

Witch Hunting – Chapter 1

The star's lit up across the sky, illuminating the Vermillion haze that hung down over the desert and creating an eerie mist that lingered in the air. The wind blew roughly, flipping Rusty's coat from side to side as it swept by. The exoskeleton suit that Rusty wore was the one he retired in. "Just one last job he whispered to himself", his finger nails clawed into his suit, scratching deep into the rubber-like fabric. His head was tilted back and his pale eyes stared into the skies as his lips moved rapidly, muttering to himself furiously but without a word being heard. Spit formed in the corner of his mouth. After every second sentence he would bite his bottom lip, whilst his jaw would shake relentlessly. Back and forth his head would move, his breathing would become heavy as his lungs struggled to keep up, filtering air at a rapid rate. "I hate it when he does this..." Kimi whispered to Blake.

"I guess I'm just used to it... it gives him his edge - he wouldn't be the same without it..." Blake tipped his hat over his eyes. "Before when he was younger, sometimes he would be in a trance for hours. In his old age, it seems to have slowed down..." Blake's voice was calm and soothing. Rusty snapped his head down violently and suddenly he was back. Tears streaked down his cheeks from his pale, gray eyes. With two fingers he wiped his rough, cracked skin until the tears disappeared. "Blake!" he shouted, his voice deep and husky. Blake flicked his hat up with one finger, turned and smiled at Rusty. "Back from the dead boss.....?" His metal teeth shone brightly in the midnight darkness. Blake was a huge mercenary and one of the best trackers in Bathos. Back in the second world war of Bathos, Blake and Rusty had become friends and had worked together ever since. Blake had long, thick brown hair that dropped down to his shoulders, thin silver glasses and a gray mustache with a smattering of black hairs throughout. He dressed in the same way on every hunt; a long, black coat draped over the brown exoskeleton suit underneath. He traveled with hardly any weapons, standing at 6 foot 11 inches, he proudly told whoever he was working with that he was the weapon and he didn't need guns, laughing loudly at his own boast. But Rusty knew he never needed guns as he was always far away when the violence broke out. "What do we have?" Blake asked as he walked over to Rusty, his boots jangling loudly with every step he took. He moved adroitly through the white ash that surrounded him, stepping over the three dead bodies, his eyes studied them for every intricate detail; their light armor, the positions of their bodies, their bullet shells, their energy tanks, even the blood splatter visible on the ash. His eyes looked out across the desert as far as he could see but he shook his head in disbelief. "There should be four....." He bent down and with his index finger he wrote four names in the ash, "Wilson, Trevor, Mandy Loc, Jason Skiel....." He got up and blew the white residue off his skin.

"I love a riddle but I'm old..... and cold... so let's get to the crux of the matter, was this the witch?" Rusty replied to Blake slowly, "it's not a riddle, these are ash dealers. They usually hunt in fours, just like the four lunatics that started this.....cult.....or whatever you want to call them." He bent down

and pointed to some footprints in the ground. "It seems one got away and if we're lucky he could still be alive." Rusty glanced over at Blake and reached deep into one of his pockets, pulling out a chocolate, he undid the golden wrapper, throwing it in his mouth and closing his eyes in pleasure. "Hmmm that's good, Blake you know how I have a weakness for chocolate?" Rusty laughed, making sure his chewing was as audible as possible, as he searched for a piece of chocolate that was stuck in the corner of his gums, plucking it out with his tongue. "Seems like I've been gone too long, educate me who these ash monkeys are?" He pointed at one of their masks. "Are they supposed to be wearing those chimp masks?"

Blake gave out a hearty chuckle, "five years you've been gone and a lot have happened in that time, my friend... gangs, raiders, bandits.... even in Che, there are some kids calling themselves the nails—"

"I'm honored! I feel naked without my hammer..." Rusty interrupted.

"We can always go and get it if time permits... and in answer to your question, they're not monkeys, those are Oni masks... demons or devils or whatever they call them. They're to scare off folk in the desert and any Elkronian or Moonlit civilian who sees one would be sent running for the hills." Rusty pulled the mask away from one of the dead men's faces. Their eyes were covered with thick black mascara and eyeliner. He let the mask go and it slapped back onto the insipid, cold face of the dead corpse. "The bone ships passed through here, through Raven Pass and up north heading through Anson Desert before they get to Zen's Harbour. What the Queen does with the bones of the dead, no one knows. But they sometimes drop ash clouds here in the desert, to lighten the load of the ship. Some of the dead, have these..." Blake turned one of the dead ash dealers over, in his belt there was a small tin pouch which he opened. "Ezoth stones...very precious" Blake smiled at Rusty as the stone shone brightly, emerald green with shards of white in it. "Ezoth huh..." Rusty's tone was flat. Blake flicked it over at him.

