

Bounty hunters of the Palace of Amino

Book Four

The Impaler and the Slim-Jims



Peter Stuart Fothergill

www.palaceofamino.com

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* With contributions by Panos Aristidou, Justin Codd, Ross Meddle and Lawrence So

Bounty Hunters of the Palace of Amino
Book Four: The Impaler and the Slim-Jims

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Book Four

**The Impaler
and the
Slim-Jims**

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1 Nomadic Ancestral Soothsayers

Earth Reference Year: 2393.77 AD

It was well and truly jammed all right.

Panman, a bounty hunter of impenetrable acumen and potent concentration, stood heroically on the topside of the *Blenheim* and surveyed the scene. The ship was wedged tightly in a fifty metre wide hard-rock crevasse, a crevasse only half the width of the ship itself, and it was damaged beyond reason. Torn armour plating and buckled weaponry could be seen crunched up against the grey lichen covered rock face. Contorted hull fragments jabbed at the air, and black smoke billowed from the huge sub-space engines at the rear. The stench of collision, similar to the odour of a dam crawling gum chewer, wafted through the air.

Panman smiled. That must have been the most extraordinary and magnificent crash ever! A shame it wasn't recorded.

Peter the Ace, a bounty hunter of multifarious subterfuge and sturdy construction, clambered out of the bridge's emergency exit hatch and joined his companion out on the hull. A chill gust of wind ruffled his un-gelled hair.

"What's the verdict, Ace?" Panman asked; his heavily gelled hair unaffected by the rush of air.

"Well, the weapons array has been almost wiped out - apart from the lower pulse cannon, that still seems to respond. All shield capability has been lost, and the sub-space drive diagnostics can't get a response from the engines. It looks like the Inanum fuel injector has snapped."

"Is that serious?"

"We need to find a new one or else we can't leave."

"Unlikely on this backwards world."

"It is indeed. The complex alloy that it's made from is deviously constructed."

"Anything else?"

Peter the Ace thought for a second. "The microwave doesn't close properly, and I can't turn off the vibrating bed in the guest quarters. The jacuzzi works, though."

"It's not all bad then."

“No, not really. Oh, I almost forgot, the Holo-Game system is off-line too.”

Panman went insane. “I don’t believe it!” he screamed, his voice echoing off the rock faces. “It’s always the same. That damn thing breaks at the slightest bump!” The bounty hunter ran over to the bridge’s hatchway and stuck his head inside. “*Blenheim*? Divert all power to the Holo-Game auto-repair systems!”

There was no response from the ship.

“Do it now!” Panman yelled. “I want to be able to play ‘*Nomadic Ancestral Soothsayers Defy Oblivion in Bizarre Ceremonial Gowns*’ in five minutes.”

Peter the Ace spoke calmly. “Unfortunately the *Blenheim*’s voice recognition system also seems to be damaged.”

Panman looked at his comrade. “The ship’s deaf?”

“It appears so. But it does respond to typed commands, I tried earlier.”

Panman looked despondent. “Typed commands?” He lay back on the hull and looked up at the darkening blue sky. “I haven’t typed for centuries!”

“I must admit that it is a bit of a chore.” Peter the Ace agreed. He followed Panman’s gaze. High above in erratic orbits a multitude of distant chunks of debris drifted through the void of space.

“If you think we’re in a bad way, just look at our adversaries!”

A grin the width of a continent spread across Panman’s face. A large segment of debris scraped the upper atmosphere and glowed bright white as it vaporised. He started to laugh. “We cut up those Gargalon Blood Smuggler Destruction Vessels as if they were onions! And we were out-numbered sixty to one!”

Peter the Ace laughed too. “We are, without doubt, the greatest beings ever!”

Panman could not disagree. “We spent two weeks at maximum sub-space speed to get out here to destroy their unauthorised zombie brain delivery and we succeeded in ten minutes!”

“Absolutely. It’s a shame that they wiped out our stabilisers and sent us crashing onto this remote slab of a planet.”

“It could have been much worse without Ross Mental’s help.”

Peter the Ace nodded. “His unique close fly-by attack techniques really helped - his foul language too. I think he offended half of them to death!” The bounty hunter looked around. “I wonder where he is.”

“I saw the *Morbid* spiraling out of control shortly before we slammed into this chasm. He’s somewhere to the north I think.” Panman got to his feet. “We’d better contact him.”

“I tried just a minute ago. Unfortunately, there’s no response.”

Panman looked thoughtful. “Strange. What shall we do?”

Peter the Ace started to pace up and down. His UIP (Useful Ideas Processor) began processing. “We have three options. One; we stay here and live off the rations we have stored in the *Blenheim’s* larder. There’s enough for two years of gluttony and as the power systems are still on we could entertain ourselves with videos. What’s more, our assistant Jemima Murma is unscathed and can still serve us.”

“Food is good.” Panman said, starting to drool.

Peter the Ace continued. “Two; we climb up out of the chasm and wander around on the off chance that we find Ross Mental and his intact ship. Then we escape.”

Panman nodded. “Simple ideas are often the best.”

“Or finally, three; we use our new *Blenheim Bikes* to ride to the nearest settlement.”

“Yes!” Panman said with excitement. “We haven’t used our new bikes yet. Let’s do it!”

“Unfortunately the bikes are in the lower cargo bay.”

“Oh yeah. That means when we open the bay doors we’ll have to drop into the chasm below.”

“Indeed, and it’s a kilometre deep.”

Panman thought for a moment. “Those bikes have Tri-Tanium coated suspension modules, don’t they?”

Peter the Ace nodded. “I believe so.”

“Then a fall of that distance will be fine. Remember the *Blenheim Mobile* back in the *Mechanism*? That had the same suspension and it survived a fall of hundreds of kilometers in double gravity!”

“You’re right as always!” Peter the Ace said. “Let’s do it.”

The two defenders of righteousness and supremacy clambered back into the ship.

2 Spinal Fluid

A haze of confusion oozed through Ross Mental’s mind. It was an odd feeling, probably similar to the sensation of having your brain sandpapered by a bamboozled flower child. The bounty hunter noticed that a headache of biblical dimensions was developing.

It would take eight bottles of whisky to generate this kind of fuckin' hangover, he thought. That must have been one fucker of a good evening!

A strange odour entered his nasal passageways. It was strangely clinical, and very unfamiliar. Ross Mental decided that now was a good time to open his eyes.

A face, contorted and scarred, was staring down at him.

"Fuck!"

The bounty hunter tried to move. It was no use; his wrists, ankles, waist, and neck were strapped tightly to whatever he was lying on. He looked left then right. Several more ugly beings were standing either side of him, all wearing long white coats. Higher up on a gallery others were staring down. Ross Mental could not believe what was going on. He was strapped to a bench in the middle of a large dome surrounded by repulsive and blemished individuals.

The nearest and most deformed being spoke. "Welcome, bounty hunter. I am Injr'd, the senior genetic researcher here. It is a great honour to meet you."

"Fuck off!"

"You are very rude, especially to someone who just saved you from your chronically mangled star ship."

"Undo these fuckin' straps, you unsightly fucker!"

"Not possible," the deformed one said. "Bounty hunters are famous for their strength and cunning. I wouldn't want to risk having my limbs torn off."

Ross Mental struggled like a fish. "Detaining a bounty fucker is a crime of the fuck most severity!" he shouted. "Free me now or suffer the fuckin' consequences!"

"Relax. The procedure will be painful but quick. Cease struggling and you'll survive relatively unscathed."

The bounty hunter glared at the ugly dude. "What the fuck are you on about?"

"Oh, did I forget to mention the procedure." The white-coated deformity paced up and down the length of the bench. "We are scientists intrigued as to why bounty hunters are so cool. I need to take a sample of your spinal fluid for examination."

"You can't tell how cool someone is from their fuckin' spinal fluid!"

"*We* can." Injr'd said. He waved at one of his hideous colleagues. "Prepare the device."

The colleague nodded and operated a small control panel that was embedded into the side of the dome. With a crunch, a large portion of dome above the panel opened outwards. From the darkness

a gleaming metal contraption extended out to a position above Ross Mental's chest. It stopped with a clunk. A needle, half a metre in length, extended from its tip.

"What the fuck is that?!" The bounty hunter yelled.

"It's a sampling device." The contorted being explained proudly. "I designed it myself actually. It's the most advanced spinal fluid extractor in the galaxy."

"Why is it so fuckin' big?"

"Because it has to penetrate all the way through your belly to get to your spine."

Ross mental laughed. "You fuckin' idiot. If you took the sample from my fuckin' back you'd only need a needle a couple of centimetres long!"

The expression of annoyed embarrassment on the deformed one's face proved that he'd had not thought of that. "Enough banter!" he shouted. "Begin the procedure now!"

The bounty hunter smiled. He loved to cause extreme annoyance in his adversaries. His smile soon disappeared when the giant needle started to descend. "Hey! You forgot the fuckin' anesthetic!"

The contorted dude smiled. "No. I don't think I did!"

Ross Mental watched in horror as the needle touched his body armour just below his ribcage. The needle pushed but didn't penetrate. "Ha harr! You stupid fucker!" the bounty hunter laughed. "You didn't anticipate Amino fuckin' body armour did you? You'll never get through this fucker!"

"You're mistaken." The deformed one said. "The needle is composed of a rare and super-tough alloy." He turned to his monstrous colleague. "Increase pressure to maximum."

The contraption started to hum loudly. The needle pushed with all its might.

Ross Mental took on a pained expression as the pressure increased on his armour plating. He felt himself pressed harder and harder against the bench.

"See!" the bounty hunter said with shaky confidence. "It's holding! You've failed, you fuckin' repulsive fucker!"

Ross Mental's belief in his body armour was admirable but misplaced. It gave way. The bounty hunter yelped like a puppy as the lengthy, centimetre thick needle plunged into his flesh. In less than a second it had passed right through his stomach and crunched through a vertebra. It began sucking spinal fluid. Pain washed up and down Ross Mental's back. He watched as a small tank above the needle filled slowly to its brim. Without warning the needle retracted rapidly,

almost pulling the bounty hunter off the bench. Once again he yelped. Blood pumped out of his wound.

What appeared to be a female approached the bench and produced a small device from her pocket. She stuck it into the hole in the bounty hunter's gut, and then smiled at him. "This will ease the pain and help repair the damage."

Ross mental noticed that she was far less deformed than all the males in the room. In fact, she was not deformed at all, and quite attractive, too.

The deformed one approached and waved her away. She took her position back with her gnarled male associates. "That's my daughter," Injr'd said. "She is very beautiful, and very well toned."

"How could such an ugly fucker like you be the father of someone that attractive?" the bounty hunter said, wincing as pain still bounced around his midsection.

"You obviously have no awareness of our cultural ways."

"I have no fuckin' interest in your cultural ways. Let me go, fucker!"

"I don't think I can. Not yet, anyway."

"You've got your fuckin' sample. Let me go!"

"We need to test the sample first. If it's adequate, then we'll take you out to the wastelands and free you."

