

Borderlands: The Hunter

(A Short Story)

NEW HAVEN, the sign read, about a quarter-click from the outer wall of the settlement. The metal was corroded and pitted from the nonstop sand and regular storms on this part of the continent. POPULATION 43. There was something else written in smaller print below that, but it was obscured by a combination of corrosion, the tint from the runner's windshield, and what looked like melted holes from tracer rounds.

Why is it, he thought, that the more of these places I see, the more they all start to look the same? He coughed again – even with the vehicle's filtration system, the dust was getting into his lungs. *Let's hope they have what I need. The next settlement's a long haul, and I don't know if this turbine is going to last another hundred clicks.* As he passed the sign, he could just make out the broken text on the last line. A GREAT PLACE TO RAISE A FAMILY. *Right.* Like anyone was going to believe that. *What a joke.*

He slowly throttled back the turbines, hearing the cracked one whine in complaint, and the light runner he was driving slowed as it approached the outer wall of the settlement. A couple of gun turrets surrounded the main utility entrance, but only one of them swiveled to meet his approach. Stopping the vehicle a few meters from the door, he slowly dismounted, keeping his hands visible and away from his sidearm. *No sense getting my ass shot off here.* Settlers here in the outlands tended to be a somewhat skittish bunch, especially when it came to strangers. The wind gusted hard again, causing his duster to blow open and the shocks on the runner to creak as the vehicle swayed slightly in the gale.

He approached the main door, a heavy-duty airlock that looked like it had originally belonged on a cargo lifter. Like everything on this planet, it had originally been intended for something else. As he stepped closer, he made out a vid unit next to the entrance. Pushing the button, he spoke into the grill-covered speaker set into the wall next to the cracked screen.

"Hello?" No response. "Anyone there?"

After a few moments, a harsh voice replied. "Yeah?"

Screen must be broken. "Name's Quinn."

"So? What do I care?"

"I understand you guys need a hunter."

Silence for a moment. "The depends. You got the tools for the job?"

"Open up, and I'll show you."

"Nice try, slick, but that ain't the way this works. Show us what you got, and quick, or you can piss off."

"How do I know you won't just kill me and take it?" Quinn replied.

The single functioning turret swiveled slightly, and fired of a round that hit the dusty ground about an inch from his left foot. "You don't. But we coulda killed you anytime since you walked up."

Direct, he thought. My kind of people. "Fair enough." He reached back into the runner and pulled out a large plastic hardshell case with a handle on top. Breaking the seals on the side, he opened the case and turned it towards the camera, tilting it so they could see the contents. "Bet you haven't seen one of these for a while."

There was no response. Getting impatient, he growled into the speaker, “Are we going to do business, or not?” Still nothing. Feigning frustration, he snapped the case shut, and turned to place it back into the cargo area of his runner – but then heard a clank as the settlement doors unlocked, then started slowly moving apart with a terrible metallic screech of poorly-maintained hydraulics. Quinn winced at the sound, feeling his teeth on edge, but inside was grinning. *Predictable - good.*

“Welcome to New Haven,” the voice from the speaker said. “But don’t plan on staying long.”

No worries there, Quinn thought, as he stepped inside the door and took a glance around at the settlement inside. *What a shithole.*

On a planet as bad as this, you figured that the settlements, especially one this remote, were going to be pretty ramshackle. Bad weather, inconsistent supplies, lack of spare parts and replacement equipment, and people forced to make do with whatever they had on hand or local raw materials tended to give any town a pretty low-rent kind of appearance. *But this place takes the cake. Are those buildings made from hull plating? Jesus. They better have what I need.*

Hefting the black hardshell, he walked up towards what he assumed was the control building – just by the fact that it was the only 2-story structure in the place. A few locals were standing around, or on their way to doing whatever it was they did in this place, and gave him everything from a curious glance to an open gawking stare. He ignored them. As he passed by a mechanic’s station, he felt extra weight on the hardshell, and snaked his hand out to grab a small wrist, hearing a yelp as he did do. He turned around, looking down at the owner of the hand that had been trying to open his case, who was now squirming and trying to break free.

“I just wanted to touch it!” the kid protested. “Leggo my hand!”

He released his grip, and the kid fell over backwards. “Uh-uh. Not for you.” The kid scampered off. *New town, same story.* He sighed and shook his head.

Turning back to the control building, he found two people staring at him. One was a slump-shouldered guy, dressed in typical settler coveralls, streaked with grease and dirt. The other was a woman.

At first glance, she appeared quite attractive – she had a slim figure, looked quite strong, and she a confident, even defiant posture. But there was something... odd about her. She had her arms crossed, and was looking at him, but her head was cocked to the side, as if she was staring at him out of the corner of one eye. He walked closer, and when he got about 3 meters away, she turned towards him, and he saw why.