"Yup my friend, it's big business in this desert, you got the Crimson Raiders, Sal scavengers and Ash dealers at war over this mystical stone."

"So what does it do?" Rusty held his felt cowboy style hat firmly on his head, as a strong wind brushed past, blowing heaps of ash over the three dead corpses that lay scattered on the ground. Blake lit his cigarette. "Well, I don't even know if these fools know why they're killing each other. The crypt priests take the ezoth underground, and though they're worth thousands of Pharonian credits, I don't even think the damn priests know what they're actually used for..."

"What's the point of all this shit man, while we're standing here freezing in the cold?" Kimi asked as he walked up to Blake. Rusty answered, visibly annoyed, "the point, my furry looking friend, is that the witch passed through here, and it seems as though she didn't want any confrontation, but

these ash dealers made the mistake of attacking her... and only one was lucky enough to make it out alive. And the question now is exactly how far has he managed to get?"

"It could be anyone! How do you know it's the white witch man?!" Kimi always questioned Blake, as even when he knew Blake was right, he wanted him to prove it – that's what kept him sharp.

"Well, the shell casing is the same one that we picked up in Oregon, modified desert falcon. And the pattern of the footprints over there, those can only be from those goat-looking mechanical feet she has." Rusty looked irritated at this, as anything mech-related riled him... he didn't believe in altering the body like that. Blake finished off by saying "That means if we find our ash dealer, we find our witch."

"If he's alive" Kimi retorted skeptically.

"Oh I think he is, it's not her style to kill those that run, that's why the people love her, she's on a mission and it seems the queen is her target" Blake answered Kimi, before Rusty interrupted "It's cold, we should move. Kimi, send one of the queen's drones to scout the north entrance of Raven Pass. Blake, how long will it take for her to move through Raven Pass?"

"If she is moving quickly with transport, probably twelve hours max."

"And when were these fine gentlemen killed? Rusty asked Blake.

Blake moved over and scanned the bodies with his monitor. "Well this poor bastard died last, it seems two hours max...." Rusty looked out to the huge space ship that covered the sky in the distance. Raven Pass was built by the famous alchemist Mammuz, it was the one place that the queen and her government could not get to him. The ships that covered the sky were built in the dark arts. No man knows how it was possible to build a ship that big and that powerful, with dark magic imbued throughout it and force fields that protected it from any sort of damage. The strange writing that covered the ship only made it more mystical and to this day not a single person has entered the ship and even the black merchant dealers had given up on trying to get in.

Rusty ground his teeth just thinking about entering Raven Pass, where unspeakable acts of evil occurred. He knew there was only one way into the city of hell – the feather gate.

Rusty looked up at the skies. "They're coming Blake, we must move now, to the Feather gate."

Blake turned and stared at the sky himself. He wondered why he did so; he could never see what Rusty was talking about, but he still had the impulse to look every time. Rusty moved quickly towards the small houses built just before Raven Pass. Black houses that had burnt trees all around them – the energy from the ship above kept the dead-looking trees barely alive, living off the white ash of the bones buried deep beneath their roots. It was one of the most haunting places in all of Bathos. Travellers had told Rusty long ago that Raven Pass was a city of the dead but nothing compared to the Clan of Seto, nobody entered the ancient Zectus city of Seto and came out the same person.

Two guards stood at the entrance to the huge black houses on the outskirts of Raven Pass. Rusty could see the purple leaves that the dead trees produced, poison flowing through their phloem tissue. The roof of the house looked like a large nest of snakes entangled with burnt leaves. The guards had pitch black bird masks with long silver beaks that seemed to be dipped in acid, black pointy hats with a symbol of the crow swallowing a raven and grainy leather outfits with feathers protruding out over their shoulders, topped off with long vintage rifles with gold encrusted hilts.