Ross mental struggled. His patience had ended. "Let me go you fuckin' disfigured fucker of a fucked-in-the-head fuck off contorted fuck fucker!"

"All in good time."

Injr'd reached under the bench and pulled out a hammer. "In the meantime, get some rest."

The ugly dude swung the hammer high into the air and smashed it hard onto Ross Mental's forehead.

The haze of confusion returned...

3 Large Bone Fragments

Two black machines of menace and mayhem rumbled through the darkness at the bottom of the chasm. The two Renegade Class Assault Cycles, named the *Blenheim Bikes* by their owners, were currently running in stealth mode. The only noise that could be heard was the rumble of their spherical wheels against the ground, and all that could

be seen was the faint green and orange glow from their instruments and display screens. The same glow reflected off their riders' faces.

Panman stared at the infra-red head-up display on his bike's windscreen. It showed the way ahead in a high-resolution wide-screen format. "The chasm seems to be getting wider."

Peter the Ace, riding to his left, agreed. "You're absolutely right."

Panman glanced up. The thin strip of dark sky that could be seen between the sheer rock walls twinkled with dim star light. "It also appears to be getting deeper."

"Right again." Peter the Ace said. "According to my scanners, it's now almost one point three kilometres deep."

"I think maybe we went the wrong way."

Before Peter the Ace could agree with his wise companion once again, a point of light appeared up ahead. The two bounty hunters braked hard and skidded to a halt.

Panman focused his bike's scanners directly ahead. "Interesting," he said, turning to his comrade. "An electric light! I didn't realise any civilised beings dwelt on this inept planet."

"The *Blenheim's* records did indeed claim that it was devoid of all civilisation."

"Maybe the beings that live up ahead have a space-faring vessel?" Panman said with a touch of excitement. "If we announce who we are they're bound to lend it to us without question!"

"That would indeed be the case if they're easygoing pacifists of hope and goodwill. But what if they're unyielding anarchists desperate to separate flesh from bone?"

Panman nodded. "I see what you're getting at. You're proposing that we use caution during our approach and not barge in like super-heroes."

Peter the Ace nodded. "Definitely." He dismounted from his bike. "I suggest that we leave the *Blenheim Bikes* here and walk the rest of the way. We don't want to intimidate anyone."

Panman dismounted. "Cool idea."

The two bounty hunters loaded up with concealed weaponry from their bikes' equipment compartments. Panman attached a packet of banana doughnuts to his utility belt - for emergency use only of course. When they had finished, the two galactic saviours pressed the 'Lock' button on their WMRACSLDs (Wrist Mounted Remote Assault Cycle Secure Locking Devices). Both bikes beeped three times, and then fell completely silent. Their instrumentation panels faded to darkness.

The bounty hunters walked towards the light.

Panman continued to scan ahead, this time using his left index fingernail mounted sensor system. Using his enhanced macro eyesight he read the data on the tiny screen. "I think it's only a street light of some kind."

"Yes," Peter the Ace agreed. "Harmless and seemingly pointlessly placed."

Totally out of the blue, a short dude, pale skinned and grotesque, stepped out in front of them. The bounty hunters stood still.

The little guy spoke. "Who are you, and what brings you to the scientific research community of Impaler?"

Peter the Ace decided not to reveal their true identity. "I am Herbert, and this is my traveling buddy... Gareth. We are here for a... holiday!"

"Yes," Panman said, smiling. "A holiday!"

"And who might you be?" Peter the Ace asked.

"I am Borh'd."

"You should lead a more interesting life then!"

The ugly fellow looked confused. "What?"

"If you're bored you should do something interesting."

"You misunderstand." The little contortionist said with a touch of annoyance. "Borh'd is my name!"

"How nice for you!" Peter the Ace said. "And what happens in this scientific community of yours?"

"We conduct research of great intellectual meaning."

"Really?"

"Yes. We Impalers have a unique mentality for study and experimentation."

Panman was tiring of the conversation. "We've been walking all evening." He lied. "Any chance of visiting your community and relaxing for a few hours?"

Borh'd eyed them for a second, and then smiled. "Of course. Follow me and I'll take you to our leader."

The bounty hunters followed the hideous little man down a thin tunnel cut into the rock face.

"Who is your leader?" Peter the Ace asked.

"He's Tiyr'd." Borh'd answered.

Panman grinned. "He should get more sleep then."

Borh'd turned and stared at the bounty hunter.

"Oh," Panman said with false innocence. "You mean Tiyr'd is his name. We'd love to meet him, wouldn't we um...? Herbert?"

"Indeed we would, Gareth." Peter the Ace replied.

After a few minutes walking Peter the Ace and Panman were lead into a large cavern. The ceiling high above was littered with bright lights, strange vines, and odd looking pieces of equipment. At the centre was a collection of single storey white buildings surrounding an unusually high platform. At the platform's base was a spike about three metres tall.

As they walked, Panman wondered about the platform and the spike. Maybe it was some kind of monument, or something.

Borh'd lead the bounty hunters down to the most ornate building just next to the platform. "This is the office of Tiy'r'd." he said. "Wait here. I will enter and request an audience with him."

"No problem." Peter the Ace said. He looked around. A crowd of white coated ugly beings had gathered nearby and were staring curiously at the two visitors.

Panman whispered to his companion. "They're all repulsive!" he said. "And some of them are deformed beyond belief!"

"It's the way they're born I guess. Maybe some radioactive isotope has altered their genetic structure?"

"I would have said the same, but look at those three over there."

Panman pointed to small group just to the left of the large gathering.

Peter the Ace nodded. "I see what you mean."

"Females!"

"Indeed. And they're attractive, slim, and toned."

"I wonder what happened to all the males?"

"Obviously only the males are born gnarled and unpleasant to the eye."

"Again, I would have said the same." Panman whispered. "But look at those children with the females."

Peter the Ace looked. "Oh yes! Young males. And healthy and normal looking, too!"

Panman smiled. "It's a mystery, is it not?"

"Indeed it is. We'll question the Tiy'r'd dude about it when we meet him."

Borh'd appeared at the doorway to the building. "Tiy'r'd will see you. Please follow me."

The two worshipped heroes followed the distorted guy inside. The interior was simple but plush. A thick white carpet covered the entire hallway that lead to two large white doors. Flanking the doors were two white coated guards each holding large ferocious looking sticks.

Borh'd spoke. "Two visitors to see Tiy'r'd."

The guards bowed and pulled open the doors. Peter the Ace and Panman followed Borh'd into the office. At a large white desk at the centre of the room sat another foul-faced dude in a white coat.

"Hubert and Gareth to see you." Borh'd said. "Apparently they are here on holiday."

"Thank you, Borh'd." Tiyr'd said. "Return to your sentry post."

Borh'd bowed then left the room, closing the doors behind him.

Peter the Ace stepped forwards and extended a hand of friendship. "Nice to see you!"

Tiyr'd looked at him but did not offer his own hand. "This is the first time someone has visited us for a holiday." He said with a slightly suspicious tone to his voice. "What made you choose our community for your vacation?"

Panman's BGI (Bullshit Generation Implant) activated itself. "We heard about your amazing and profound research and decided to come and visit."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. Meeting beings as profound and intellectual as you has always been one of our greatest ambitions. We feel honoured to finally be here."

Tiyr'd seemed to relax a little. "It is true that we are profound and intellectual." he said, smiling. His smile was bizarre, probably due to the fact that half of his lower jaw was missing. "It is strange that you know we exist, though. Apart from our mortal enemies the Slim-Jims, we have never had any contact with other races. There is no way you could know about us, unless you are in league with the Slim-Jims, of course."

Panman's BGI continued to give excellent service. "We've never heard of the Slim-Jims. But your Impaler community is a legend with my people. Most think you're a myth but we thought otherwise, and we were right!"

Tiyr'd stared at Panman. "And who are 'your people'?"

"We are the um... Muscle-Russells!"

"The Muscle-Russells?"

"Yep. We live on the other side of the planet in a water-filled valley. It's a nice place, full of large floating flowers and little furry monkeys."

Tiyr'd was about to speak when a low and rhythmic boom sounded.

"Excuse me" he said. The leader of Impaler got to his feet and stumbled over to the large window at the back of his office.

Panman whispered to Peter the Ace. "We should ask him why all the men are so obscenely hideous."

Peter the Ace agreed. The two bounty hunters walked over to the window.

“Tiyr’d?” Peter the Ace asked. “Why are all the adult males in your marvelous community so ugly and deformed, whilst the females and young males seem so normal and healthy?”

Tiyr’d turned to the bounty hunter. “Your question is well timed. Follow me onto my balcony and it will be answered.”

Tiyr’d pushed open the glass door inset into the window. The rhythmic booming was now very loud. The two bounty hunters followed him onto a large tiled balcony overlooking the centre of the village. A large crowd had gathered outside and was staring up at the tall platform and at the three metre spike at its base. Several young males were climbing up a ladder on the platform’s side.

“What’s happening?” Peter the Ace asked over the noise of the boom.

“It is the Ceremony of Impalation.” Tiyr’d said with reverence. “At the age of thirteen, all males must take part in it.”

One of the males had reached the top of the tall platform. He was now at least fifty metres above the village. To the bounty hunters’ relief the booming stopped. The crowd turned to face the balcony.

Tiyr’d started to make a speech. “My fellow Impalers, once again the hour is upon us - the hour when our adolescent males must take the leap of faith to determine their destiny. Will their future be a noble one of cerebral scientific research, or will they plunge into the scorching trans-dimensional cavity of uninterrupted destitution?”

The crowd bowed their heads and spoke in unison. “*The Almighty Impaler, god of all science, must judge our young males.*”

“Yes.” Tiyr’d said with complete seriousness. “The Almighty Impaler must judge them. And that time of judgment is now.”

The crowd spoke in unison once again. “*The time of judgment is now.*”

Tiyr’d pointed at Peter the Ace and Panman. “For the first time in our history outsiders will witness the Ceremony of Impalation. These two beings have traveled to us from the other side of our world to be with us tonight. Please welcome Herbert and Gareth of the Muscle-Russells.”

The crowd bowed towards the bounty hunters. “*Welcome Herbert and Gareth of the Muscle-Russells.*” they said in sweet harmony.

Peter the Ace and Panman smiled and waved. “Hello!”

Tiyr’d raised his contorted arms as high into the air as he could. “The Almighty Impaler is watching. Let the ceremony commence.”

All of the young males were standing on top of the platform now. There were five of them, and they huddled together like puppies. One of the young males broke away from the group and walked to the edge of the platform. He looked down and spread his arms out wide. "I am Hatr'd, son of Neutr'd, the molecular biologist." he shouted, his voice full of pride. "I submit myself for judgment." Hatr'd swan-dived off the platform and plummeted down. He let out a shrill scream as his body hit the spike. He was skewered upside down from his shoulder right through his left leg and out through the sole of his foot. His thigh bone had been pushed out and hung from his torn leg. Blood pumped freely from his horrific wounds rapidly staining his white coat. After a couple of seconds Hatr'd moaned.

