steps. As soon as his feet touched the ground, they were already running for the opposite side. He jumped on the platform and knocked over the smaller treasures, desperately trying to find his goal.

He was so focused that Jude had to clear her throat to get his attention. She was at the head of the stairs looking down at him, her hand near her pistol. "We're supposed to do this together," she said.

She had the drop on him, so it was no use for Dillon to go for his own weapon. "We are, red. I'm just finding it for us."

Jude strolled down the steps, her hand perpetually near her pistol. "You're not going to have much good fate with those."

"Isn't this where it's supposed to be?"

Jude took her time to answer, then just nodded at the rectangular rise in the platform that looked like a sarcophagus.

"Here?" Dillon asked, turning to it.

Jude nodded.

Dillon grabbed the edge and began to pull. It slowly began to slide off. "Little help," he grunted.

"Yes, Jude. Why don't you help him?" came a familiar voice from the entrance. The eyes of both rogues whipped over toward it, and they saw who they expected; Nikos. His pistol at the ready. "You can then hand it over to me, and avoid becoming a permanent part of this site."

Jude stared at Nikos passively. He placed his own Spectrolight on the ledge of one of the pillars with its omni setting on high. The room was lit up as though it was daylight. "We could have shared it, Jude. Just you and me."

“And your five goons,” she said.

“They were hired minions. They got their pay and that was that. You and I could’ve split this fortune.”

“You would’ve turned on me before we pinged out,” she said.

“You’re wearing on my patience, Jude,” Nikos said. “Give me my prize.”

“It’s not here,” Jude said, and she kicked the lid the rest of the way open. All that was inside was a lever, which she then flipped with her foot. A trap door slid open in the middle of the floor.

Nikos tried to peer into the hole but saw only darkness. Dillon shined his light inside and it revealed rows of skeletons laid out in shelves. “Catacombs,” he muttered.

“Kilometers of them,” Jude said as she strolled toward one of the pillars. “A seemingly endless labyrinth. Anyone going in there will likely join the bodies after they get lost for days.”

Nikos looked at her and said, “But you know where to go, I take it.”

Jude peeled off a loose piece of stone from the pillar as she nodded. She then used one of her cybernetic fingers to fire a low-level beam to burn a message into the stone. “I’m writing the directions the pilot told me. Whichever one of us earns it, gets it.” Jude finished writing, eyed both men, then laid the stone face down near the middle of the floor.

She then backed away toward the periphery, one hand nearing her pistol. Getting the message, both men backed up to the higher platform along the rim. Nikos already had his pistol out, but while they were talking he had let the hand drop to his side. He had a decided advantage by his weapon not being in its holster, but that was countered by the fact that he was the worst gunman in the room. He typically allowed someone else to do his dirty work.

Dillon knew this, and he eyed Nikos contemptuously. But he had to keep his eyes on Jude as well. She was a sneaky one and likely was ready to exact revenge on him.

Jude meanwhile began moving around the perimeter toward Nikos and the entrance, her eyes always on her opponents. He moved away, and Dillon moved in turn. They instinctively paced themselves to create an equal distance between them. Their arms tensed, ready to strike. Their eyes studied every tiny movement of their opponents. Each disappeared for a moment when they moved behind a pillar, but then reemerged on the other side, still ready to attack.

Dillon twitched when Jude went behind a pillar, ready to draw on Nikos, but Nikos was completely focused on him, so he waited. He then prepared to fire on Jude when she emerged, but her eyes were focused on him as though she was ready for that.

Jude had just passed the first pillar after the entrance when she stopped. The others stopped as well. This was where they would draw first and aim true, or die. All three had to guess what the other two would do. Whoever drew first would have the initiative, but they would also give an opening to one while firing on the other.

Nikos concentrated on Jude. They had been friends once. Surely that meant something more than a man who had tried to kill her. But she only watched him with a blank stare. Dillon had the same thoughts as Nikos. The two old friends had probably set him up. Made him find the tomb while they waited. He couldn’t think of that now. He had to choose which one to shoot. Of course he had both targeted with his cybernetic eye, but Jude would certainly have hers ready, too. He concluded that Jude was probably waiting for one of the men to draw and she would finish up the other; because Nikos wouldn’t shoot at her, and she probably knew Dillon would go after the easier kill..

Then Dillon noticed that her visage was fading, as though the light was dimming just around her. Nikos noticed the strange look in Dillon's eyes, and looked over just in time to see Jude fade to blackness. Then they heard the outer door slam shut.

"The hologram!" Dillon shouted, and he began sprinting for the corridor. Nikos sighed. He knew the trick, and he knew it was now too late. While Dillon banged on the door and shouted threats, Nikos strolled toward the center and picked up the stone. Written on the back was, "The wounded guy had it."

Outside, Jude could hear distant banging from the doorway she walked away from it. Next to the door was a now useless hook where the Mandrake Leonne had once rested. Someone had taken it from there and given it to a wounded soldier. After all, it did look a bit like a metallic bouquet. Someone thought it would be appropriate for a dying man who needed comfort to have.

Jude thought about the irony of so many soldiers dying for the army to capture a treasure, when they had a more valuable one in their possession the whole time. She had had it free and clear earlier when Dillon was searching for the right tomb; but she knew that Nikos still had the tracker on her, so she had needed to get him out of the picture as well.

She hopped into the trench, scooped up the Mandrake Leonne, then climbed out with the treasure in tow. It would take her about a day on foot to make her way to the refugee center where they were loading up people onto transports to take them wherever they might be able to resettle. She would be long off the planet by the time Nikos and Dillon learned to work together and either blasted their way through the wall or the door, or risked the catacombs to find another exit past the walls. Regardless of how they did it, Jude knew that their combined cunning minds would get them out. And then she would once again have to watch her back.

* * *

Mika Sinovi exited the classroom after all her students to find Jude standing outside leaning against a wall. She did not know the fortune-hunter well, but she knew that trouble often followed her, so she nervously asked why she had come.

Jude answered by pulling out the Mandrake Leonne from a large pack she was carrying. Jude stepped toward it wide-eyed and asked, "Is that what I think..." Jude was already nodding. "How did you..." Mika began, then, "I don't want to know, do I?" Jude shook her head.

"How much can the museum pay for it?" Jude asked.

"Not as much as you could get elsewhere," Mika admitted.

Jude shrugged her shoulders. "How much?"

"We'll talk to the head curator, but we won't insult you."

Jude nodded and put the piece back, then said, "There's another reason I came. We have a mutual acquaintance in the form of one of my past employers."

"Nikos," Mika said distastefully.

"That's him," Jude said. "I had a little time alone with his fon when I pick-pocketed it off him on his ship. Past all the things that show what a sad little life he leads, I found something else that you might find to be an eye full. So I scanned it into my own device."

Jude pulled out a 3D projector and shot a hologram into the hallway. Mika's eyes grew wide.

THE END