

Support of the North

As the Darjorran Defense Forces training exercises were to begin, several vessels still announced arrivals and departures from the arctic terrain, utilising a fixed landing zone to prevent further disruption of the polar landscape. One such vessel was 'The Armistice End,' a non-descript Escort Shuttle, which landed only long enough to discharge its Captain, Wulfram Armistead. The man looked around the perpetual winter terrain while Ritz prepared to take his ship back into orbit; the polar glare reflected off his T-Visor.

"Cold weather drills. The worst." The Mandalorian complained as he tightened the all-weather cloak around his climate-sealed armour.

No matter how many layers you wore, places like these had a pervasive chill. It always found its way to your core and threatened to cling to you if you stood still for too long. It was a very tangible thing one couldn't linger on, and if they did, they would fall prey to it. Durasteel-clad boots carried Wulfram through the field to the rest of the DDF assembly as he fought to shake off the cold that already weighed on his soul.

As he approached the gathering, he caught sight of a curious event as some of the natives, Tuncans, had shown up to investigate and converse with the Darjorran forces; while approached by some, they were ignored by many. The Mandalorian quirked a brow beneath his helmet and drew nearer them, examining their dress, weapons, and how they spoke with those who were attentive to them. Their clothes were layered, piled thick, but still loose enough to let their bodies breathe. Enough to keep them warm but not let moisture sit on their skin. Wulfram's reached instinctively under the collar of his cloak, adjusting the seal pressure of his bodysuit to approximate their method of climate control and breathed a sigh of relief as he felt the slight chill in his body relent slightly. Despite the climate rating in the suit, it wasn't designed for prolonged cold, and he knew it; he'd suffered this before and didn't intend to again if something so simple could address it.

Something else Wulfram realised as he looked through the gathered forces. There were a lot of polearms on the fields, spears, electro staffs, and even just a lot of long sticks in the hands of some of the older soldiers. The Tuncans walking across the field nearby were using their spears to stab at the ground, as if testing if it were solid, and tilted his head to one side.

"There's a lake under the drift." A soldier chimed up as he caught the posture of confusion from the older Mandalorian, standing at rest. "Guess it's pretty hard to tell from down here, but that's why the natives like to use spears, Sir. Serves a dual purpose, keeps them above water, and keeps muties at arm's length."

"Makes sense." Wulfram said as he lowered the range finder on his helmet to scan for the lake, only to find that his armour's internal scanners were not powerful enough to read through the haze of the snow and ice. "Practical and generally foolproof."

"And why are so many of our people unwilling to meet with the natives exactly? As I understand it, they have been an ally in hunting down the Caxqettes." He questioned as he turned to face the soldier in full.

"Sir, I..." The man faltered for a moment as he scrambled for an answer to the prejudice of others. "They're worried that they're the enemy, Sir. We're invaders to them, and they're 'Other' to us, even if they are our allies." A tale as old as time.

"This is 'their' world as much as ours, and they're fighting a common enemy with us. I hope you give them at least as much respect as they give you." The Mandalorian quipped before he made his way towards one of the smaller groups of Tuncans to better learn from them.

As Wulfram approached the group, one of the Tuncans saw him and pointed out his helmet. They said something in native Selenian, which gave the Mandalorian pause before another DDF soldier spoke up.

"Sir, they're worried about your helmet. He says..." The soldier turned to the Tuncan and confirmed the exact phrase before he repeated it to Wulfram. "Cold metal burns flesh, but hot metal makes the skin wet. Wet skin can be deadly."

A smile formed on Wulfram's lips at the translator's cautionary words. He chuckled as his practiced hand unclasped the durasteel helmet, releasing the internal pressure before he removed it from his head. A few of the soldiers stared at him, surprised.

"Sir, your helmet... isn't it against your..." He stammered as the Mandalorian's pale skin was exposed to the polar air and sunlight, revealing an open-faced balaclava beneath it.

Wulfram pulled the hood of his cloak up and piled the fabric around his face as he shook his head at the soldier.

