



## Dark Cloud

**Sandra Wolff**

**Jared Barel**

Loaded Barrel Studios (Nov 1, 2021)

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*Combining gritty realism, mysterious gods, and a noble heroine, Dark Cloud is a vibrant, exciting graphic novel.*

In Sandra Wolff and Jared Barel's post-apocalyptic screenplay-turned-graphic novel *Dark Cloud*, a woman fights to stop a warlord from detonating a nuclear bomb.

Dark Cloud lives with Ricardo, an engineer and her surrogate father, and a protective combat robot, Klaatu, in the American Southwest. She does not remember much from her past. Ricardo wants to keep a low profile, living off of the land and avoiding complications with the nearby warlords. But then Dark Cloud learns that a local military dictator has a nuclear device, and that he intends to use it to cleanse a large area of its inhabitants. Despite Ricardo's warnings, she is spurred into action. She gains new allies in her desperate fight to prevent disaster.

Dark Cloud has a special relationship with the land, represented by her visions and conversations with the dragon-like Lord of Storms. A flashback reveals her encounter with the desert Earth Mother five years before, too. The Lord of Storms plays a critical role in the story, and also contributes a spiritual dimension to the often technological plot.

The book's art utilizes an eye-catching blend of photography and illustrations, accompanied by excellent coloring work. Its photorealistic elements are immersive and cinematic. Lens flares and other special illustrative effects are used to embellish images as needed; as a result, many panels—even the mere backgrounds of interior settings, daytime landscapes, or the desert night sky—are stunning.

In following humans who fight to survive in the aftermath of an apocalyptic event, the story mines a familiar vein. Some of its secondary characters—including the rebel Coyote Joe and Dark Cloud's primary foil, General Stone (whom she is told she met before, though she has no memory of him)—are under developed. Still, the book contains enough original ideas to distinguish it, and Dark Cloud, Ricardo, and Klaatu, are a memorable, sympathetic, and inspiring trio. Dark Cloud faces tragedy and continues undeterred; glimpses of her strength and determination are abundant throughout. Enough of her backstory is hinted at to tantalize the audience with the promise of future adventures and revelations, though the cause of her amnesia is not explained here. A four-page guide to the process of photographing and composing the artwork follows the text proper and holds interest.

Combining gritty realism, mysterious gods, and a noble heroine, *Dark Cloud* is a vibrant, exciting graphic novel.

PETER DABBENE (February 1, 2022)

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