Her face was... scarred. Terribly scarred. Nearly the entire left side of her face was a mass of angry red tissue, which looked painfully swollen and rough. Her left cheekbone was dented in, giving her face an awful dissymmetry, as was most of her left eyebrow. But worst was her left eye. While the right one was sharp, clear blue, her left eye was a discolored, milky orb that looked quite blind.

“And you are?” she demanded, in a rough voice. The same voice, he realized, that he had heard on the speaker outside the wall. *No wonder she doesn’t fix the vid screen.*

“Quinn,” he responded, grinning at her. “And who might you be?”

“Pierce. Helena Pierce.” She didn’t offer her hand, nor did she bother to introduce the man next to her.

He asked what he knew was a rhetorical question. “So who’s in charge of this dump, anyway?”

She glared at him, but seemed unfazed by the insult to the town. *I guess it’s hard to refute the obvious.* “You’re looking at her.” Her eyes drifted towards the case in his hands. “Do you know how to use that thing?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t,” he replied. She looked back up at him, clearly unimpressed. “You have what I’m looking for?”

She was silent for a moment, but then nodded.

“Then here are my terms. They’re non-negotiable. There’s one reason I came to this shithole – you have a replacement turbine I need for my runner. That and 300 creds are my fee, payable in advance–”

She cut him off, her expression changed from mild disgust to open hostility. “That’s not what we agreed to!”

“–plus a free throw with the top girl at whatever passes for a warehouse in this dump. And any pearapples you happen to have in your stores.” He winked at her. “A growing boy like me needs his vitamins.”

The slumped guy standing next to her, who Quinn had almost forgotten was there, looked at the woman, then looked at Quinn, and took a hesitant half-step back. She walked to Quinn, very close, and until he could see right into the milky orb of her ruined eye. She grabbed the front of his duster, and he realized that her left hand was a robotic-looking metal prosthetic. The scars on her face, deep as they were, did nothing to mask her anger. *Jesus, that must have hurt like hell.*

“Now you listen to me. You’ll get your payment, but you get it after you do the job. And then you’ll get the hell out of New Haven. Are we clear?”

This was clearly a woman who was used to being in charge. “No problem.” He glared at her, smiling all the while. “Then I guess I better get my throw tonight then, huh?” They needed him, and his services, and they both knew it.

She glared right back for nearly a minute, unflinching. “Marcus,” she finally barked, without looking away from Quinn’s face. “Take him to Clayton’s. Tell him Mr. Quinn here will require Jessica’s services for the night. Tell him I’ll square it with him later.”

“Yes ma’am,” the slumped guy responded.

She eyed him for a moment longer. “You’ll get the rest when you get back – but only after the job is completed. Provided you are still alive.” She turned and started to walk away.

“One last thing,” he called out to her, she stopped, but didn’t look back at him. “The pearlstone.” He saw her stiffen, but still didn’t look at him. “I keep that as part of my fee.” She stood still for a long moment without answering him. “Do we have a deal? Or do I get back into my runner and take off for Waterfront?”

“Deal,” she replied, and walked away without looking back.

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“So what’s her story? How come she’s in charge around here?”

Quinn had driven his runner in from outside the wall, and left it near the main entrance, with the canopy locked and the security charge on. There was no telling what

might happen to it during the course of the evening, and the last thing he wanted was to be stuck here any longer than necessary. They were walking down what passed for a main thoroughfare in this place.

Marcus looked at him, then glanced around making sure nobody could overhear.

“She came here about 5 years ago. She was with this guy, some rich dude by the name of Alexander Pierce. They ride out here from New Houston, skirting the edge of the badlands, and stop here for the night. They was engaged to get married – turns out this Pierce guy and a bunch of others had been courting her for years. So she finally agrees to marry him, but only under one condition.” He looked around again, then back at Quinn. “She tells him she’d only get hitched to him if he got her a pearlstone for her engagement ring.”

They turned off the main street and went down a side road, sidestepping a puddle of something foul-smelling on the street.

“So they come out here, decked out like they was on some safari. He leaves her at the hotel, and goes out, taking one of those with him...” He pointed to the case Quinn was holding. “...and he bags one. Killed it clean, cut it open, and brought the ‘stone back with him. He walks right into the smith’s shop, and hands over the stone, along with this ring he’s brought with him, and has the guy mount it on the ring so he can propose to her right then and there.”

Quinn could already see where this was going, but let the man finish his story.