The crowd cheered. "*He lives!*"

The leader of Impaler spoke. "Hatr'd has been judged. He is deserving of a position as a scientist. Take his injured body from the spike and treat his wounds."

Four females approached the impaled male, grabbed him, and then proceeded to tear him off the spike. Hatr'd yelled as his flesh was ripped.

Peter the Ace watched with interest. He whispered to Panman. "I think our question has been answered quite graphically!"

Panman did not disagree.

The four females had now removed young Hatr'd from the spike. He was carried away through the cheering crowd. Several large bone fragments and chunks of bloodied flesh remained stuck to the spike.

A second adolescent male had positioned himself on the edge of the platform. The crowd's gaze returned to the top of the platform. As Hatr'd had done only two minutes earlier, the second male spread his arms and introduced himself. "I am Wizzr'd, son of Pepr'd, the nuclear physicist. I submit myself for judgment."

Wizzr'd swan-dived onto the spike.

There was no scream this time. Just a crunch, splat, tear, squelch, and thud in rapid succession. The spike had entered the young male's body through the top of his skull and had exited through his butt-cheeks. He had been split completely in two. His divided body slipped off the spike and fell to the ground at opposite sides. The muscles in his limbs twitched randomly. His entrails exuded from his belly and slithered into the lake of blood that had formed around his torn physique.

The crowd watched in silence as the twitching and convulsing slowed then stopped. They spoke quietly and in unison. "*He dies.*"

“Wizzr’d has been judged.” Tiyr’d said. “The Almighty Impaler has sent him to the scorching trans-dimensional cavity of uninterrupted destitution. Remove his body and dump it in the dog pit. His physical form must be digested to rid us all of the shame he has brought to our society.”

The four females dragged the two halves of Wizzr’d away.

The ceremony continued and the other three males performed their leap of faith one after the other. Only one of them survived to join Hatr’d as a trainee scientist. The others both joined Wizzr’d in the dog pit.

When the ceremony finished, the crowd dispersed. The disfigured males went back to their research laboratories and the well-toned females went back to their homes to tend to their children. A few stayed to clean up the bloody mess with hoses and brooms.

Tiyr’d, Peter the Ace, and Panman were still standing out on the balcony.

“Interesting ceremony.” Peter the Ace said to Tiyr’d. “Rather unnecessary though, don’t you think?”

The leader of Impaler became defensive. “It is described in detail in the great book of Impaler! The Almighty himself decreed eighty billion years ago that it must be performed three times a week. It is the only sure way of determining which of our young males will develop into magnificent scientists.”

“Wouldn’t a written aptitude test be better?”

“Definitely not!” Tiyr’d said. “It would be much less efficient.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our community cannot afford to have non-scientific males running around making a nuisance of themselves and eating our precious food supplies. The Ceremony of Impalation makes sure that only those with keen scientific minds survive.”

“But how does leaping fifty metres onto a spike ensure that?”

Tiyr’d was growing impatient. “Because, only those with the intelligence to avoid getting their head skewered can handle the demanding research that we undertake!”

“Why?”

“No more questions!” the leader said. “That is the way it always has been, that is the way it is, and that is the way it will always be.”

Peter the Ace shook his head slowly. “For scientists, you’re all very closed-minded and way too religious.”

Tiyr’d ignored Peter the Ace and walked back into his office. The bounty hunters followed.

Panman whispered to Peter the Ace. “These people are mad! We should put them all out of their misery. And we should do it now!”

“I agree that they’re mad.” Peter the Ace said. “But if they spend their lives doing research, their labs may contain equipment and materials that we could use to get the *Blenheim* back to flight status.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Tiyr’d turned and spoke. “You must be weary after your journey here. I will order my female servant Sind’a to prepare guest rooms in my home for you.”

“Thanks, Tiyr’d man.” Peter the Ace said.

“You are welcome to stay for tonight only. Then you must leave. Our research commitments cannot be compromised and your presence here is a distraction to us.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Good. I am about to have my evening meal. Would you care to join me?”

Panman leapt into the air. “Now you’re talking, appalling dude!”

4 Surgically Implanted Artificial Fingers

Tiyr’d, the leader of Impaler, sat down at his desk, spun his chair round, and looked out of his large office window. The view outside was very dark now; the cavern lights had been dimmed to minimum. Sleeping time had arrived and most of the community would now be in their beds. Tiyr’d liked this time. It was the time when he could take care of ‘special’ business - the special and secret business that all leaders must deal with.

With Herbert and Gareth, the two annoying visitors from the Muscle-Russells, safely asleep in their guest rooms, Tiyr’d could get on with some real work. He turned back round to his desk and pressed a switch on his intercom. “Is Injr’d, my senior genetic researcher, out there?” he asked.

One of the guards replied. “*Yes, he is actually.*”

“Send him in.”

“OK.”

The double doors opened and Injr’d walked in briskly. The doors closed behind him. “Here I am, as requested.”

“I need an update on your project.” The leader said. “Time is running short.”

“What do you mean, short? I have two more days to...”

“You have only a few hours.” Tiyr’d interrupted. He leaned forwards onto his desk and locked his surgically implanted artificial fingers together. “My head of intelligence, Splyntr’d, presented me with a disturbing report a couple of hours ago. His report of a Slim-Jim attack in two days was apparently errored.”

“Errored?”

“Yes. Slim-Jims have been sighted approaching our chasm from the south west. They are moving fast and will be upon us by early morning.”

Injr’d was flabbergasted. “The morning?!”

“Your project must be up and running by then. Is that possible?”

The senior genetic researcher looked doubtful. “I’m not sure.”

Tiyr’d stood and raised his voice. “What do you mean? You told me that the extraction was successful!”

“It was.”

“And you told me that accelerated growth to maturity had occurred without problems!”

“It did, but...”

“So what are you not sure about?”

“I would have liked a day or two to condition their minds. They seem very agitated and undisciplined.”

“I thought you had already done some mental conditioning on them?”

Injr’d tried to remain calm. “I have, but that was only to make them hate the Slim-Jims. There is a lot more that I need...”

“So long as they are exceedingly strong and violent that will be sufficient.” the leader of Impaler said, sitting back down.

The senior genetic researcher gave up the argument. “Well, I guess under the circumstances that will have to do.”

“It will. That will be all. Thank you, Injr’d.”

Injr’d spoke again. “Before I go, can I ask a question?”

“Of course.” Tiyr’d answered. “What is it?”

“It concerns those two visitors that we have staying with us.”

“Herbert and Gareth of the Muscle-Russells? What about them?”

“I attended the ceremony tonight and saw them. They look very similar to the bounty hunter I used for my project.”

Tiyr’d’s uneven eyes widened. He had not seen the bounty hunter that Injr’d had captured. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that maybe they are not who they say they are. Maybe they are not from the Muscle-Russells.”

“Are you suggesting they may also be bounty hunters?”

Injr’d nodded. “They could be a rescue party.”

“Interesting hypothesis.” Tiyr’d said. “But unlikely. Our intelligence researchers have been monitoring Palace of Amino transmissions for decades now. What they tell us is that bounty hunters are not known for their subtlety. Whenever they need to rescue one of their own they go in with weapons blazing. If this had been a rescue attempt we would all be smoldering clumps of charred flesh by now.”

Injr’d looked more relaxed. “So you are saying this is just a coincidence?”

“Yes. They are probably not bounty hunters at all. And even if they are, they suspect nothing. They will want to find their missing colleague and set off to look for him in the morning.”

“What if they find his empty ship and come back looking for him here?”

“By then, we will have destroyed all evidence that he was ever here.”

“That should be OK, I suppose.”

“It will be OK. Don’t worry, Injr’d, if they do come back that will be my problem. Your problem is to get your project operational by the morning.”

Injr’d nodded. “Will that be all?”

“Yes.” Tiyr’d said. “Off you go.”

Injr’d turned and walked out of the office. The leader of Impaler reclined back in his chair and spun round to face the window once again. The coming morning would be one of his most challenging times as leader. The Slim-Jims had never attacked in such large numbers before. If Injr’d’s project failed, the scientific research community of Impaler would fall, and that would not do next month’s re-election campaign much good at all!

5 Armour Shielded Auto-Tightening Battle Boots

In almost virtual darkness, Peter the Ace crept out of his guest room and carefully closed the door behind him. Using his nose-mounted night-scope, he slowly stepped across the carpeted hallway to the

room opposite. He knocked gently and whispered. “Yo, Panman? It’s me.”

No mere mortal would ever have heard the knock and whisper, they were way too quiet. Panman, however, had digitally intensified hearing.

The door clicked, then whooshed open. Peter the Ace walked inside. Panman was sitting up in bed stuffing his face with banana doughnuts.

“We only ate two hours ago!” Peter the Ace exclaimed.

“I know,” Panman replied, stuffing two doughnuts into his mouth in one go. “But I always crave food during the twilight hours.”

Peter the Ace went over to the window and peered through a gap in the curtains. It was almost black out in the cavern. The ceiling lights had been dimmed severely. “The entire community appears to be asleep. We should go and have a look around.”

Panman continued chewing. “What for?”

“To find stuff to help us get away from here.”

“Great idea!”

Panman threw the bedclothes to one side, scattering crumbs all over room. He slipped his feet into his armour shielded auto-tightening battle-boots and joined his companion at the window. “See anything interesting?”

“Over there.” Peter the Ace pointed. “The only lights still on are those in that isolated domed building at the far side of the cavern.”

“Something important must be going on there for them to be working this late.”

“My thinking exactly.”

“We should look around that place first.”

“Again, my thinking exactly. Firstly though, we need to get out of here without drawing attention to ourselves.”

Panman smiled. “A small pluton grenade would make a nice man-sized hole to climb out of!”

Peter the Ace frowned at his companion.

“Oh yeah.” Panman said, thinking his plan through a little more. “The noise and the intense light of the blast might wake someone.”

“You could use your elbow-mounted laser to cut around this window.”

Panman nodded eagerly. “Yeah! Cool! I love lasers!”

After booting up the laser’s operating system, Panman set to work. It took less than a minute for the tiny but intense laser to slice through the thin window frame. When the cutting was completed the two bounty hunters pulled the window inside and placed it carefully on the floor. The room stank of vaporised plastic. They climbed out.

“Right,” Peter the Ace said. “Let’s jog in a very stealthy manner.”

The two bounty hunters set their battle-boots to whisper-mode and ran through the village. Silently, they ran passed Tiyr’d’s office balcony and made their way carefully around the spike and platform. Without a sound they circled the dog pit and sprinted between various laboratories and dwellings. After running up a short incline they stopped. They were only ten metres from the mysterious domed building.

Panman activated his left index fingernail mounted sensor system and scanned the building. “There’s plenty of movement inside. They seem very busy.”

Peter the Ace was perplexed. “I wonder what is it that makes them stay up all night working?”

“Illegal wake-up drugs?”

“Possibly, but I suspect the reason is intellectual rather than chemical.”