"Greetings, we're here to see the Swallow—"

"Do you have an appointment, caw caw?" the guard interrupted Blake, as he watched Rusty closely, he could see the gray eyes shining just underneath his felt hat. His gray hair and grey beard with swirling smoke moving from his lips made him look even more menacing. "Well no, we don't have an appointment. How do you even make an appointment, you're in the middle of fucking nowhere?" Blake turned to Rusty laughing, "what's up with this guy, why's he making these fucking weird crow noises?" Rusty just sucked on his cigar and puffed out more smoke – making it look like his face was slowly burning. He stared unblinkingly at the two guards. "Do you know who this is?" Blake asked, pointing his calloused fingers at Rusty.

"Caw, no, caw" the guard answered in a leering, mocking tone that immediately irritated both men. "This is Rusty the nail of—" the other guard took a step towards Blake. "That ain't Rusty, because Rusty retired years ago, plus Rusty always travels with his hammer. That's a nice suit but if you don't have an appointment with the Swallow, fuck off, caw" he lifted his rifle and pointed it squarely between Blake's eyes, just barely touching his head with the tip of the barrel, which felt as cold as ice against Blake's skin. Rusty threw his cigar out and shoved his hand deep into his pocket. The other guard stepped aside and lifted his rifle towards him. "Caw I'm warning you - we will happily execute both of you and feed you to our brothers", he moved his eyes in the direction of the nearby trees, where three crows sat eagerly watching the confrontation unfold.

Rusty pulled out two chocolates and slowly unwrapped the paper from one. He tossed the golden wrapper into the air and watched calmly as the wind swept it away. Opening his mouth slowly, each of his movements calculated and deliberate, he put the chocolate on his tongue, chewing it slowly. Both guards glanced nervously at each other, not knowing what to think, both uneasy from the quiet confidence of the man. "Money talks, shit walks..." Rusty's voice was smooth as honey. Blake didn't even recognize it as being Rusty's. "What?!" the guard jabbed his gun out towards Rusty, he looked skittish and frightened now. "Ah, you didn't saw. You should always stay in character, working for that fat bastard the Swallow!" He opened the palm of his hand and lifted it towards the guard. "Would you like one of these? They're from Daghos mountains, with a locian peanut just in the center. Try one, they're excellent and they really help to settle any nerves."

The guard's hand was getting tired holding the gun, and he glanced apprehensively over at the other guard from the corner of his eye. "Don't do it, Javi" the bigger guard pointing at Blake. As Rusty spoke. "Now, now gentlemen - I'm going to have to tell the fat Swallow that the men at the door ain't doing their duty. You need to be cawing. Now go on, take some chocolate, I won't bite." He tipped his hand toward the guard, how someone would offer a treat to a timid dog. The guard stepped to one side and fired a bullet into the air, smoke sucked around the chamber before the wind blew it away. "Last warning before I blow your fucking heads off" he screamed at them, spit flying from his mouth. Blake closed his eyes slowly, "bad Idea kid." Rusty jolted forward rapidly, the guard got a panicked shot off but Rusty evaded it easily, grabbed the gun and smashed the guard in his throat, bringing him crumpling to the floor. Blake ducked as the other guard moved quick, firing off a round which Rusty dodged as he hit the rifle from his hands, thrusting his body into the guard and pinning him helplessly against the steel door. He held the knife in between the guard's legs, while the other hand held him tight against the door. "Now your friend is shortly going to choke to death if you don't get in there and tell that fat fuck Swallow that Rusty the nail of Che has come to see him. And if you take too long and I get bored of waiting for you, I'm gonna kill this wretched piece of shit lying over there, then I'll kill you, every other guard in there and finally that fat, ugly boss of yours. Is that understood?" The guard trembled in fear.

"Y-y-yes, yes it's clear, it's clear!" Rusty jerked the blade tighter into his manhood.

"You forgot to caw..." The guard was shaking uncontrollably and breathing deeply through his nose. "Yes, caw, yes I will do it, caw!" Rusty released him and he turned around as quick as his legs would carry him, opened the large metal door and ran down the hall, towards Swallow's main chamber. Rusty turned to the guard choking on the floor and bent down, pushing two fingers into his neck. The guard wretched loudly and took in a huge deep breath. While he lay coughing and gasping for air, the door opened suddenly and another guard stood before Rusty and Blake. "Caw the Swallow will see you now." Rusty stepped into the black mysterious house but the guard stood before Blake "not you caw, you wait here, caw". Rusty gave Blake a quick nod, signaling that he would be okay, just as the iron doors slammed shut. Rusty walked down the corridor, passed rooms filled with children dressed as birds, with yellow and dark red bulbs giving the place an even more eerie feel. The wooden floor panels creaked loudly as they walked on, neon green crows flying above them making bird calls. Naked women stood at both sides of the entrance to the Swallow's chamber, covered only in bird feathers that seemed to be glued to their nipples and the sweet spot in between their legs.