“Idiot, right? So the next morning, they head back to Houston, only their runner breaks down about 50 clicks east of here. Before they can repair it, or radio for help, a pack of about 20 skags attacks them.”

“Let me guess...” Quinn started.

“Yep. It was the pearlstone. The damn skags could smell it on them, even inside the runner. Once Pierce killed the alpha, all the wannabes in the pack had been following them, trying to get at it.”

“See, skags are pretty competitive – the only way for a new alpha to take over is to kill the old one and eat the pearlstone from its body. That’s what makes the alpha larger, smarter and meaner than the rest – they say it’s some kinda hormone thing, triggered by the chemicals in the stone.”

“Pierce’s body was never found – skags must’ve hauled it away, though there was enough blood on the ground that they might’ve eaten him on the spot. She survived, but lost her arm and part of her face in the attack. Skag ate the stone off ‘er - ring and all - and took most of her arm with it. Most folks don’t last long after that kind of injury – medicine round here ain’t exactly state of the art.”

He spat onto the ground, and paused, as if in quiet reverence for a moment.

“But her body just wouldn’t give up. She came out of the coma after about 3 weeks, and raised enough hell in the infirmary that they jury-rigged a prosthetic arm of her out of spare parts, just to shut her up. After she got back to walking around, everyone figured she’d be heading back to New Houston, that she had family or something that would come and get her. But no one did, and she never left.”

They were approaching a building that looked vaguely like a hotel, if you were to build a hotel out of cargo crates and weather sheeting.

“When the old mayor died, she took over his position in the community – no one else was really interested. Most folks round here don’t mess with her – she runs this

place pretty well, and aside from the odd bar brawl, keeps pretty much to herself. A couple of drifters came through here once, though, a little over a year ago. One of them got pretty drunk, and started making his move on her. Poor bastard couldn't see straight, I guess. Once he got a good look at her, he and his buddy started calling her 'Dealbreaker' – on account of her scars and all." He looked around again, as if to see if they were being overhead. He lowered his voice and leaned towards Quinn. "They found him the next day out in front of the settlement, beaten to hell and without a stitch of clothing on, beating up against the door and yelling at us to open up before the skags got him."

Quinn humored the guy. "They ever figure out who did it?"

"No one asked any questions." He leaned in closer. "Personally? I think she does it on purpose."

"Does what?" Quinn asked.

"When you first stepped in from outside? You only saw her good side, right? Until you got closer, and saw the whole package?" He grinned. "She lives for that."

He opened the door of the hotel, and Quinn followed him inside, hefting his case.

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Early the next morning, Quinn rose from his bed in the tiny room, and pulled his clothes on. Jessica stirred next to him, but didn't wake up. *Just as well.* For the best girl in the house, she'd been adequate, if somewhat unenthusiastic. *Doesn't like working for free,* he guessed.

He picked up the case and left, walking down the short hallway into what passed for a front office for the place. The owner was snoring in his chair behind the tiny counter. Silently, he opened the door, and walked out into the gloom. He checked the chrono on his wrist – an hour until sunrise. The skags would be waking soon, moving out into the early light, but would be lethargic until the sun came all the way up and warmed their bodies. He'd probably find them somewhere near the outcropping he'd seen on the way in, about 3 clicks south of the settlement.

It said something about the local ecosystem if the skags were attacking the settlers. They were usually pack hunters, scavengers even, and rarely came after anything as large as a human unless they had the advantage of numbers. But the settlers of New Haven had been victim to over a dozen attacks in the last few weeks, usually by a just a single skag.

Their local food supplies must be running low. Wonder if something's killing off the smaller animals out there?

He made his way back to his vehicle, automatically disengaging the security charge as he approached it. From the black electrical burn marks visible on the edge of the canopy, he could see that at least one of the locals had tried to break into it during the course of the night. He grinned wryly.

Be a while before they try that again.

He stowed the hardshell case into the cargo compartment, and climbed behind the controls. After waking the camp night guard, he got him to open the main entrance, and rolled out into the rocky landscape. It looked a lot different at night – gloomy,

mysterious, but somewhat peaceful. Quinn had been on Pandora long enough to know how deceiving that could be. *Nothing about this dirtball is ever quite what it seems.*

He activated the vehicle's pheromone sensor, and was rewarded with a trace signal – as he suspected, the strongest concentration was due south. The runner normally ran pretty silent, but with the cracked turbine, he was going to have to ditch it when he was a ways out and close in on the pack on foot.

Skags, he thought. Fitting name for the damn things.