“Maybe they’re engineering new wake-up drugs and testing them on themselves.” Panman said with sagacious insight. “Maybe they’re using so much of their own drugs to keep themselves awake that they’re actually becoming desensitised to it and therefore have to engineer even more potent drugs. It’s a vicious circle! As the drugs become more and more powerful they become more and more desensitised to them. Eventually they’ll have developed the mightiest wake-up drug in the galaxy! Any normal person taking just one milligram of the stuff would stay awake forever! That would be so utterly cool!”

Peter the Ace stared at Panman. “That’s a very interesting hypothesis, but I would expect it to be the least likely answer.”

Panman nodded. “You’re right; these Impaler people are not that intelligent.”

The two bounty hunters crept forwards towards the main entrance to the domed building.

Panman examined the double doors. “They’re locked electronically.”

“Can you unlock it?” Peter the Ace asked.

“Of course!” Panman answered. “I’m the finest and most distinguished lock-picker in the Palace of Amino!”

“Excellent! Go to it.”

“Unfortunately, it’ll take about twenty minutes.”

“Why?”

“It’s a four level tamper-proof cantilever design with a double linear independent power converter.” Panman answered with perfect articulation.

Peter the Ace thought for a moment. “If you cut the power wouldn’t the bolting mechanism become weakened? Then we could use our brute strength to force the locking joint.”

Panman smiled at his companion’s ignorance. “You’re assuming that this is a standard servo-coupler assemblage, aren’t you!”

“Am I?”

“Yeah! And if it was, your idea would probably work, but it isn’t.”

“So what is it then?”

“This lock is based on a modified tiger-shark configuration. It’ll have at least four redundant power systems. Each power system will take about five minutes to cut, therefore twenty minutes in total.”

“I see...”

Suddenly, the locking mechanism started to buzz and whirr.

“Someone’s coming out!” Panman said excitedly. “This is our chance!”

“Indeed.” Peter the Ace agreed.

The two bounty hunters crouched in the darkness next to the building and waited. After a couple of seconds, the door bleeped. Two large bolts were yanked out of the door frame. The door swung inwards. A grotesque dude in a white coat stumbled out of the building and hopped off towards the village dragging his useless and paralysed left leg behind him. The door began to close.

“We’d better go.” Panman said.

The two bounty hunters crept past the heavy door and into a small lobby. The door clanked shut behind them and locked.

“Cool!” Panman said. “We’re in!”

Peter the Ace looked around. “Let’s find out what they get up to in here.”

He wandered over to an internal window at the back of the lobby and peered through it. It was a view into the dome. Unfortunately most of the lights had been turned off. Peter the Ace activated his nose mounted night vision system then waved to Panman. “Come and look at this.”

Panman joined him and stared into the darkness. “Looks like they’ve shut everything down. They must have finished working.”

“They’ve got a body in there strapped to a bench.”

Panman turned on his night vision system and looked. At the centre of the dome was a bench-like platform. On it, underneath a

white cover, was the shape of a body. “Maybe this is where they try to repair all those idiots who dive onto that spike?” he suggested.

Peter the Ace was not convinced. “Maybe, but I don’t recall seeing their mangled forms carried up here.”

“Well, whatever it is they do here they seem to have stopped now.”

The sound of agitated voices drew Peter the Ace’s attention. He walked over to a door and listened. “There’s some kind of heated debate going on, like an argument.” he said. “I think we should try down here.”

Panman cautioned his colleague. “What if an Impaler scientist dude sees us? We’d have to do a lot of explaining.”

Peter the Ace agreed. “You’re right. We’d better activate our bullshit implants just in case.”

As soon as the word ‘bullshit’ entered the bounty hunters’ thought processes, their BGIs were energised.

Carefully, Peter the Ace operated the door control. It whooshed quietly open revealing a long corridor stretched out before him. The sound of the voices grew louder. “Follow me!” he said.

Panman followed.

Peter the Ace stopped at the last door on the right. “This where it all seems to be happening!” he said, his ear to the door. “I’ll open it. Get your BGI ready.”

The door opened.

Before either of the two bounty hunters could get a look inside, a tall and muscular figure pushed past them. The figure had an impressive and oppressive air about him, and ginger hair too.

Panman could not believe it. “Ross Mental!” he shouted. “Cool or what!”

Ross Mental ignored him and wandered down the corridor. “Fuckin’ Slim-Jims.” he said. “I hate the fuckers!”

Panman watched as the foul-mouthed bounty hunter disappeared into the lobby. “How rude!”

Another figure pushed out of the room. “Slim-Jim fuckers!” it said. “I’m gonna fuck them up bad!”

“Ross?” Panman said, amazed. “How did you get back in there so quick?”

Again, Ross Mental ignored him and wandered off towards the lobby.

Panman turned to Peter the Ace. “What is he talking about?”

“Apparently he hates the Slim-Jims.”

“Who?”

“You remember. They’re the enemy of the Impaler. Tiyr’d thought we were in league with them.”

“Oh yeah.”

A lot of loud-mouthed foul language was still emanating from the room. Peter the Ace turned and finally managed to get a look inside. An expression of surprise filled his face. Panman was curious and had a look for himself. Once again, Ross Mental was in there. But not only one Ross Mental - there were dozens! The identical and profane bounty hunters - there were at least thirty of them - were pacing up and down the room and shouting. “Slim fuckin’ Jim fuckers. Gonna crack those bony fuckers into tiny and fuck off blood-soaked fuckin’ segments!”

After a couple of seconds of amused surprise, Panman’s mood changed. “Shit!” he shouted. He had suddenly realised what was going on. “These Impaler scientist bastards have cloned Ross Mental!”

Panman drew his fusion pistol from its secret thigh-mounted holster and waved it around in the air. “It’s a capital offence to replicate a bounty hunter! The Impaler must perish in agony!”

The enraged bounty hunter let off a shot of lethal energy. A large scorched hole appeared with a flash on the ceiling. Chunks of smouldering debris scattered across the room.

Peter the Ace spoke. “Calm yourself.” he said. “You are right, it is a capital offence. But Ross Mental is a prisoner here somewhere. We must free him first, and then we can devastate this cavern.”

Panman cooled down a little. “True. Let’s find him and free him. Then let’s burn butts!”

They turned round ready to begin their search. Their search ended prematurely.

“Interesting.” Peter the Ace said.

6 Mangled Lower Jaw

The two bounty hunters stared at the group of five contorted Impalers standing before them. Three of them carried long crooked sticks, one of them carried a book of notes, and, most importantly, one of them was the Impaler leader, Tiyr’d.

Panman raised his fusion pistol and pointed it at the face of Tiyr’d. “Explain yourself!” he yelled.

The three Impaler security guards raised their sticks in front of their leader to protect him. The ends of the sticks started to glow red.

“Lower your weapon.” Tiyr’d said with apparent calm.

“Get your men to lower theirs!” Panman said. “Or feel the full wrath of on-the-spot Amino justice!”

“Ah...” the leader said with realisation. “So you’re not from the Muscle-Russells after all?”

“Of course not, you ugly malformation!” Panman said angrily. “We’re top class bounty hunters from the Palace of Amino, and you and your people have committed a capital crime against the bounty hunter organization - a crime that will see you suffer torment beyond imagination!”

Tiyr’d’s disfigured face developed a serious expression. “I will ask my men to lower their sticks if you will put away your gun. We know that we cannot win a fight with you.”

Panman nodded. “Too right you can’t!”

The leader continued. “Once you put away your weapon I will explain why we have done what we have done.”

Panman was about to incinerate everyone’s guts when Peter the Ace intervened. “Agreed.” he said. “On one condition, though.”

“And what would that be?”

“That you take us to the real Ross Mental.”

Tiyr’d looked across to his companion carrying the book. “Is your captive in a suitable condition to be seen?”

“He is still unconscious,” the leader’s companion replied, “but he can be seen.”

Tiyr’d addressed the bounty hunters. “My senior genetic researcher, Injr’d, says that will be fine.”

“It’s OK, Panman,” Peter the Ace said, “lower your pistol.”

Panman reluctantly did as his colleague requested. The Impaler guards lowered their sticks.

“Right,” Peter the Ace said, “take us too our friend.”

The Impaler leader and the genetic researcher lead the way. The two bounty hunters followed. The three guards followed close behind.

Peter the Ace noticed that Panman was not happy with the way things were going. “Don’t worry.” he whispered. “We are in control of the situation. We could take out all of them with our bare hands if necessary. And that would be much more fun, don’t you think?”

Panman thought for a moment, and then smiled. “Yeah, you’re right! That *would* be more fun - and much cooler, too!”

The bounty hunters were lead into the dome, which was now illuminated by bright lights that ringed the underside of the gallery above.

“There is your friend.” Tiyrd said, pointing at the bench at the centre.

Injr’d walked over to the bench and removed the sheet covering the body. It was indeed Ross Mental. He was completely unconscious, and his arms, legs, neck, and waist were tightly strapped to the surface of the bench.

Panman’s trigger finger was becoming itchy. “He’d better be in good health!”

“He is.” Tiyrd said. “The Almighty Impaler does not allow us to permanently harm the innocent.”

Peter the Ace spoke. “A few minutes ago Panman asked you to explain yourself. My colleague, like myself, has limited patience. Perhaps you had better answer his question before he files off your nose.”

The leader of the Impaler began his explanation. “For almost a hundred years,” he said solemnly, “the Impaler have been at war with the Slim-Jims, ever since they first appeared within the realms of our domain. Although lengthy, up until a year ago the war had consisted only of sporadic skirmishes. The Slim-Jims would occasionally attack through the orifices of this cavern, attempting to ruin our research, steal our food supplies, and impregnate our females.

“We were more than a match for them though; our shock-sticks were far superior to their bludgeons and machetes, and our tactical abilities far outweighed their ape-like protruding-forehead-style charge-at-full-speed predictable assault patterns. Our individual strength, even after experiencing the leap of faith ceremony, was greater. The weak and bony nature of the Slim-Jims, and their apparent unwillingness to partake in drug enhanced bodybuilding, ensured that they always remained fragile and easily breakable.”

Panman shouted. “Get to the point!”

Tiyrd got closer to the point. “Their last raid was different. Instead of attacking in small uncoordinated groups, they attacked en mass. There were over a hundred of them. They destroyed half of our labs, kidnapped thirty of our sexiest females, and bred with ten others. Those shamed females will give birth to tiny Slim-Jim-Impaler mutants in less than a month.”

“There is still no point!” Panman yelled.

“Here it is.” The Impaler leader said. “We desperately needed to find a way to repel their next attack otherwise our community would be wiped from existence. Three months ago we embarked

upon our most ambitious research project ever, the aim of which was to capture a strong muscular being, violent and fearless, and make dozens of copies. We would then condition the minds of those copies to hate our enemy.

“Time was getting and short, and up until yesterday we hadn’t found any muscular beings at all. Then we found your friend, Ross Mental. We had monitored the activities of bounty hunters for many years but never expected one to crash a spaceship near to our home. The opportunity was too good to miss. With an army of cloned bounty hunters on our side we couldn’t fail to defeat the Slim Jims.”

Silence reigned for several seconds.

“Interesting.” Peter the Ace commented, finally. “But why didn’t you just call the Palace of Amino for help? I assume you have invented some kind of ultra-space radio receiver. You did say that you monitored our transmissions?”