The door opened and Rusty was let in. The room was dark with huge black feathers covering the walls, large egg shells in the corner and candles burning quietly all over the floor. A huge king size bed was in the center of the room, surrounded by black monitors. The Swallow sat in the center, wearing a big bird suit – his large protruding stomach made him look pregnant. A large scruffy beard covered his face, with a bald head and thick gray hair on the sides, with golden feathers

stuck within his shaggy hair. His eyes were covered with goggles that had a pink tint to them. He put his hands on his fat chest and slowly tapped each of his four fingers onto the rubber black bird suit he wore. "The third eye bounty hunter has arisen from the ashes like a phoenix and comes to my nest unannounced... unacceptable!" He sat up awkwardly, his fat body moving from side to side as he struggled to move out of his bed.

"My Rusty, you're looking fatter as well! Plus, oh my, no hammer... no wonder my pretty black birds didn't recognize you. Now now my dear Rusty, don't dodge the eagle eyes watching you from above..."

"Do you mind?" Rusty replied tersely.

"Of course I mind.... I want them to get into your brain so you can come and live with me. I can dress you up in feathers and call you hawk hammer. Mmmh, that has a nice ring to it."

The Swallow put a finger on his cheek and rubbed his face roughly as he spoke. Rusty moved over and closed the windows. "Alaric Fiddler..." Rusty's voice was deep and menacing, "let's just get on with it, I'm chasing someone and I don't have time for—"

"Games", Alaric finished his sentence. "We all want something Rusty, but as you know nothing is free, you do something for me, you get what you want" Rusty moved over to the black leather chair on the side of the bed. "Dear me Rusty, I'd rather you stood, you look like you need the exercise, your belly is almost as fat as mine. Are you staying for dinner? I'm cooking pigeon stew." Rusty ignored the comment and plonked himself onto the chair. "I was going to offer you tea Rusty, but then I remembered you're not really a guest, but more of an intruder. So no feathered cupcakes for you." Alaric's tone was playful and you could tell he was enjoying this encounter immensely. Rusty, however, seemed unamused, "what do you want....?" Alaric massaged his nipples slowly.

"Oh hawk hammer.... it doesn't matter what I want, I'm just a black market dealer with everything I could wish for and more." Rusty looked around the room.

"Yep, you've sure got it all. This is one twisted fantasy you're running here. I love how you've got the guards cawing though." Alaric's mouth twitched at this jibe.

"My little black birds must sing.... And you're not as fun as you used to be. I'm saddened that you only come when you really need me, which is quite often... but no card for my birthday, not even a parrot for Queen's Day—"

"Queen's Day? Since when do the people of Raven Pass celebrate any of the Pharonian holidays?" Rusty asked.

"Oh Rusty you forget, we are not in Raven Pass. Though it's been banned, I do rather enjoy Queen's Day." Rusty could see the golden chandelier up above, carved with crows at each corner. Pure gold, with rubies in each of the crows' eyes. Just getting a pass into the most notorious city in Bathos had made Alaric very wealthy. "The white witch is in Raven Pass, I need to find her... it's different this time, the job I mean... it's personal...well the reason behind it anyhow, so let me

pay whatever fee you're charging, and I swear to you, you will never see me again." Rusty himself knew that Alaric would never settle for credit - he was rich beyond his wildest dreams, but he wanted to get out of the haunted mad-house as fast as he could. "My old friend, did you know that most of the people they called witches, were in fact not witches at all, and the methods they used to find them, and better yet convict them, were pure witchcraft..." Rusty ignored this, waiting for Alaric to get to the point, which he reluctantly did, "you will have a hard time in Raven Pass... you have been gone a long time Hawk Hammer, witches are now heroes there. A lot want the Queen dead, and can you blame them? They'll aid that dangerous rebel on her quest." Alaric's words were poison to Rusty's ears. "I fear if you enter Raven Pass, you will never come out... it's not the Canyon, old Hawky is not respected there... and word has spread fast that you're working for the Queen. In fact, let me show you something—" He flipped over to the side of the bed, reaching for a remote, his fat body wobbling like a black worm, as the hinges underneath the bed moaned in agony.