The beasts were indigenous to Pandora, scavenger/hunters, remarkably feral and extremely dangerous. Slightly larger than a man, skags were covered on part of their bodies with a segmented chitinous armor, had stiff boney legs, yet still slinked on all fours with a feline grace. Unlike the spiderants he usually hunted, skags attacked in packs, and coordinated their attacks through a series of soft grunts and growls that were emitted through the breathing holes. Though not completely silent, they could get pretty close before you heard anything, and rarely attacked solo – if you spotted one sneaking up on you, you could be sure that there were two or three more coming from other directions. The only way to kill one was to hit it point-blank in their soft mouth tissue – difficult because they only opened their mouths when they were just about to strike, at which point you were probably already dead – or to shoot it through the breathing holes on the sides of their torsos.

The one fatal flaw of the species was in their mating cycle. What a lot of people didn't know, was that every skag was born female. The only males of the species were the pack alphas – bigger, more intelligent, and the leader of the group. Only the strongest and most cunning of the females ever challenged the alpha, and fewer still were able to kill them and assume leadership of the pack. Those who did ate the pearlstone which grew in the male's thorax, and it triggered a hormonal change which turned the female into a male – they grew larger, changed color, and their reproductive system changed to allow them to fertilize the eggs of the other females. This cycle ensured that only the strongest, fittest, most cunning, and most savage of the species were able to reproduce.

The only way to kill off the pack was to eliminate the alpha, and remove the pearlstone before any of the females could ingest it. A female skag's average lifespan was only about three years – once the male was gone, the pack would die off pretty quickly. But as Dealbreaker's betrothed had discovered, once you got the stone, you had to either destroy it, or get very far away, because the pack wouldn't stop until they hunted it down.

The pheromone sensor emitted a soft beep, and Quinn looked up towards the rocky outcropping ahead. He steered towards a chunk of rock large enough to conceal his vehicle, and with a slight skid, swerved to a stop behind it. He killed the turbine, popped the canopy, and climbed out. Opening the cargo compartment, he extracted the hardshell case, and set it down on the rear of the vehicle. He unlatched the seal, and carefully removed the contents a piece at a time, keeping a careful eye on the surrounding terrain. Fitting them together, he assembled his pride and joy – a Lunara SNP-7 sniper rifle, with a smoothbore extended barrel and night-vision scope. He completed the rifle, admiring its black chromed finish and clean lines. He still had 17 of the caseless, explosive-tipped armor-piercing rounds left, eight of which resided in the clip that he snapped into the bottom of the rifle. There was no point in bringing more ammo – if he

didn't kill the male in less than eight rounds, the rest of the pack would be on him and he'd be dead anyway. He'd never have time to change clips.

He closed the case, stowed it back in the passenger compartment, and activated the security charge. He attached his portable pheromone sensor to his belt, and screwed the earpiece into his right ear. It immediately began clicking, sounding kind of like an old-fashioned radiation detector. Hefting the completed rifle, he activated his infrared goggles and started moving forward through the rocky terrain.

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Creeping forward across the rocky terrain, Quinn followed the ticking of the pheromone sensor and the occasional infrared bloom on his goggles. All at once, he spotted a skag, about 40 meters away – and it was looking right at him.

He froze, not wanting to spook it or provoke a violent defense response. He quickly looked around, using his thermal imager to seek out the others that would surely be surrounding him, but there were none. It was odd, one of them being out here alone – skags always hunted in packs, and when they were the last one standing, they inevitably fled back to their den. This was a strange-looking one, as well – it was scarred over much of its face and torso.

He slowly, quietly drew his rifle, but he got it halfway to his shoulder when the skag bolted, running the opposite direction from where the main pheromone trace was coming. In a few moments it was gone. He slowly re-slung his gun and continued on his previous path towards the outcrop.

After searching for nearly 30 more minutes, Quinn located the skag nest. It was some fifty meters up the outcrop, shielded from the wind and from view on all sides by jutting chunks of stone. There were around a dozen, including the alpha, and piles of broken eggs in the corners. There was also what looked like a cave entrance on one side, which was probably their lair during the night.

Quinn carefully climbed his way up the outcrop, above the nest, being careful to stay both out of sight and downwind of the creatures. Three times he lost his footing, sending a shower of small pebbles down the outcrop and causing him to freeze and re-check his thermal scope. The skags didn't appear to be getting any closer, so he guessed they didn't hear him. He crept into a spot that gave him line of sight over part of the nest, but was still close enough to get in after he fired.

Carefully unlimbering the SNP-7, he snapped the cover off the scope and brought the rifle to his shoulder. Peering through the scope, he could make out the alpha, feeding on a small carcass and swatting at any of the females who came too close to it. The rest of the pack was either lumbering around the male, or going in and out of the den entrance, where presumably the eggs were. He watched it for a while, observing how it moved when it ate, and noting the walking patterns of the females. When he felt that he knew the best time to shoot, when none of the others would be in the way, and the male was about to open its jaws to take a bite, he clicked the rifle's safety off.