“We do indeed have a receiver of the type you mention, but we couldn’t for the life of us get it to transmit.”

Panman was looking more relaxed. “If your story is true then I guess your actions could qualify as acts of desperation. What you say could, of course, be a load of bullshit. If that’s the case then you’re all doomed to hard labour in the sewer systems of the Palace of Amino’s under-class accommodation units.”

“I am telling the truth.” Tiyr’d said seriously. “And in less than an hour you will have proof.”

“What do you mean?”

“A Slim-Jim attack force is approaching. Please let me place a Ross Mental clone at each crack and orifice in this cavern. They will mash and splinter the Slim-Jims as they try to enter. That will be your proof.”

Panman turned to Peter the Ace. “Should we let them?”

Peter the Ace thought for a moment. “Yes. We’ve nothing to loose.”

“OK,” Panman said sternly. “But if you trick us or deceive us in any way, instant Amino justice will be distributed generously!”

“That is fair.” the Impaler leader said. “And when proof is seen, will you use your superior might and reasoning abilities to aid us in our fight? Of course, if you have to follow a prime directive that prohibits interference in the affairs of lesser cultures, then you must abide by it.”

“We’re first class bounty hunters of vast wisdom and extraordinary dexterity!” Peter the Ace said sharply. “We are above the law and instinctively ignore all directives all of the time.”

Panman nodded vigorously. “Yeah, we do that!”

“Good.” Tiy’rd said. “We must prepare for the attack.”

“Before you do,” Peter the Ace said, “you must free the real Ross Mental.”

Tiy’rd looked at the unconscious bounty hunter strapped to the bench. “He is dangerous. His rage will destroy us all when he recovers.”

A harsh look of power filled the face of Peter the Ace. “It is a serious offence to detain a bounty hunter. Free him now, or the rest of your mangled lower jaw will be crushed to a pulp.”

Tiy’rd paused for a moment and contemplated that punishment. He turned to Injr’d, his senior genetic researcher. “Free Ross Mental.”

The researcher did as he was told.

Tiy’rd looked at Peter the Ace and Panman. “I have done what you have asked. Will you protect us from his wrath when he awakes?”

“We will try to calm him.” Peter the Ace said. “But we can’t promise anything.”

Tiy’rd did not seem convinced. “OK, I suppose.”

“It’ll have to be.” Panman said.

“Well.” Tiy’rd said. “Time moves on. We must prepare for the attack. The clones must be taken to their positions.”

The bounty hunters and the Impalers left the domed lab.

7 Various Kitchen Utensils

Within an hour, all of the Ross Mental clones - thirty four of them to be exact - had been placed at every possible entry into the Impaler cavern. Most of them had been placed at cave entrances on the upper walls, the entrances where Slim-Jims had previously entered the cavern and leapt down onto unsuspecting females. The others were standing in wait at several ground level entrances.

Peter the Ace stood with the Impaler leader at the centre of the village. “Those are definitely the only entrances to this cavern?” he asked.

“They are.” Tiy’rd confirmed. “We developed just enough clones to cover each and every one.”

“Good thinking.”

Panman approached. “Everything’s set. There’s no way one of those Slim-Jims is going to get in here tonight!”

From all around the cavern, a faint but clear chant could be heard. The Ross Mental clones were ranting in unison. “Slim-Jim fuckers, you’re all fucked!”

Peter the Ace smiled at the deformed leader. “I guess all we can do now is wait.”

“Panman made a suggestion. “We could eat?”

Tiyr’d looked at the bounty hunter. “You are hungry?”

“Always! You got any snacks?”

“There is no time for...”

Peter the Ace interrupted. “If my astounding colleague requires nourishment then his desire must be fulfilled.”

Tiyr’d stared at the two bounty hunters for a second, and then turned. “Sind’a?” he called.

The leader’s female servant appeared on his office balcony above. Her well-toned thighs were clearly visible below her white mini-skirt. “Yes, leader?”

“One of our guests requires snacks. Prepare a selection and bring them out here immediately.”

Sind’a bowed graciously. “Anything you wish will be done, leader.”

Sind’a wandered away.

Peter the Ace smiled. “Your servant is very obedient, and also delightfully toned.”

Tiyr’d nodded. “All of our females must workout daily to maintain their physiques. We will not tolerate weak sagging muscles, overhanging guts, and unsightly mounds of blubber.”

“Quite right.” Peter the Ace said. “We bounty hunters demand that level of toned perfection, too.”

Panman interjected a few words. “Not in the palace’s under-class areas, though.”

“Ah, yes.” Peter the Ace said. “The females in those areas only serve menial workers such as cesspool scrubbers and restroom polishers. They are often tremendously fleshy and caked in months of dried sweat.”

The Impaler leader appeared to be sickened at that thought. “How do you cope with the stench and their offensive appearance?”

“We never encounter them. As I said, they only serve menial workers, and they live hundreds of levels below the surface of the palace. They have their own sub-standard communities down there, mainly brothels, casinos, and thunder-domes. The air-locks between them and the surface keep the smell away, and the heavy security and powerful laser cannons at each exit prevent them from wandering around the luxury avenues of the palace’s central districts.”

Tiyr'd nodded in approval. "That kind of control over your under-class is admirable."

"And necessary." Panman said. "Bounty hunters must not be distracted from their work and relaxation by severe body odour and ugliness."

Sind'a approached and handed Panman a large tray of assorted pastries, buns, and pancakes. She bowed with sincere respect for her betters then walked away. Panman began to eat like a horse.

A bleeper sounded. Tiyr'd pulled a small device from his belt and looked at it. "It is a message from my scouts on the surface. The Slim-Jims are here. It begins!"

"Cool!" Panman shouted. Pancake fragments flew everywhere. He looked around for the first attack.

It happened only a few seconds later - and directly above. High up on the cavern's ceiling a struggle was occurring. The Ross Mental clone hanging next to the highest orifice was punching and kicking and stabbing wildly at something concealed in the darkness next to him. "Here's pain, Jim fucker!" he shouted. There was a high pitched screech, and then something began to fall.

Four seconds later, that 'something' landed with a muffled crunch only a few metres in front of Peter the Ace and Panman. The two bounty hunters walked over to the crumpled form. It was a strange sight. The Slim-Jim's long and extremely emaciated limbs had snapped like twigs on impact. Bone and tendons protruded out of deep tears in the creature's limited flesh and tar-like blood oozed from ruptured arteries. The slim-Jim's head had been squashed and its large eyeballs had been squeezed out of their sockets. Its pink shorts and yellow shirt were stained beyond recovery.

"What a feeble looking thing!" Panman said as he stared into one of the eyeballs.

There was another screech. A second Slim-Jim landed almost on top of the first. It was still alive. With an agonising groan, it tried to pull its broken body across the ground.

Panman pulled out one of his concealed fusion pistols, aimed, then fired. The Slim-Jim shrieked in torment as its face melted away to the bone and the wispy black hair on its scalp burst into flame. The creature's exposed skull slumped forwards and disconnected from its neck. The skull cracked open as it hit the stony surface.

"Nice work!" Peter the Ace said.

All around now, Slim-Jims were dropping like flies onto the cavern's floor. The females of the community had been waiting for them, and as soon as a Slim-Jim landed they proceeded to hack away

at it with various kitchen utensils. Bone and flesh scattered into the air.

The Impaler leader watched with obvious delight. “The cloning experiment is successful.” he said proudly. “Our mortal enemies are being slaughtered like hogs!” He turned to the two bounty hunters. “The Almighty Impaler has blessed us with your timely arrival. I must thank him.” The Impaler leader dropped to his knees and faced the platform and spike at the centre of the cavern.

Peter the Ace stared down him. “It has nothing to do with any god. It was your scientists and bounty hunters who made this possible.”

Tiyr’d looked up. “That is true, but without the Almighty Impaler’s guidance and encouragement you would not have arrived and my scientists would not have been motivated to work so quickly.”

“You are very confused and blinded by religion.” Peter the Ace said. “Ross Mental, Panman and I are here by sheer fluke only. And your scientists were motivated by the fact that if they didn’t finish their work quickly they would die.”

The Impaler leader looked up at the impressive bounty hunter. “What you say is blasphemous!”

“I am a first class bounty hunter.” Peter the Ace said, stating the obvious. “I am above religion and the law and can say what I want. And what I say is true.”

Tiyr’d frowned at him for a moment, and then continued to pray.

The noise of carnage around the cavern was dying down now; the Slim-Jim attack seemed to be almost over. A few skirmishes around the edge of the cavern were the only signs of conflict. Even the loud cursing and swearing by the Ross Mental clones had ceased.

Panman spoke. “Well, that was easy.”

“Indeed.” Peter the Ace said. “These Slim-Jims are the most pathetic creatures I’ve ever encountered.”

The Impaler leader struggled to his feet. “I have thanked the Almighty Impaler.”

“Congratulations.” Peter the Ace said.

Tiyr’d looked around with pride. “We have taught the Slim-Jims a powerful lesson tonight.” he said. “They will not trouble us again.”

The Impaler leader wandered down to the stream that trickled out from a small cave directly under his office balcony. He scooped up some water and drank it. “Come.” he said to the bounty hunters. “Drink with me from the stream of success. It will bring you luck and good health for your next battle.”

Panman whispered to Peter the Ace. “He’s crazy with superstition!”

Peter the Ace agreed. “He is indeed, but let’s humour him anyway.”

The two bounty hunters joined Tiyr’d and tasted the water.

“Needs some flavouring.” Panman said.

Many of the females joined them and also began to drink. The males of the village and the clones kept their vigil at the entrances to the cavern just in case a further attack occurred.

There was not a milliseconds warning of what happened next. A Slim-Jim, rampant with rage, leapt out of the stream’s cave and whacked the Impaler leader hard in the shoulder with a heavy wooden club. Tiyr’d groaned and fell to the floor. The female Impalers screamed in terror at the sudden appearance of the Slim-Jim. Panman drew his fusion pistol and aimed at the intruder. Five more leapt out of the cave. Panman fired. He hit one of the Slim-Jims squarely in the chest, splitting its ribcage and cooking its internal organs. It collapsed into the water. Several more Slim-Jims appeared. Within seconds, there were more than thirty of them, each brandishing a club. Some of the clubs had nails hammered into them for extra effect.

“This is unforeseen.” Peter the Ace said. He drew his pistol and began firing.

“Yeah.” Panman said. “That idiot, Tiyr’d, said he’d covered all entrances!”

“Obviously not.”

More and more Slim-Jims were piling out of the small cave. The first group of scrawny attackers leapt at the crowd of females. They grabbed some of them and pulled them screaming into the water. The females yelled and struggled in the grip of the lanky Slim-Jims.

“Breeding stock!” one of the Slim-Jims shouted. He laughed.

The two bounty hunters continued massacring the Slim-Jims.

“We must not let them take any females.” Peter the Ace said.

Panman agreed and intensified his firing. It was difficult though, as many of the females were now in the line of fire.