The black mirror screen came on, and Alaric pulled his goggles down to see the huge screen in front of him, scanning the database in search of Rusty's name. "Ah here we go, Al Claudio has put a bounty on your head, for eighteen million credits." He wobbled to the other side of the bed and opened the drawer, pulling out an old, black revolver which he pointed squarely at Rusty's chest. "And the bounty wants you dead, not alive!" He pulled the trigger and a flurry of blue feathers exploded into the air. Alaric laughed hysterically, as the bed rocked violently as if an earthquake was shaking the house to its core. Rusty wondered to himself what he had done to Al Claudio to deserve a bounty that high. He thought about asking but decided he wasn't keen on hearing the answer. He was still horrified by the bloodlust he'd had before retiring and the acts he'd committed. "There are two things you want Hawk hammer, and two things I want—"

"I only want one thing—"

"No Hawky, you want two—"

"One—"

"You don't even know what you want, you old—"

"Watch it Alaric, I still have my father's fierceness flowing through my veins... may the Gods have mercy on his soul" Rusty tipped his hat in remembrance of his father.

"You want that squirming little worm that got away from white dove" Alaric put his hands on his bird suit and tapped his fingers - one, two, three... and before he put the last one down he continued, holding it suspended in the air, "you want the witch's details, who she is, where she's from, you might even be planning to pay some of her family members a visit...?" Rusty gave out a loud, disbelieving chuckle.

"The Queen of this planet and her best agents don't have a clue who this girl is, and you're telling me you do—"

"Oh Hawk Hammer, I don't, but I know where you can find out.... I have seen it" Alaric put his hands together - he knew how badly Rusty needed this information. A strange silence enveloped

the room. "She, she wants me to leave....I don't have time." Alaric looked around the room and belched. "Don't you wish you could, close it, or at least know what triggers it?" The whole house began to rattle, glasses fell, candles tipped over, crows flew around hysterically, the windows vibrated loudly as bird noises went up and strange screams filled the air. "Ah the Bone ships, they are flying closer to the ground than normal." Rusty's eyes could see the girl that haunted him day and night. She opened her mouth and Rusty moved his head closer to his chest to see if she would speak, but maggots and worms poured out of her mouth, every second or so she closed her mouth, crunching some of the worms and maggots, a thick white juice oozing from her lips and running down her cheeks. "Hawk Hammer!" Rusty closed his eyes tight and opened them again, the girl was gone and Alaric stood before him, staring irritably. "The warlord they call Zamzum, I want to know about the hunt that made you famous. And, well, I need someone who is close to Black Coffee dead. The story on Zamzum gets you the location on the ash dealer, the killing of Neon Bullet gets you the black file on the witch..." Alaric gave the terms and Rusty immediately knew there was no way he was going to go on another hunt, just to find the witch's location. Even if he was willing to, he knew he was a dead man if he set foot in Raven Pass, with the number of bounties on his head. Even the Hunter's Guild was gunning for him, so it would only be a matter of time...

"I have told this story before and nobody has ever believed me, I doubt you will—"

"Oh Hawky Hawky, I am in the business of information. I have wanted to hear this story for a very long time..." Alaric's mouth curved upwards and an ugly smile appeared on his face.

"I wish I could cut the story short, but in this case, I can't..." Rusty held his throat, "walking in this vile desert has gotten my throat dry... where is the hospitality in this crow's nest?" Alaric clicked his fingers, which looked like fat, black sausages in the studded gloves he wore, and immediately one of the women by the door came in with ice cold beverages. Winking at Rusty, she moaned seductively as she lowered the drinks to the table. "I'm seventy-one and not interested" he quipped, without even looking in her direction. He grabbed a drink and downed it in one, his throat burning from all the ash in the desert, as he coughed roughly before beginning his story. "I was not sent by Pharos to take the giant out but by a girl just twelve years old." Rusty looked up to see a girl with a face full of blood stood next to Alaric, she pointed at him, a worm seemed to be burrowing out of her finger nail, it slithered forward before it transformed into a venomous snake. Rusty closed his eyes. Rubbing his eyelid roughly he muttered under his breath. "Oh if there is a God, rid me of this curse..." Alaric moved on the bed, annoyed, "get on with the story before the Ash Dealer moves to another town." Music played in the background, which Alaric bobbed his fat head to from side to side. His neck looked like three large worms trying to wriggle free from each other. "The girl... she came to me when I was walking home after a party...I will never forget her face, I was young and in my prime - there was nothing I would say no too. She told me about the Giant that had eaten her whole village, killing many hunters in the Canyon. Pharos heralded the beast, they called it the devourer of the Canyon. At that point of my career, I had a full-time contract with the