"Smile," he whispered to himself. The alpha paused for a moment, almost as if it had heard him, then opened its jaws to take another bite. "Smile, you son of a–"

BLAMMMMM! The rifle report deafened his right ear, even through the earpiece. The recoil suppressors in the rifle compensated for most of the kick, but it took

him half a second to re-sight in the target to see the result. A horrible screeching sound rose from the females in the nest, overshadowed by the pained roaring of the male.

Damnit, didn't kill it clean with the first shot.

He re-sighted again, targeting the open jaws again as the monster bellowed, its fierce thrashing making the shot much more difficult. He squeezed the trigger again.

BLAMMMMM! This time the alpha keeled over and stayed there. The females were scrambling around, most of them darting into the den to protect the eggs, a couple biting and snapping at each other, confused by the death of the male with no visible enemy present. He shouldered his rifle, and started downward towards the nest, staying out of sight of the females as much as possible. Once he got within 30 meters, he peered through the rifle scope again and dispatched the two females still outside with a shot each through their breathing cavities in their sides. They dropped dead in front of the entrance to the den, helping to block the entrance.

Shouldering his rifle once more, Quinn scrambled down to the nest, and approached the male while pulling out his combat knife. Putting his shoulder into it, he was able to turn the heavy carcass over enough to expose the bottom of the thorax, one of the few unarmored spots on the beast. He dug the 14-centimeter ceramic blade in to the hilt, and sawed open a slit in the thorax big enough to get his hand into. After digging around in the creature's throat, then widening the slit further with the knife, he finally found a hard lump at the base of the throat the size of a peanut. He dug in again with the knife, severing the stringy flesh surrounding the lump, and pulled it out of the creature's throat, his gloved hand coming out covered in gore and bluish-black ichor.

He had the pearlstone. Now began the dangerous part.

Quickly, he wrapped the stone in a scrap of cloth and stuck it in his vest pocket, and wiped his hand off on his pants. He climbed over the edge of the nest, and started climbing down, listening to the telltale sounds of the female skags, emerging from the den and starting to tear at the corpse of the alpha. The screeching noise got louder and louder.

Ignore it. Focus on the climb down.

If he slipped now, and sprained his ankle or broke his leg, he'd be dead inside 5 minutes.

Keep going, one foot at a time, get to the bottom.

Quinn was almost there - he just had to make it to the downward slope and sprint back to the runner before they caught on. He risked a glance up at the nest, and was horrified to see one of the females already glaring down at him. It began screeching at the top of its lungs, and after a moment, another came to the edge and looked down. Then another. And another. He made it to the slope and started sprinting back towards his vehicle. Glancing back again, he saw the first skag step over the side of the nest, and start its way down, with that weird stiff-legged feline grace. He turned around and ran for all he was worth.

Keep going. Keep going. KEEP GOING.

All he could feel was his breath was burning in his lungs, his adrenaline pumping as his legs ate up the remaining distance. He could hear the pounding of multiple feet behind him, and the quiet growling of the skags to each other, spreading out to surround him. He began to think he'd made a fatal miscalculation – that maybe he wasn't going to walk away from this one. But then the vehicle was right in front of him, just a few

meters away. He turned around, fired the remaining four shots from his rifle into the approaching horde (noting with some brief satisfaction that three skags dropped from the shots), then pressed the button on his gauntlet that deactivated the runner's security charge. Bolting for the vehicle, he nearly had his hand on the canopy, when he saw it.

It was the skag he saw earlier, before he found the nest, the one that had been wandering out alone. Even in the chaos and adrenaline just before it struck, he recognized the strange scarring. In the moment before its claws sank into his leg, he realized that it had been waiting behind the vehicle for him. That somehow, on some instinctive level, it knew that he was going to kill the alpha. That he would be coming back this way, and that he would be carrying the pearlstone with him. Perhaps it was coincidence, but as he felt the beast bite into his neck, and rip open the clothing and flesh of his chest, he remembered his conversation with Marcus the night before - that a single, lone skag had been attacking the settlers. That the smartest female skag, the most vicious, the most cunning one - that was the one who became the new alpha of the pack. That was the one that became a male, reproduced, and passed its genes along to the next generation - but it had to kill the previous alpha first.

As his vision dimmed, he saw his black chrome rifle lying on the ground near his face - in its reflection, he saw the skag that had killed him rip open the cloth holding the pearlstone, and its rosy tongue scoop it up and swallow it.