

The Amanian Incident

Iris Periden conferred with the documents on her data tablet. She'd been in her chair since the Aman sun rose behind her temporary office and now the moon was starting to come up over the ridge that decorated her view. Her eyes hadn't left the tablet, even when she had called Commander Berker in for a debrief.

Berker was a scientist soldier. He was built like a linebacker with a crisp crewcut, but his appearance disguised his intelligence. Iris was a former pilot, but her application stood out for her ability to coordinate efforts and lead groups of people effectively. Berker's portfolio boasted a doctorate in biology and the rank of field commander. He was classically good-looking, as far as Iris was concerned, but he was equally brilliant and compliant.

"Commander," Iris stood and nodded. Berker stood at attention, tightening all his muscles and saluting. With a nod, Iris invited the man to sit. "I'd like to discuss your latest field report."

"Of course."

"First of all, I congratulate you on getting your team out of a serious crisis. A cave-in like that can be a death sentence, but you kept your command well and got your entire group out without incident. All this to say, I can't help but notice some...inconsistencies."

"Ma'am?"

"You said in your report that..." Iris consulted the report on her tablet, "Wilks made the splint for Orton when he fractured his leg?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Wilks didn't attend medical training. He isn't trained to make a proper splint, especially not the one that he made."

"He must have...seen it on some medical drama. He eats those old vids up."

"In fact," Iris pulled up images of Orton's splint, "this doesn't strike me as any human splint I've seen. It's an interesting design...brilliant use of the para-cord, but also some crushed local greenery to dull the pain. Did Wilks learn herbalism from the old vids as well?"

"People pick things up around here. There's always something else to learn."

"I thought the same thing, but there are other problems I'd like to address. You said that you led your team north from the collapse site?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Through the storm?" Iris asked. "Between that and Orton's broken leg, that would have taken you twice as long. Miraculous you made it."

"A bit of luck, then."

"Berker...can I call you Berker?"

"I prefer Steve."

“Very good,” Iris nodded. “Steve, I’m not trying to get anyone in trouble. I’m just trying to figure things out.”

Berker took a deep breath and licked his lips. “We were told that was the official report by the suit.”

“Lasser?”

“Sorry, yes, Letter Commander Lasser.”

“He got to you before your report came to me?”

“Yes,” Steve said. “Look, I wanted to get you, but he stopped me and my team. He said that the report was important, but he had a matter of security to discuss with me.”

“Security?”

“I was just following orders. He was sent by top brass. They say the Letter Commanders make their badges from the bullets that couldn’t kill them.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“The story has a reason. Letter Commanders can make people disappear with a phone call to the right person. And I don’t mean transferred, I mean in the ground.”

“I’ve heard those same rumors,” Iris nodded. “What happened? Just between you and me...”

“He said it was a matter of security to the mission.”

“The mission?”

“I don’t think they understood helping us would be that much of a problem, but—”

“Whoa, whoa, who is ‘they’?”

“I don’t know,” Steve shook his head. “They were these...weird little things. I thought they were animals at first, but there was something about their eyes...something human.”

“Are you saying there are people here?” Iris asked.

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “Not people proper, that’s for sure. They looked human in that they had two legs and two arms, but they were scaly and had long snouts with sharp teeth. We thought they were going to attack at first, but even after we raised our guns, they seemed to understand we needed their help.”

“Who else knows about this?” Iris asked.

“My whole unit was instructed not to discuss it with anyone...even each other.”

“Good,” Iris said. “I appreciate your candor with me, Steve. I encourage you to keep the instance out of your mind.”

“Is it possible—sorry.”

“No, speak your mind.”

“Is it possible that they’re sentient? Like you and me? They have some form of medicine, some means to cooperate. There were dozens of them down there. If the planet is inhabited—”

“Just...focus on what you can for now. Keep this between you and me. I’ll handle everything else. You’re excused, Commander.”

Steve stood and saluted. He left the room briskly, avoiding Iris’s gaze and dodging her automated cameras. Iris set her office to a secure mode, encrypting all communications and preventing anyone from barging in unannounced. She made a call from her console and Commander Lasser appeared on her view screen. “Yes?”

“You didn’t tell me that there was another Amanian encounter..”

“Gutter-dwelling lizard moles,” Lasser waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

“That’s three in the past two months. They’re getting too frequent for my taste. The Amanians are getting bolder and we have no way to counter that without outright deterrents.”

“My people are handling it.”

“Well, get them to handle this faster. The Foster Group has strict rules regarding mining on an inhabited planet. Do you remember Eslen? They found that advanced plankton in the water or something...”

“Sentient algae. I don’t have to remember it, I was there. I still can’t eat dehydrated seaweed.”

“Letter Commanders are the clean-up crew for these messes. If word of this gets back to the Foster Group, our contract is finished.”

“Director Periden, I don’t tell you where to drill and I don’t boss your little scouting parties around. The Amanians will be dealt with. You just keep bringing up the minerals and sign my check when this is finished. Understood?”

“Yes, Commander Lasser...” Iris said, the conceit bitter as she spoke it. The Letter Commander ended the conversation and Iris’s office went back to normal. She turned and regarded the mountain range behind her. She was getting better at reading through the reports to get to Lasser’s real story. There were people smarter than her. She was afraid that one day they would get their hands on her findings. They were nearly finished, but it was always a bitter, hard-fought victory.