Queen and I worked solely for her. But the girl begged me, she had saved up two hundred credits, which was nothing and it could scarcely afford any of my time." Rusty held the glass up and gave it a swirl, the wine they served was strong, he slogged it down his throat and continued. "I had never seen a Zectus before, and of course being the arrogant hot-shot I was, I wanted to kill one. The girl insisted that I take her, which was madness. But everyone she knew was dead and back then I didn't have any remorse for life, I was a killer." Alaric belched and demanded more drinks. "Oh Hawk Hammer, and do you care for life now?" he asked mockingly.

"Of course I do, that's why you're still alive." He said this unblinkingly and without any sign of humor on his face. Alaric paused and gave a nervous smile, rolling his hands in the air, indicating that Rusty should continue. "When I got to the cabin that they said was the last sighting point of this giant, it was... bleak, I've never seen anything else like that. Chopped up body parts, blood, piss, vomit, limbs, flesh— the place reeked of death. But the most shocking thing was, none of the parts were human."

Alaric twirled his fingers through his beard. "What do you mean?" Rusty squinted at him, as though it was obvious. "They were dead Zectus, about ten in total. When I noticed that all of their heads were missing, I searched until I found them, in a lab behind the huge mansion I was in. The heads were piled into some sick pyramid, one over the other. I'll never forget those skulls, at least three times the size of a human skull... but the one on top was different from the rest and it made me shudder to look at it." Rusty kept silent, letting his words slowly sink into Alaric's head.

"Oh don't be a tease Hawk Hammer, tell me." Alaric was leaning forward now, hungry to know more. "When I went in closer, I picked up the skull on the top, it was bigger than the others and heavy – seemed to weigh a ton. It also had three eyes, one in its forehead. It turns out this was a different breed of Zectus." Alaric's eyes snapped quickly to his monitor to check if Rusty was lying; it flashed green, reading his heart rate, temperature, and mood, he was telling the truth. "They're not even called Zectus – they're Zamzum, a cyclopedian breed, bigger and with three eyes, one huge one just above the other two. You know what the scary thing about this whole mess was?" Rusty asked tantalizingly. Alaric scratched his face and opened his eyes wide "What's that my psychotic friend?" giggling nervously all the while.

"They were killed, by neither Zectus nor man...." Rusty gave Alaric a sinister smile. "How do I know? Because each skull had the back part removed. Their brains were scooped out, the weapon must have been some kind of advanced war hammer. Striking the victim at the back of their head, it would pierce the skull and suck the brain out into the top chamber of the weapon. These creatures, or whatever they were, must have been studying the brains of Zectus and Zamzum." Rusty slouched back in his chair, letting the full weight of his words sink in. "Why Hammer Hawk go on... please" Alaric begged. Rusty chuckled.

"That I don't know for sure, but I took on their methods and made a hammer of my own, bashing every brain I could, out of the head of each victim I killed, in the hope that the ancient alien would return....maybe notice me. But I did it all in vein, I guess they care not if a man lives or dies." He rose to his feet abruptly. "Now I think you have taken enough of my time Alaric, the location of the Ash Dealer and I will be on my way." Alaric immediately pressed a button, and all the information was uploaded to Rusty's monitor within seconds. "The Black files are what you need on the witch, so you should carefully consider my offer." Alaric's voice was playful and mischievous but Rusty didn't say a word, he headed straight for the exit. "The next time you come, I will demand more Hawky Hammer, I know you will be back, just like the last time." Alaric exploded into a frenzy of laughter. "With you hunters, every job is the last one... pffft! You've always sucked back in again – I don't know what for, money, fame, women... No matter the reason, I will be waiting for you old Rusty nut." Rusty paused, staring at him long and hard – hate building in his pale, gray eyes, but he didn't utter a word in response.