A couple of Ross Mental clones had reached the scene. They proceeded to tear the limbs off several Slim-Jims. “Gaunt fuckers!”

Peter the Ace noticed Sind’a, Tiyr’d’s servant, up on the balcony. Three Slim-Jims were up there with her. She yelped as one of them grabbed her, tearing off most of her clothing. The bounty hunter fired. The head of the Slim-Jim that was attacking her vaporised. Its decapitated body dropped to the floor. Sind’a screamed at the sight, and then fainted. The other two Slim-Jims’ saw their chance and before Peter the Ace could main them severely, they

grabbed her. Within seconds, they had dragged her off the balcony and into the water. The bounty hunter fired, burning off one of the Slim-Jim's legs. It moaned, then fell, letting go of Sind'a. The other Slim-Jim still had hold of her. He pulled her into the mouth of the cave, dragging her into the darkness.

"I'm going after Sind'a." Peter the Ace said.

Panman laughed as he detonated a couple of Slim-Jims with his waist-mounted mini-grenade launcher. "Good idea. She deserves saving, her snacks are awesome!"

"Try and prevent any more females from being captured."

"Not a problem."

Peter the Ace headed for the cave. He broke a few scrawny necks on the way.

The battle around the stream had intensified. All of the community's males had arrived, and all of the clones too. It was a scene of total carnage. The Slim-Jims - more than fifty of them now - continued to try and kidnap as many females as they could. Contorted and disemboweled bodies lay everywhere. Many Impaler males, too deformed to fight well, were being clubbed to death by the vicious attacks of the skinny intruders. Only the presence of Panman and the Ross Mental clones was managing to keep the attackers at bay.

Panman continued firing as he surveyed the battle scene. It was a marvelous, if gruesome sight. He hadn't seen so much blood and guts for weeks!

8 Huge Servo Locking Mechanisms

Ross Mental opened his eyes. A searing pain stabbed through his brain and across his forehead. He closed his eyes again and the pain eased slightly. Memories of what had happened - the ugly dudes in white coats and the giant needle plunging into his guts - returned rapidly.

"Fuckers!" he shouted, opening his eyes again.

He tried to sit up and to his amazement, he could. The straps that had been holding him to the bench had been left undone. He looked around. The domed room that he was in was dark and deserted. Ross Mental took a few seconds to compose himself, and then got to his feet. The smooth floor was icy cold to the touch. Fuckin' odd? He thought. He looked down and noticed that his boots had been removed. "The little repulsive fuckers' took my fuckin' boots!" he exclaimed.

“Those boots are fuckin’ T-Uff-As-A-Rhino Quality Brand Back-Breakers, the toughest fuckin’ boots in the fuckin’ galaxy! The most fuckin’ expensive, too!” The bounty hunter punched the air with both fists. “The fuckers’ll pay for this!”

Ross Mental made his way over to a door at the side of the dome. It was locked. In a fit of raving madness the bounty hunter leapt into the air, somersaulted, and then kicked out hard. The soles of his feet connected with the door at immense speed, sending it crashing to the floor. A huge chunk of the wall was ripped out along with the hinges. The furious bounty hunter stomped down a long corridor shouting at the top of his voice. “Where are my fuckin’ boots!”

At the end of the corridor another door presented itself. Luckily for the door, it slid quietly open before the bounty hunter had a chance to beat it senseless. Ross Mental stepped into what appeared to be a lobby and walked over to the main entrance. The main door did not open automatically, and it was much too heavy for even Ross Mental to break through.

“Fuck!”

The bounty hunter looked around for the door’s control system. It was then that Ross Mental noticed the noise from outside. Although faint, he could definitely hear screams, profanity, and the crack of breaking bone. Something important was definitely happening out there, and with no windows to see what it was, Ross Mental rapidly became wild with impatience. Someone out there had his boots and he wanted them back. He frantically searched his utility belt for his trusty six-shooter. It wasn’t there. Neither were his two fusion pistols or his sonix-grenades.

“Fuck!”

Ross Mental was about to slam his head through a wall in frustration when he remembered something. The micro-grenades! He always kept a few in his collar for emergency use. He’d never used them before. He felt around his collar and to his pleasant surprise they were still there, over-looked by the ugly dudes when they stripped him of his weapons. “stupid careless fuckers!” he said, laughing demonically. He placed two of the grenades on the floor next to the door, primed them, and then ran into the corridor at the back of the lobby.

A double flash of brightest blue was followed instantly by a thunderous crack of sound. Tonnes of debris scattered violently around the lobby.

Ross Mental let things settle for a few seconds then took a peek at the damage. Very impressive for such small devices! The thick metal door had been torn completely apart by the blast; its complex

internal workings were now clearly visible. Its huge servo locking mechanisms had been either melted or buckled and were currently embedded in the lobby walls.

The bounty hunter smiled wryly then walked through the debris and out through the hole at the centre of the door. He was too enraged to worry about the jagged metal fragments that cut into his bare feet.

Ross Mental stood just outside the domed building and looked around the cavern. At the cavern's centre, less than a hundred metres away, was a collection of small buildings surrounding a tall platform. And in amongst the buildings was a crowd of beings. They were shouting and screaming, and beating the shit out of each other with clubs and sticks. There also seemed to be an energy weapon of some sort going off in there as well. Body parts were freely flying through the air.

With a strong sense of determination, Ross Mental stomped down the hill towards the affray. As he approached the two sides of the battle became more distinct. One side seemed to consist of the grotesque white-coated beings that he had seen earlier, and the other consisted of tall and exceptionally thin creatures in brightly coloured clothing. The bounty hunter's DBA (Digital Battle Analysis) brain implant assessed the situation. A stalemate situation seemed to have been reached. If this continued both sides would almost certainly wipe each other out.

Ross Mental stopped ten metres away from the edge of the fighting and wondered for a moment. Maybe he should let them fight it out and find out who took his boots later, after all, he could not help because he did not even know who the good guys were. He felt intensely indecisive.

Fortunately - or indeed unfortunately - the decision was made for him a second later. One of the tall beings had spotted Ross Mental and ran towards him brandishing a wooden club. Its large eyes were filled with evil intent. The being yelled a war cry, swung the club high above its head, and then brought it down hard towards Ross Mental's head. The bounty hunter reacted instantly and launched himself into the air, swerving expertly past the swinging club.

"Slender fucker!" Ross Mental shouted as he flew over the lanky being's head. He landed heavily then, in a split second, spun round and performed a stunningly accurate forward snap kick and punch combination into the thin one's back. It groaned then collapsed, coughing blood. Turning its head, it glared at the bounty hunter. Ross Mental smiled, and then leapt into the air once again. He landed a second later right on the gaunt creature's face; his bare heels

connecting with its cheek bones and crushing its skull. Blood soaked brain matter was ejected sideways - just like a stomped melon.

“In your face you fuckin’ scrawny bony girl armed fucker!”

The bounty hunter admired his handy work. A sharp pain on his shoulder re-focused his mind. He turned to see a club stuck to his left side. That second, the club was yanked away, pulling out a long rusty nail from deep within his well-developed lateral deltoid. Ross Mental twisted round and saw another of the lanky dudes. It laughed manically. The bounty hunter was pissed, really pissed now! A lightning punch caught the skinny creature squarely in the forehead. It stumbled back a few steps, a dazed look spread across its face. Ross Mental ran over to it, grabbed it from behind, and held it in an unbreakable arm lock around its neck.

“You’re too thin, fucker.” The bounty hunter said through clenched teeth. He took a micro-grenade from his collar. “Eat this!” The bounty hunter stuffed the grenade into the scrawny being’s mouth and forced it down its throat. By reflex, the creature swallowed. Letting go of the lean being, Ross Mental pushed it hard and watched it stumble across the rocky surface. The bounty hunter’s action-hero-style dry cool wit was better than ever. “Time to fuckin’ explode, you fucker!”

Still with a look of confusion on its face, the skinny creature detonated. A blinding blue flash scattered scorched chunks of cooked flesh and bone right across the cavern.

Ross Mental laughed, and then turned and looked back at the main battle. The carnage was still in full swing. Now that he knew who the bad guys were, there was no reason not to join in. He stepped into the brawl.

After quickly and effortlessly tearing out the throats of two skinny creatures he encountered one of the white-coated deformed dudes. He grabbed him and held him up in the air. “Where are my fuckin’ boots?”

The white-coated dude stared at him. “I... I don’t know!”

Ross Mental dropped him and moved on to the next one. “Tell me fucker, where are my fuckin’ boots?”

The second white-coated dude was about to speak when a large club wiped away his face. The deformed dude shuddered and fell to the floor, his frontal lobes exposed for all to see.

Ross Mental turned and grabbed the creature that had clubbed the ugly dude. He snapped its neck, tore off its head, and then drop-kicked the head away over some of the buildings. “That’ll teach you to interrupt one of my fuckin’ conversations!”

The bounty hunter looked around for someone else to talk to. A few metres ahead he could see the back of a tall and strong looking man. He walked towards him. The man seemed to be someone more on his own level - someone who might be more helpful. Then he noticed the man's boots - they were identical to his own! "That fucker's wearing my fuckin' boots!" The bounty hunter walked up to the man and punched him hard in the back. "Give me back my boots, fucker!"

The man turned and stared straight at the bounty hunter. Ross Mental stared back. For the first time in his life he was speechless.

9 Paisley Night Dress

Peter the Ace ran through the depths of the dank cave, his standard bounty hunter issue hip-mounted flood light lighting the way ahead. The stream trickled noisily over his boots. He'd been stomping through the damp cave for almost ten minutes now. He'd climbed waterfalls and crawled through submerged tunnels with ease. Sind'a must be rescued before the Slim-Jim that had kidnapped her reached the cave's exit.

Up ahead he could hear frantic splashing and screaming. Sind'a must have regained consciousness. Peter the Ace drew his Assassinator Class One Super-Heated Carnage Blade from its lower leg-mounted sheath and energised it. It glimmered white hot. "Time to cauterise some flesh and bone."

The bounty hunter walked round a corner and stopped. A few metres in front of him stood the Slim-Jim. He was holding the almost naked Sind'a by the waist and was trying to push her up onto a ledge. She was struggling wildly. The Slim-Jim ripped off what remained of her clothing, raised his hand, and prepared to strike her.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Peter the Ace said. "Striking a well-toned girl across the face is a capital offence."

The Slim-Jim looked at the bounty hunter. "Not on my world." it said in a grating tone of voice.

"You must respect her beauty and sexiness and not damage her good looks."

The Slim-Jim laughed. "She is only good for breeding stock, and nothing more. The health of her face is unimportant."

Peter the Ace disagreed. "On the contrary, it is very important. If her face is disfigured she will suffer intense stress, anxiety, and

depression about the loss of her attractiveness. The negative chemicals that her body will then produce will deform any children that she bears, and lower their intelligence, too.”

“Nonsense! We beat all our females until the flesh on their faces is bruised and scabby. Our children are born quite normal. My own mother’s head was beaten into an unrecognisable lump and I still developed fine.”

