

“Sir and Madam Foran, I presume?” asked a Kiro man in a forest green uniform shirt and slacks, from the front gate of the Wild Ferian Reserve. “Officer Denis Hutner at your service.”

Rumil huffed as she was passed over by the Kiro, who exchanged a forearm grasp with Timothy, who had to shift the rifle case on his back to return the gesture. She had almost forgotten the blatant sexual bias of Erani in general, and was not pleased at the sudden reminder.

“I’m not terribly sure just why the Galactic Alliance is concerned with the health of the Wild Ones,” Hutner admitted, “but I’ll do what I can to help you.”

“Well, we just do the job... not ask why,” Rumil cut in, hoping to force the reserve official into at least acknowledging her existence... which the Kiro man did... fleetingly.

“I suppose that is true,” he stated, then turned right back to Timothy. “Is there anything you are looking for in particular?”

Timothy simply smirked as Rumil again answered the question. “We were told to get data on anything and everything. My guess is the science crews are trying to find anything they can make an issue out of.”

“That sounds like the Galactic Alliance,” Hutner replied with a fake laugh then turned right back to Timothy. “We’ll take one of the offroad vehicles in... yeah, I know, it’s not a hover, but there isn’t any magnetic paneling for hovers on the reserve... and I’ll escort you around to some of the more popular spots for the Wild Ones. With any luck, you should have everything you need by the end of the cycle.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Rumil remarked again, her voice starting to reflect her increasing annoyance. “Unless you two boys have something else to discuss, we might as well get on with our business.”

Timothy again smiled, yet said nothing, willing to defer any discussion to Rumil. Whether that was because he acknowledged her irritation as valid or his nature to not engage in conversation without something to add, Rumil couldn’t be certain... but she appreciated the unspoken gesture nonetheless.

The reserve officer finally took extended note of Rumil when Timothy deferred the front side passenger to seat to her. Like a disappointed child that wanted to speak his mind, yet not wanting to get punished for it, Hutner said, “Oh... I was expecting Sir Foran to... sit there...”

“Rama is the one in charge of this investigation, Officer Hutner,” Timothy finally said, opening up the large black case he had brought with him, revealing a black long range rifle complete with several clips of feathered darts, presumably filled with sedatives. “I’m just the shooter.”

It took a few demiticks for that news to sink in, as if the reserve officer only just began to contemplate the possibility. Rumil lifted her eyebrows in challenge, and allowed a smirk to slowly creep onto her mouth, as if daring the Kiro man to comment on Timothy’s claim. The officer finally sank as low as he could into his seat, and Rumil reveled triumphantly in the man’s discomfort... after all, he had it coming.

The magnetically sealed metal gate slowly opened to allow their treaded vehicle access to the interior of the reserve, the driver beginning to accelerate as soon as there was enough room for the vehicle to fit through. “Generally the Wild Ones keep away from the wall,” Hutner explained. “It’s electrified, and they seem to have the same implanted fear of civilization as other feral beasts. Fortunately there’s over five thousand square TackMets of untouched wilderness so that they don’t feel cramped or isolated.”

“Just how many Wild Ferian are in the reserve?” Rumil asked.

The officer shrugged. "That's hard to say, actually. At last count from sat data and tagging, there was approximately two thousand, three hundred... but they have been known to breed, so there's no guarantee we've counted every single one of them as the new cubs wouldn't necessarily be tagged, and the dens they grow in could potentially block detection from satellites. However, I would say with all certainty that there can't be any larger than a population of about three thousand."

"I don't terribly understand why some Ferian would want to be feral," Timothy replied.

"I don't know either. There is a cult of sorts that calls upon its members to accept their beastly natures, but it's a very small group. Some just... I guess they just get tired of being slaves to drugs and the bustle of civilized life. The city jungle isn't for everyone, I suppose."

"You don't sound like you accept those theories," Rumil noted.

Hutner shrugged. "They make more sense than the conspiracy theories we can't get rid of. In order for those to work, the Kiro and the Ferian would have to be in on the whole thing, and I can't imagine the Ferian actually doing that to themselves."

Timothy muttered something that Rumil couldn't hear over the sounds from the vehicle, but she figured it probably went along the lines of his experience with the Ubeks. If there was personal gain to be found, racial lines could be quickly forgotten.

It was half a tenth-cycle before they found their first signs that Wild Ferian were nearby... and it certainly wasn't something Rumil wanted to approach. Their escort seemed to have no such problems, pulling to a stop and jumping out of the vehicle to analyze the very fresh mountain of dung that was less than two Tacks from Rumil's shoe. She gagged and covered her nose from the smell with the collar of her shirt while the reserve officer seemed to take in the scent with little external reaction.