The night was a cold one. Rusty could hear the ships flying high above, bringing the bones from planets many didn't even know existed and delivering them to an equally sinister government that had a cruel plan for the land and its people. When the humans came from Earth one, they didn't even know what the planet was called or why they were here. Hundreds of years later and only a select few were privileged enough to know. "Bathos hey..." Rusty mumbled it under his breath just soft enough that Blake wouldn't hear him. They knew what they were doing when they named the planet, giving humans the illusion that it could be their new paradise, where they didn't have to worry about all the problems Earth One faced. But they were wrong. Bathos was really a planet to harvest humans like they did to animals. They were no longer the dominant species, and just like the lion who thinks he rules all, most are completely unaware, with Pharos quite happy to feed them this lie.

The door crept open and Rusty and Blake entered the Soul Den, a small bar on the outskirts of Moon Lit City. The Bar had a vintage feel to it, with old oak tables and chairs and golden elks pinned all over the walls. Illuminating blue tiles were spread around the floor, which seemed to dim every time someone took a step on them. Many tables were spread across the bar but it was a cold night and only four men filled the eerie room they stood in. "Double jelly Jack with freeze cubes" Rusty stared at the bartender as Blake ordered a drink for himself. The mechanical arm and jaw of the bartender had already put Rusty in a foul mood. Blake turned to Rusty but Rusty spat out the words reluctantly before he could speak "Make it two, no cubes, straight up on mine", his voice was deep and flat. "Coming right up folks, you guys traveling? Bad day to be doing that." Rusty tipped his hat over his eyes and searched his pocket for a lighter for his cigar. "Why is that, my man?" Blake asked.

"Well, every fortnight the death ships fly over us, on the first day of the week. Why do you think this place is so empty today? I don't know why I even bothered opening." The bartender's voice cracked as he uttered the words "death ships", he seemed to be horrified by them. Rusty turned around and scanned the bar, pointing to the back "you've actually got a fire going at the back there. That's a nice touch for a bar like this, I like it a lot."

The Bartender put the cubes in Blake's drink and pushed both men's drinks down the bar, where they stopped perfectly in front of them. "You know what, I am feeling mighty generous today!" Rusty picked up his drink and walked over to the man sitting by the fire. He raised his glass high into the air, "I would like to buy a drink for everyone here, including our mech bartender over there who didn't have to open the place today but still did." The man sitting near the fire didn't look up at Rusty, he just took a long gulp of his drink, slammed it down on the table and wiped his beard roughly before muttering "no thanks". Rusty stared at him but the man didn't meet his gaze. Blake stood up and pulled out two plasma pistols, pointing them towards the two men at the bar. "Now I haven't killed someone in a long time gentlemen, and I just don't feel like breaking that streak today, so stay calm and keep those hands where I can see them." Rusty looked coldly at the man by the fire, he could see the ash covering his thick metal boots, with thin blue eyes embedded deep into his skinny face, large black bags hung from his eye lids, his famished look completed by thin pale lips and a smattering of hair on his head. He looked at Rusty. "Seven hells just leave me alone, I had a bad day—"

"Did you now?" Rusty's voice was as sharp as the ash dealer's blade he found in the desert. Grabbing the drink, he threw it into the man's face and grabbed him by the throat, launching him crudely away from the table. Glass shattered and bits of wood from the tables and chairs flew in all directions. Before the man could even react, Rusty grabbed him by his thick metal boot and dragged him to the fire. He spun him around, his cries for help being ignored. "Nobody fucking move, this is all going to be over quick and don't worry, that sick fuck will be buying everyone a drink afterward, even you" Blake winked at the bartender. Rusty held the man's face two inches away from the fire, the flames burnt his eyes but he couldn't free himself from Rusty's tight grip, no matter how frantically he twisted and squirmed. "You know on the way here, I read a few articles about you sick, deranged desert killers. So I understand that one has to capture the victim, the guy with the net right?, and the other has a gun and then I'm guessing there's you with the machete. But what really pisses me off is the guy with the flame thrower. Now that's some fucked up shit." Rusty pushed his face closer to the flames, the wood crackled sharply and his eyes began to sting painfully. "It was just a job man... please let me go!" Rusty gave a hearty chuckle.