“No you didn’t!” Peter the Ace said, laughing. “Look at you! You’re gaunt, unfit, have no fashion sense, have minimal intelligence, and you’re ugly. You’re a complete disaster!”

“I am not!”

“Yes you are. And you’re unquestionable proof that what I say is true.”

The Slim-Jim grabbed Sind’a by the neck. She coughed and gasped for air. “I’ll give her the beating of her life!” the Slim-Jim said. It raised its free hand and prepared to deliver its first crushing blow. Rapidly, the Slim-Jim’s fist began to descend towards Sind’a’s face. It almost made it, but not quite. A flash of light and heat passed neatly and accurately through the slender creature’s wrist, cutting its clenched fist clean away. The Slim-Jim’s cauterised stump missed Sind’a’s face and passed harmlessly by. The severed fist splashed into the stream.

The Slim-Jim howled then started to leap around insanely. “You die now!”

“I think not.” Peter the Ace said.

The Slim-Jim charged at the bounty hunter, the fury of a thousand feral invaders seeping from its eyes. It leapt into the air and brought its remaining fist slamming down onto Peter the Ace. The bounty hunter moved his head to one side, allowing the fist to hit the thick armour of his shoulder padding. The Slim-Jim landed in front of him. Grabbing the creature’s neck, Peter the Ace began to squeeze. The Slim-Jim gasped then made another futile attempt to kill the bounty hunter.

Peter the Ace made a cool statement. “Licence to live revoked.”

Three bright yellow flashes illuminated the cave. An ear-splitting fizzle echoed all around. The Slim-Jim’s expression changed to disbelief, then a moment later, went blank. Peter the Ace let go of the Slim-Jim’s neck and the lifeless creature crumpled into the stream. There was hiss as the water rapidly cooled the smoldering Slim-Jim.

The bounty hunter laughed and re-holstered his fusion pistol. There was very little in the universe that was as satisfying as burning a hole through a devious wrong-doer at point blank range. Peter the Ace walked over to Sind’a. She was leaning against a rock face and was visibly shaken by the whole experience. “Come my dear, you are cold, naked, and frightened. I’ll take you home.”

Sind'a forced a smile and took the bounty hunter's hand. Peter the Ace grabbed his Assassinator Class One Super-Heated Carnage Blade and placed it back in its sheath. Sind'a and the bounty hunter headed back to the Impaler community.

After eleven minutes and three seconds of walking and crawling and climbing, Peter the Ace stepped out of the cave and into the Impaler cavern. He helped Sind'a down and then looked around. The fighting had ceased. Bones, muscles, kidneys, livers, stomachs, entrails, tendons, brains and cartilage littered the area surrounding the platform at the centre of the village. A few Impaler males wandered around. Some of the females had already started to brush away the mess. At the far side of the centre square the Ross Mental clones seemed to be arguing about something.

Peter the Ace turned to Sind'a. "There are no Slim-Jims left alive. It seems that your people won!" he said happily.

Sind'a smiled nervously, trying to cover up her breasts and nether regions with her hands.

"Oh, I'm sorry." the bounty hunter said. "You are shy about being naked." Peter the Ace opened a small compartment on his utility belt and pulled out a purple and blue paisley night dress. "I always carry one of these; you never know when one might come in handy. Try it on."

Sind'a pulled it over her head and let it fall down over her body. She caressed it and smiled, appearing to like the smoothness of the material against her skin. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. Now let's go and find out what's happening."

Peter the Ace walked over to the group of Ross Mental clones. Sind'a followed a few metres behind.

"We fucked the Slim fuckers!" one of the clones shouted.

"You did indeed." Peter the Ace said, humouring him.

The other clones repeated that phrase. All except one. That clone was pushing the others around and asking questions - an unusual thing for a near brainless replicant to do. Peter the Ace approached him.

"Take those fuckin' boots off now!" the clone said to another clone.

"The Slim-Jim fuckers are fucked." the other clone replied ineptly.

The first clone glanced at Peter the Ace. His eyes widened. "Fuck! Ace! Am I fuckin' glad to see you!"

Peter the Ace smiled. "You finally came round, I see!"

“Too right! What the fuck is going on here? Are these fuckers taking the piss, or what?!”

“They’re not taking the piss. They’re...”

“These motherfuckers have made themselves up to look like me and are wandering about acting like fuckin’ inane fuckers! If that’s not taking the fuckin’ piss I don’t know what is?”

“If you calm down I’ll explain what...”

“And what’s more they seem fuckin’ indestructible! Every time I try to tear their fuckin’ faces off they stop me. They’re almost like bounty fuckers!”

“They *are* like bounty fuckers - I mean hunters. They’re clones of you developed by...”

“And what’s more someone has stolen my fuckin’ boots!” Ross Mental paused for a second. “What did you fuckin’ say?”

“They’re clones of you. These people made copies of you to help defend their cavern from the Slim-Jims.”

Ross Mental punched the air. “A capital fuckin’ crime!” He yelled, his face screwed with fury.

“Calm yourself.” Peter the Ace said. “You’re right, it is a capital crime, but after realising the desperate nature of their situation, I absolved them.”

“What the fuck for?”

“Because my superior intellect told me that that is what I should do.”

Ross Mental knew how superior Peter the Ace’s intellect was and couldn’t argue any further. He held up one of his bare feet. “What about my fuckin’ boots, though?”

Peter the Ace looked around at the clones. “The boots the clones are wearing are probably clones to. Yours are probably still in the lab somewhere. We’ll find them soon.”

Ross Mental looked back towards the building that he’d blasted out of only fifteen minutes before. “I can’t fuckin’ wait. I’ll get the fuckers now!” The foul-mouthed bounty hunter stomped off up the hill back to the domed laboratory.

Peter the Ace admired his fellow bounty hunter’s resolve and determination. He turned and noticed that Sind’a was looking very agitated. “What’s wrong?”

“I cannot see our leader, Tiyr’d. I am concerned about him.”

“I understand.” the bounty hunter said sympathetically. “Let’s find him.”

A distant shout was heard. “Ace?”

Peter the Ace looked towards the source of the sound. Panman was standing on the Impaler leader's balcony and waving. Peter the Ace waved back. "Panman! What's up?"

"Come into Tiyr'd's office quickly! It's urgent!"

Sind'a cried. "Something's happened to my master!" She started sobbing.

Peter the Ace put one of his densely muscular arms around her. "Be strong," he said. "Let's go and find out, shall we?"

Peter the Ace and Sind'a walked towards the Impaler leader's office.

10 Doughnut Machine

Panman met Peter the Ace and Sind'a at the front door. "Come on, hurry!"

Sind'a rushed ahead. Peter the Ace stopped her. "You'd better stay behind me. You may see something you don't want to see."

Sind'a agreed and stepped back.

Panman had already gone back into the office. Peter the Ace entered with Sind'a cowering behind him. He was perplexed. The Impaler leader's office was full of the Impaler community's most important males, and they were drinking, laughing, burping, eating and joking.

Panman waved from the far corner. "Ace, over here!"

Peter the Ace joined his companion. "Why did you call me here so urgently? I assumed that the Impaler leader had been brutally disfigured somehow."

Panman frowned. "He *is* brutally disfigured. Look at his ridiculous jaw-line for a start!"

"No. I mean life-threateningly disfigured."

"Oh, you mean in the battle?"

"Yes."

"As far as I know he got a bruise on his shoulder, nothing more."

Peter the Ace was still perplexed. "So why the urgency?"

Panman pointed to a gurgling device next to him. "This is why!"

"What is it?"

"It's a doughnut machine! And it's making the best doughnuts I've ever tasted!"

In timely fashion, two doughnuts appeared from the machine and landed in a tray on its front. Panman stuffed one in his mouth and handed the other one to Peter the Ace.

Peter the Ace placed the doughnut in his mouth. “Ah, yes! Tasty!” he said as he happily munched away. “I still don’t understand the urgency, though?”

“Two reasons.” Panman said, swallowing hard. “One; doughnuts taste the best when they’re fresh out of a machine. And two; the doughnut mix has almost run out and I wanted you to try one before these contorted dudes ate them all.”

“You mean before *you* ate them all?”

“Um... yeah, OK. Before I ate them all.”

Peter the Ace chuckled. “That was very considerate of you, Panman!”

“No problem.”

Sind’a spoke. “Where is my master?”

Panman was busy trying to coax more doughnuts out of the machine. He pointed without looking up. “In that restroom, I think. He downed a bottle of strong ale in celebration of the victory and he needed to vomit.”

“Thank you.” she said. “Excuse me; I must tend to his needs.”

Peter the Ace watched her leave the room. “Sind’a is a finely developed girl.”

Panman looked up. He looked disappointed - the machine was empty. “She is perfectly formed.” he agreed, punching the doughnut device. “Why do you say that?”

“I’m going to offer her a job.”

“Doing what?”

“Tending to our needs on the *Blenheim*.”

“Another assistant?”

“Indeed.”

Panman smiled. The snacks Sind’a had made him earlier had been some of the most delicious he had ever tasted. It would be nice to have her on board. He was unsure, though. “Didn’t the Superior Beings only grant permission for each ship to have only one assistant and no more? Even we cannot break the regulations set by them.”

“Very true,” Peter the Ace said. “But those regulations were set in place three hundred years ago when all bounty hunters had a ship of their own. Although we’ve always worked as a team, we used to have individual ships and assistants until thirty years ago. As we share a ship, I feel we should be allowed to have an assistant each on board.”

Panman nodded. “With such impeccable logic, and also your status, the Superior Beings cannot refuse your request. You should speak to them as soon as you get back.”

“I will indeed!”

Tiyr’d, the Impaler leader, entered the room with Sind’a by his side. “Peter the Ace!” He said, his speech slurred. “You’re back!”

“Well spotted.”

Tiyr’d shook the bounty hunter’s hand. “Thank you for rescuing my servant.”

“No problem. Any well-toned female is worth saving.”

The Impaler leader nodded and turned to the small crowd that had gathered in his office. “My fellow Impalers. With the help of the bounty hunters and the divine guidance of the Almighty Impaler, we have defeated the Slim-Jims!”

The crowd cheered.

Tiyr’d held up his glass in the direction of Peter the Ace and Panman. “We salute you, bounty hunters!”

The crowd repeated the words. “We salute you, bounty hunters!”

Peter the Ace and Panman nodded out of politeness only. It was common for them to receive praise from lesser life forms.

Tiyr’d spoke once more. “We are in your debt. If there is any way we can repay you, please let us know.”

Peter the Ace grinned. “There is one way.”

“Name it.” The leader said, dribbling ale onto his white coat.

“With her shapely and toned physique, her culinary abilities, and her desire to serve, Sind’a would make a fantastic assistant for Panman and me. I ask that she join us on our ship. If she wishes to, that is.”

Tiyr’d looked unsure. “She is my personal servant. I need her here.”

“You did say anything.”

Reluctantly Tiyr’d nodded. He turned to Sind’a. “Would you like to go with the bounty hunters?”

“Only if you will be OK without me?”

Tiyr’d smiled. “I could get another servant, although not as devoted as you.”