"Oh, this is a definite sign that some Wild Ones are nearby. This little dropping can't be any more than twenty ticks old or so. Let's take a look and see if the sats can pick some up..."

He jumped back into the driver's seat and cheerily tapped in commands on the vehicle's computerized panel located between the two seats. Rumil, on the other hand, simply couldn't take her eyes off the simply massive mound of feces that seemed to be getting closer the longer she stared. Because of her repulsed fascination, she barely heard Hutner declare happily, "Yes, the satellite's got one a little more than a TackMet away! With luck, we can sedate the thing and get what you need before it even knows we're there."

With that, the vehicle moved forward to Rumil's intense relief, albeit at a drastically reduced speed so as not to warn their quarry of their approach. Hutner called back, "Just how good of a shot are you?"

Timothy was quickly making a check of the rifle to make sure everything was set. "Good enough," was his reply. "Get as close as you feel you comfortably can, and I'll do the rest."

"Very well... just so you know; missing probably wouldn't be a good idea for our continued health. Wild Ferian are nasty sorts when they feel they are being provoked."

"I don't miss," Timothy assured.

The reserve officer looked over to Rumil, as if hoping to confirm Timothy's boast. Rumil had never actually seen Timothy use a long-range rifle before, but something told her not to doubt the Solarion's proficiency with the weapon. "He doesn't miss," she then agreed, hopefully without too much of a pause.

While Hutner didn't seem totally convinced, he continued driving, idling the vehicle's engines once the Ferian was in sight... barely in sight, but in sight nonetheless. To Rumil, all she saw was a

reddish ball about half a TackMet away. “Is this close enough for you, Sir?” Hutner asked Timothy, who was already lying prone against the rear seat of the vehicle, his feet sticking out one end, his elbows propping the rifle firmly, the magnifying scope already pressed against his eye.

“Plenty close enough, Officer,” Timothy drawled, instantly followed by a sudden pop of air as the rifle fired, the high-pressure dart zipping out of sight before Rumil even thought to follow its flight path. A couple demiticks later, their quarry suddenly lurched to its full height, staggered three steps, then collapsed back onto the ground.

“Good shot!” Hutner exclaimed, clearly impressed and relieved as he slowly accelerated to the site of the fallen Ferian, oblivious to the fact that the dart had been psionically guided, a fact that amused Rumil.

He then turned to Rumil and asked, “I assume you have the extraction tools, Madam?”

Rumil glanced down at her satchel, as if suddenly remembering that she did indeed have the kit and extraction needle to gather genetic material from the Ferian ... and that she couldn't use them from a distance...

“Are you sure it's... sedated?” Rumil asked nervously as the vehicle pulled to a stop in front of the fallen Ferian.

“Well, why don't you try and take a sample, and we'll see if he bites you!” Hutner declared cheerily, intentionally doing nothing to ease Rumil's slightly troubled state of mind.

“I'll keep the rifle trained in case one dose wasn't enough, lovey,” Timothy promised with a playful grin. “Although judging from the sedative that was loaded into these darts, I can't imagine anything being able to get up from that.”

Despite his assurances, Rumil didn't feel remotely close to secure, approaching the massive feline-like beast gingerly, worried that making too much noise would shake it out of its drugged stupor.

Half a tick later, she was leaning over the Ferian, the extraction needle Tackets from its fur... when Hutner crept up behind her, grabbed her shoulders, and emitted a very fake sounding roar in her ear. Nonetheless, Rumil screamed in terror and jumped backwards, tripping over Hutner's foot and falling roughly on the ground, panting in an attempt to catch her fleeing breath.

When her lungs once again filled with air, she scowled furiously, and kicked out, catching the officer directly on the side of the shin. She then turned a baleful eye towards Timothy to see if he also found the malicious prank humorous, as he didn't do anything to warn her of it. He simply looked back at her with a half smile, and gestured towards the sedated Wild Ferian, who still had not seemed to move.

Rumil was partially disgusted at the officer for pulling such an inane stunt, and partially disgusted at her response to it. Rather than shattering any sexist attitudes Hutner clearly possessed, she likely gave him another silly story to tell his friends that night; that of the scared little woman that buckled when given any sort of authority and cowered in terror before an unconscious Ferian.