"Burning, maiming, and shooting. All for stones... pathetic." Rusty grabbed his knife and held the cold blade tight against the man's flesh, drawing blood which trickled slowly down. "Now if you were lucky I would just cut deep into the bone, you would not even feel it. But you're not so lucky,

especially with all that alcohol splashed over your ugly face. What a way to go huh? getting your face melted off." Tears began to roll uncontrollably down the man's cheeks.

"Pl... pl-please let me go, I'll do anything" he screamed, and the terror in his voice pierced the old bar. "Oh, I know you will. Listen, being a bounty hunter, it goes without saying that you have to deal with the scum and low lives of this galaxy, and I've killed a lot of people... I lost count a long time ago. But you know what I don't forget, the ones whose faces I burnt off. The way they scream and wriggle like a worm as the flames slowly melt their skin away, cooking their brains and their eyes." He pulled the man's face away from the crackling flames and suddenly all of Rusty's calmness evaporated as he screamed in his ear. "Have you ever seen a black tongue, so burnt that it looks like snake skin? have you?!" He shoved the man's face deep into the fire and he screamed in agony and terror before Rusty pulled him back out and slammed him down onto the wooden floor. "I'm going to ask you one question, you answer it-you live, you don't and I'll happily melt your face off." The man was shivering and Rusty could see a puddle on the floor as the piss leaked out of his trousers and rained down on the wood below. "The white witch, you met her earlier, remember?" The man nodded his head so violently that his chin bashed into his chest. "Tell me everything you know about her, now goddammit." Rusty leaned in closer to the man's scalded face, he could hear his teeth clattering against each other as he spoke, trying to slow his breathing. "We...w..we were looking for Ezoth, she was app—approaching from the north to Raven Pass. Randy called out to her and warned her to leave, that this was our site. But she pointed to the ship floating in the sky and said she was in a hurry to get to it. We agreed as we didn't want trouble and she was carrying a huge rifle. As she spoke to us her face changed—"

Rusty threw the man to the floor and turned him over. "What do you mean it changed?" He stood on him with his leather boots, pushing them deep into his throat. "Her face, hair, everything - at first it was a pale face, green eyes, and red hair but then it changed.... it freaked Randy out, he pulled a gun on her but she was so quick... her arm, the mech one, moved like a snake underneath her cloak and she shot Randy, Martell, and Ed before we even knew what was happening. Then she walked over to me, I dropped the knife and begged her to spare me. She didn't say a word, just stared at me and then walked off towards Raven Pass." Rusty picked him up and punched him hard in the stomach, he fell to the floor, wheezing and holding his stomach as Rusty caught him and asked: "her face, what did it look like?" Still coughing and gasping for air, the man struggled to reply "kof, kof... brown hair and brown eyes—"

"Her cloak, did her cloak have a symbol on it?" Rusty's voice had changed now, the calmness had been lost and he sounded menacing. "Yes a shield with some weird alien writing through it, it was on her shoulder as well. She tried to cover it up." Rusty dropped the man, who fell into a crumpled ball on the floor, and then his eyes glanced into the flames – the girl who haunted his dreams stretched out her arms to him. You failed me Rusty, you took my bounty and failed me. YOU FAILED

ME! the voice screamed in his head. Rusty closed one eye as a sharp pain jolted through his skull. The voice made him dizzy. "Blake!" Rusty shouted across the room.

"Yes Sir" Blake answered quickly. Rusty turned toward the bartender.

"Pay the man for the drinks and buy everyone a round, including this scumbag." Rusty stepped over the body and exited the bar without another word.

As he stood outside waiting for Blake, he put his hand in his pocket and pulled out one of his golden chocolates. He undid the wrapper slowly, placing it on his tongue he slowly sucked on the chocolate before biting into the peanut center just as Blake emerged, "mmm that's good Blake." Blake looked at the monitor, "bad news Rust the drone was just shot down." Rusty closed his eyes as he swallowed the bits of chocolate still in his mouth. "Blake, I'm tired of hunting this witch, so I'm going to do something I never like doing on a hunt. Let's go to Sera and go visit some of the witch's friends..... I would like to test out that angelic hammer that the Gods left me, maybe the brains of her relatives will make her think twice."

He searched in his pocket for one more chocolate but couldn't find it. "Curse the witch, but I will hurt her where she least expects it. Her symbol, Blake, it means she is a descendant keeper... from the small city of Sera... and I know that city well. She will come to us on her knees, begging for her death, and I will grant her wish."

Short Story End.