Sind’a turned to Peter the Ace. “I have heard stories about your home. Is the Palace of Amino a wondrous place of opulence and fulfillment just as legends say it is?”

“It is indeed.”

“And are the restaurants and casinos the most scintillating in the galaxy?”

“They are.”

“And are all the bounty hunters as strong, intelligent, and as powerful as everyone says they are?”

“Of course! Even more so, in fact.”

“And do all ships in your fleet have holo-game systems fitted as standard?”

“Absolutely. And our ship has the most advanced system of them all.”

Sind’a smiled broadly, tears wandered down her face. She dropped to her knees. “Then I will come with you. It will be an honour for me to serve the greatest beings ever to exist!”

“Excellent!”

The crowd cheered.

The Impaler leader swigged another glass of ale and burped loudly. “Although I am sad to have Sind’a leave me,” he said unsteadily, “I am also proud. Proud that, for the first time in history, an Impaler citizen will leave our community and our planet and head for the stars.”

The crowd cheered again.

There was a crash and a thud. The crowd fell silent. Ross Mental stormed into the room.

Peter the Ace walked over to him. “Did you find your boots?”

“I fuckin’ did!” he replied. “The fuckers were locked in a fuckin’ cabinet!”

The foul-mouthed bounty hunter grabbed the nearest alcoholic beverage, opened his throat, and then poured the drink down. He swallowed hard. “Fuck! I needed that!”

Tiyr’d staggered over to Ross Mental. “I must apologise for kidnapping you and abusing your body in the way that we did. We were desperate. I hope you can forgive us.”

Ross Mental glared at the Impaler leader. “No fuckin’ way, you fucked up repulsive fucker! If Peter the Ace hadn’t absolved you I’d have wiped your fuckin’ face across this entire fuckin’ planet!”

Tiyr’d took a step back.

Panman butted in to the conversation. “What are we going to do about the clones?”

“Fuck! Yes!” Ross Mental said. “We can’t fuckin’ leave them here!”

“I was hoping that we could keep them for defence purposes.” Tiyr’d said.

“No way, fucker!”

“We’ll have to take them away.” Panman said.

Ross Mental shook his head. “I don’t want those fuckers back at the palace. They’ll wander around and destroy my fuckin’ reputation.”

Panman wondered exactly how Ross Mental thought that his reputation could be destroyed. He ignored that thought and looked at Peter the Ace. “What do you reckon?”

“Well, the only other option would have been to destroy them, but they’re not ordinary clones; they’re bounty hunter clones, and they’ll therefore be able to defend themselves phenomenally well.”

Ross Mental nodded vigorously. “Good fuckin’ point, Ace!”

Peter the Ace thought for a moment, and then spoke with the wisdom of three secret monks. “There is only one solution. They must remain here after all.”

“What?” Ross Mental said in disbelief.

“Let me finish.” Peter the Ace said. “They will not stay with the Impaler community, though. A new place for them to live must be found - a place well away from prying eyes. They must be given suitable housing and the ability to cultivate their own food. They must be conditioned to believe that they are a unique race of people with the ability to look after themselves. Then they must be left alone to live out their nine hundred year life-spans in peace. They must never know that they are clones. And they must never know of their bounty hunter heritage.”

Ross Mental bowed his head in appreciation of his superior’s insight. “That’s fuckin’ great, Ace! I can live with that.”

Peter the Ace looked at the Impaler leader. “Will that be OK with you?”

Tiyr’d shook his head. “Not really.”

“It will have to be. Ross Mental will stay here to supervise the clones’ relocation and re-conditioning.”

Ross Mental smiled at the Impaler leader. “I’ll be with you for fuckin’ weeks, how does that feel?”

Tiyr’d shuddered.

Panman laughed. “Cool! That’s that sorted out. There’s one more thing, though.”

Peter the Ace looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“The *Blenheim*. It’s broken, remember?”

“Oh yes.”

“What the fuck is wrong with it?” Ross Mental asked.

“The Inanuim fuel injector snapped. The sub-space engines won’t work until we replace it.”

“Isn’t the Inanuim fuel injector just an immensely strong fuckin’ tube?”

“Indeed it is.”

“And isn’t it about half a fuckin’ metre in length?”

“Again, yes it is.”

Ross Mental smiled. “I know of something that fits that fuckin’ description perfectly!”

“Really?”

“Fuck yes! It can even penetrate Amino fuckin’ body armour!”

Peter the Ace and Panman were curious beyond reason. “Show us!” they said in unison.

The foul-mouthed bounty hunter led them out of the office.

11 Hog-tied, Gagged and Blindfolded

A cooling breeze blew delicately down the chasm near the entrance to the passageway that led to the Impaler cavern. High above, the sky was turning blue. Morning had broken.

Panman finished strapping the giant needle to the back of his *Blenheim Bike*. He turned to Peter the Ace. “All done!”

“Excellent!” Peter the Ace replied.

Tiy’rd, the Impaler leader, stepped forwards from the farewell crowd that had gathered. “Once again, I must protest!” he said sternly. “That needle is a valuable Impaler research tool. It is wrong for you to just take it like this!”

Peter the Ace spoke with dominant authority. “You kidnapped a high class bounty hunter and cloned him without permission, and you’re telling me what is right and wrong?!”

“I admit we were wrong to do what we did, but you should not punish one crime with another!”

“You used that needle to extract DNA from the spine of Ross Mental and I am therefore well within my rights to confiscate it. After all the help we provided you, you should show more gratitude.”

“We are grateful, but we need that needle for...”

“Cloning?” Peter the Ace said in anticipation. “No my friend, your cloning days are over. I am hereby making it a galactic offence for you and your community to ever clone anything else ever again.”

“But we are scientists, and cloning is one of our most important areas of research. We must have that needle back in order...”

“Remember that I took pity on you and absolved you from your initial violation on the grounds of desperation. If I hadn’t, you and those directly involved would have been arrested, hog-tied, gagged,

and blindfolded. Then you would have been taken back to the Palace of Amino, publicly insulted, and then sentenced to work for thirty years in one of the pizza delivery companies of the under-class domain. Hideous females would have been your companions. That will happen if you insist on cloning things.”

“If you absolved us, then why the need to confiscate...”

“Enough! Do you want me to reconsider my original decision?”

Tiyr’d stared at the bounty hunter, and then shook his head.

“Good! Then we’ll leave it at that.”

Ross Mental approached. “I don’t trust the ugly fucker.” He said, placing his fuming face within inches of Tiyr’d’s. “Just reconsider Ace, and then fuck him to fuckin’ hell!”

The Impaler leader shuddered.

Peter the Ace smiled. “Remember, Tiyr’d, that Ross Mental will be staying with you for a while. I won’t be here to calm him so you’d better behave.”

“Yeah, you fuckers!”

Tiyr’d said nothing and stepped back into the crowd. His chances of re-election next month didn’t look good.

Sind’a walked up to the bounty hunters. She was carrying a box of snacks and was wearing a tight-fitting black body suit, just as Peter the Ace and Panman had demanded. “I am ready.” she said.

“Great!” Peter the Ace said. “Hop on!” He motioned towards his bike.

Sind’a giggled with delight. She’d never seen a vehicle this cool before. She handed the box of snacks to Panman and then lifted one of her well-toned legs over the luxury saddle and seated herself on the bike’s rear seat. She moaned in ecstasy at the quality of the leather beneath her buttocks.

Peter the Ace mounted the saddle just in front of her. “You’d better hold my waist, just to be on the safe side.”

Sind’a put her arms round his waist as ordered. Once again, she moaned in ecstasy.

Panman stored the box of snacks on his bike and then mounted. He started the engine and revved it hard, letting the powerful motors roar deeply and menacingly. “This is so cool!” He said, admiring the power below him. “Let’s burn, Ace!”

The two bikes roared off up the deep chasm.

The two bounty hunters shouted a farewell. “Bye forever, ugly dudes!”

Sind’a shouted too. “Goodbye master Tiyr’d.” she waved. “I will honour you and the Impaler by serving the bounty hunters well.”

Ross Mental watched the two fantastic vehicles disappear into the distance. He turned to the crowd of Impalers. "Right." he said, a malevolent smile spreading across his battle-scarred face. "It's time to sort you fuckers out!"

With a mighty shove of potent strength, the needle clicked into place. Panman closed the maintenance hatch on the *Blenheim's* sub-space drive power transfer unit and stepped back. The red light above the hatch flickered momentarily, and then turned green. "Cool! I think it'll work."

Peter the Ace nodded. He walked over to a console at the back of the engine room. "I'll get the *Blenheim* to power up the engines." He began entering commands.

"It's really tedious that the voice recognition system is off-line." Panman said with annoyance.

"You're right as always." Peter the Ace said as he typed. "When we get back to the palace, I'll order Eric Brillo to install a more reliable..."

"AUTO-REPAIR OF VOICE-RECOGNITION AND VOICE-SYNTHESIS SYSTEMS COMPLETE. SYSTEM ON-LINE."

Panman back-flipped for joy. "Cool beyond the visions of my deepest fantasy!"

Peter the Ace laughed. "It's great to have you back, *Blenheim*. How are you feeling?"

"I AM FUNCTIONING IN A SATISFACTORY MANNER."

"Great. Power up the sub-space engines and atmospheric thrusters. Prepare to get us out of here."

"I WILL."

The whole engine room began to shudder as the engines burst back to life. Peter the Ace studied a data screen. "We only have fifty percent of normal power flow." he said. "The needle isn't very efficient at transferring energy."

"It'll still get us home though." Panman stated.

"Indeed it will."

"We are completely ingenious!"

"We are!"

"We should get up to the bridge."

"Good thinking Panman."

The two bounty hunters headed towards the upper decks.

Panman activated his communicator. "Jemima?"

Jemima Murma, the *Blenheim's* on-board assistant, answered.
“Hi! What can I do for you?”

“We’re heading for the bridge now. Could you prepare some pancakes with maple syrup, several bowls of Katsu chicken, ten custard pies, and some grape juice and bring it up to us please?”

“No problem.”

“How’s Sind’a doing?”

“Fine. She’s taken to her duties effortlessly. She’s scrubbing the ovens with expert precision.”

“Excellent!”

Panman turned to Peter the Ace. “It was an inspired idea of yours to bring her with us.”

“It was.” Peter the Ace replied modestly. “I think I might make this my new hobby.”

“What? Collecting well-toned female assistants?”

“Indeed.”

“It’s original, I’ll grant you that!”

Peter the Ace entered a thoughtful phase. “I have a feeling I’ll be starting a trend. Soon, all of the best bounty hunters will be collecting assistants. Eventually, the Palace of Amino will be over-run with the most highly-toned female assistants in the galaxy.”

Panman laughed with delight at the thought.

Peter the Ace laughed louder.

Panman laughed even louder than that.

By the time they both reached the bridge they were laughing like demented Hyenas.

Laughing was cool!

Bounty Hunters of the Palace of Amino
Book Four: The Impaler and the Slim-Jims

Bounty Hunters of the Palace of Amino

Book Four

**The Impaler
and the
Slim-Jims**

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