Giving a murderous glare to the slightly wincing – but still chuckling – Kiros man, Rumil kneeled back down over the Ferian. She directed one more withering scowl to Hutner, then pushed the needle through fur and flesh, gathering blood and tissue samples when she pulled it out. The needle was detached, sealed in a vacuum bag, and then dropped in the hard plastic box with the rest of the extraction kit before Rumil placed the box back in her satchel.

“Now, provided we can avoid any more juvenile jokes...” Rumil sneered, giving the Kiros man her best look of warning, “we should be able to complete our task without any undue waste of time,

and we can all return to business as usual.”

A tenth-cycle later, they had collected three more samples, and Hutner decided it was time for a different target.

“I’m assuming you want a few females in your sampling as well,” he commented.

“How do you know they’re all males?” Rumil asked.

Hutner laughed at that, once again causing Rumil to scowl at what she perceived was another tidbit for the Kiro’s bias. “Males are generally the only ones that you’ll find solitary in the wild. Females are a lot bigger than any of the males, and are often surrounded by huge packs of males in a pride.”

Then, the Kiro’s reserve officer surprised Rumil. He sighed then commented, “Sometimes makes me wonder... you start to rethink your ideas about the ‘superior’ gender when you see a Wild Ferian queen having an escort of twenty males or so. It’s rather humbling in a way. By Bannor, their entire society is like that... the female is generally the one that’s always had the power, and it’s the men who have been fighting the status quo, trying to find some sense of equality in it all.”

He flushed, as if embarrassed by the admission. “I know that doesn’t sound terribly Kiro’s of me. I don’t claim to be an expert on my faith... but when you’re placing value on sheer chance, it just seems... out of place, no matter what some priest says... *there we go!*”

The sudden exclamation jarred Rumil, who was taken by surprise by the rapid change in the Hutner’s mood. She noticed he was pointing at the satellite display in between them, and a large grouping of dots at which his finger was pointing.

“That’s a nicely sized pride there,” Hutner explained. “Has to be at least forty of them, and likely a queen with a few other females. Depending on how fast of a shot you are, Sir Foran, we could make quite a score here.”

“You just drive... I’ll shoot. We’ll sort out the rest once that’s done,” Timothy replied, once again checking over his equipment.

With an energized whoop, Hutner pressed the accelerator to full, and the vehicle responded with a reluctant lurch as he made all due speed towards their next destination. “It doesn’t pay to be discreet with a pride of that size,” he explained, as if anticipating Rumil’s question about the apparent change in tactics. “They’ll simply attack if one of their number is threatened. What you have to do in these cases is to come in loud and scatter them, and make your shots in the confusion. As a matter of fact...” Hutner said thoughtfully, suddenly stopping the vehicle again, causing all three to jerk forward with the change in momentum.

Rumil stared at him questioningly as he unbuckled his harness, and dashed to the rear storage compartment of the vehicle. Rumil turned about to see what he was doing, and realized that he was piecing together a long-range rifle of his own. Noticing her and Timothy’s attention, he explained, “Well, we increase our chances with two shooters, after all. That is... if Madam Foran feels she’s up to driving.”

Rumil’s eyebrows raised as she registered the suggestion. “I’ve never driven a land-bound vehicle... actually...”

The rifle assembly complete, Hutner hopped around to the vehicle’s front passenger side, and said with confident persuasion, “Ah... there’s nothing difficult about it, really. Just like driving a hover. That lever there is the velocity control... just push it forward to accelerate, and pull it back to brake. The further you pull the level either side, the harder the change in speed. This little beauty is

designed with displaced treads as well, so don't get too worried you're gonna tip us over. It even has high-pressure thrusters so that you can maneuver a bit while airborne. Just pay attention to the windshield projection displays and if a warning pops up, just let the vehicle compensate for it. Not too tough at all."

"Think you can handle a device that does most of the work for you?" Timothy said bemusedly.

Rumil rolled her eyes, and muttered, "I think I can manage... yes." She took a deep breath, and climbed over to the driver's seat, allowing Hutner to take her seat on the passenger's side.

"Whenever you're ready, Madam," Hutner declared. "You don't have to go too fast... just enough to freak the Ferian out for a moment."

With another deep breath, Rumil grabbed the steering wheel – little more than a plastic circle with a handgrip on top of the steering column – in one hand, and the velocity control lever with the other. Then, her dangerous side took over. She looked back at the two men, and flashed a mischievous grin that caused Timothy to look slightly worried. He knew what it meant... and soon the unsuspecting Kiro next to her would as well.

Rumil licked her lips then thrust the velocity level to full acceleration, catching Hutner off-guard. However, the reserve officer recovered quickly, and it almost seemed like he was enjoying the thrill even more than she was as the vehicle bounced over ruts, divots, bumps, and hills.

The rush Rumil felt seemed to cloud her rational thought, because she never really registered the pride of Wild Ferian until the vehicle was almost right in front of them. She edged off the acceleration slightly as the pride scattered. Rumil couldn't hear the sounds of her companions shooting, but had little doubt they were.

"Loop around, and go after the ones that dashed off to your right!" Hutner shouted. "We should be able to catch up and tag a few more!"

Rumil pulled the velocity lever to an idle, and quickly whipped the steering grip to the right, feeling the heavy vehicle respond with surprising agility, turning approximately a hundred and twenty degrees in a tight enough radius that she worried for a moment that her harness would break from the strain.

Once the vehicle settled straight, it was back to full acceleration in pursuit of the fleeing Ferian that were still keeping a relatively tight formation. As she pulled even with the group in question, Rumil noticed that the one in the center of the group was indeed significantly larger than those around it, probably about two full heads taller than any of the rest. Rumil let off the accelerator again so as to keep pace, somewhat enthralled by the almost majestic creatures in flight.

"That's the queen... that's why those males are so bunched together around her!" Hutner said. "Pull around to the other side of them if you get the chance so that I can get a shot as well."

Timothy successfully shot one of them just before Rumil began to make the necessary adjustment in positioning. By the time the vehicle was on the other side of the group, he had sedated another in the rear of the pack.

"Tag the queen last!" Hutner advised. "Once you do that, all the males will scatter!"

If Timothy replied, Rumil didn't hear him. With that in mind, all she had to do was follow the pack as the two men picked off the pack, then finally the queen. Like all the others, the large female staggered and fell. With that, Rumil turned the vehicle about again, and approached the sedated Ferian... albeit considerably more slowly.

She stopped next to the Queen, and pulled the extraction kit out of her satchel. Hutner and

Timothy followed, likely to stretch their legs.

“Well, I shot a few of the females in the pride at the initial site,” Hutner claimed, “and I know you tagged quite a few yourself, Sir Foran. I suspect we probably can collect about fifteen samples just from this pride. How many are you looking to get, by the way?”

“Enough to determine we have an adequate cross-section of the population,” Rumil answered as she took the required tissue and blood from the Queen. “If you estimate there can’t be any more than three thousand, about thirty samples should suffice.”

“Well then, we could probably hunt down another pride, and that should fill your quota nicely,” Hutner replied, then suddenly his head jerked to the west, and his facial features reflected confusion. “What in Bannor...?”

Rumil looked up to notice that Timothy was looking in the same direction. Then she felt a strong buzz of psionic energy in the back of her head. Perhaps Timothy’s occasional lessons helped her, because she felt she could identify who it was from the unique sensations it triggered. But how, or why, was Emmitt Fransisca wandering around on Feria?

Timothy reacted to something, jumping in front of Rumil, grunting as something struck him in the palm as he held his out in an attempt to ward off the attack. The psionic tingle disappeared soon after that, and Rumil stood up as Timothy pulled the dart free. Hutner grabbed the pointed injection needle, sniffed the tip, then grimaced.

“Good Creator, that’s the fetish bait we use to attract Ferian for checkups... but this is really concentrated. This stuff could whip any Ferian into a frenzy,” the officer commented. “But why would he—” Hutner was interrupted by the sounds of growling from where Fransisca had just disappeared. At the top of a rather large hill, a massive number of Wild Ferian started to appear.

Timothy scowled in anger, understanding Fransisca’s plan. He sent a tightly shielded telepathic message across the planet, and when he got the reply he was looking for, turned to Rumil. “Quick, give me the extraction kit.”

Rumil complied, keeping a nervous eye on the approaching Wild Ferian as they began to stalk forward slowly down the hill.

Timothy then addressed Officer Hutner. “A Kiros man, a Mister Irons, will be appearing shortly. Once he arrives, get out of the reserve as quickly as you can.” Then he turned back to Rumil and said, “I’ll return to the hotel as soon as I am able... I should be able to collect the remaining samples in the process.” With that, he grabbed the fetish dart, and dashed away as quickly as he could, the Ferian changing their course to follow.

Finally Hutner blinked, opened his mouth while plotting out what he wanted to say, before finally managing to mutter, “What... just happened?”

Rumil shook her head and didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure she could in any meaningful way.