"I am Mandalorian; yes, but I do not adhere to that outdated belief. Don't worry; you do me no dishonour by seeing my face today. If you concern yourself with it, then believe it an honour that I trust you enough to remove what keeps me warm and safe in this place." He laughed as he held his helmet towards the Tuncan that had offered wisdom.

"The helmet is metal, yes, but the inside is not. I wear breathing material, like you." He said as he lifted the collar of his body suit, which he had loosened to breathe better, and waited for the

translator to speak for him.

The Tuncan took the helmet from Wulfram as he held it out to him and inspected the material of the liner as the translator spoke for the Mandalorian. The man then loosened his own hood, removing a facial covering of leather and bone to show to Wulfram for comparison. It was lined with leather and fur to keep moisture away from the more sensitive areas of the face but had an open slit to let warmth and sweat escape from where it sat. An intelligent design. He said something to the translator as he handed Wulfram back his helmet and placed his hand on the sun visor.

“They say if you cannot hear around you, you will, yourself, be hunted by what you hunt; the winds are loud. Can you hear the difference between footsteps and raging winds inside your shell?” This was an honest question, one Wulfram would have to test in the field.

In cities and jungles, urban combat and stations, the vacuum of space, and cramped corridors of ship hulls? In those places, Wulfram could decipher between myriad sounds or the lack thereof, even with a klaxon and others shuffling around, because they were familiar and common; but in a place where it was barren, alien, and changing rapidly because of how unwelcoming it was and how unreliable sensors were due to the conditions, would he be able to rely on the microphones, telemetry data, and his limited view?

“Honestly, I do not know. And I appreciate this counsel. Perhaps I could join you, then, and learn the ways of your people, individually, in surviving these conditions? How to travel, hunt, and fight in such a climate? Once this collaborative measure is over.” Wulfram was intrigued; beyond simply cold weather drills and fighting in snow drifts, how these people survived in these places.

The translator relayed his words with hesitation; Wulfram felt the mood shift between both men as the Tuncan pushed back from the pair and shook his head, his hands thrown into the air. The translator sighed and uttered what Wulfram could only assume to be an apology to the man as he walked off from the pair of them.

“The Tuncan people are... How do I say this politely? They are withdrawn and view us with prejudice, as much so as many of our men view them. Those who came have done so because they are worried about us building up here and wanted to be sure we are not in harm's way or doing no harm. Beyond that, we are generally of no interest to them beyond our ability to cull a common enemy. Some may disagree with my assessment, but it has held true to this point, outside of a curious tribe nearer Port. Maybe we can discuss that more later.” The man said as another voice shouted over the cry of wind.

Formal training was to start soon, focused on communications and squad tactics in the cold biome.

The first measure was splitting the units into three units, an attacking battalion, a defence battalion, and a medical brigade, to focus on the realities of fighting in such an inhospitable

place. Some Tuncans found purchase and would watch from shelter on the high rises as the invaders took turns practising winter warfare.

The battalions were each separated and given strategic positions to hold and attack, and over the next week of training, Wulfram learned a harsh lesson. There was no opponent on a battlefield as deadly as the cold itself. The defensive positions were instructed to reinforce one another, hold supplies for their own, and each tasked with materials that the others may be short on. The attacking forces' jobs were to route the defence, overtake positions, or spoil supplies. The Medical Brigade's job was solely to attach with the hardened landing point and deploy to the front when someone's vitals spiked in either direction to be prepared to deploy and assist in cold weather circuits.

Ambush tactics worked well in the cold, as moving from white cover into flanking positions allowed the couriers from defences to be taken with little response. But hardened locations were hard to attack, especially when any movement could be seen on approach. Several times throughout the exercise, the medical brigade was called in as one force or the other would retreat and bring their 'casualties' to a safe place to be treated for cold injuries.

Soldiers crossed thin ice and fell into frigid water, leading to hypothermia. They wore thickly bundled layers with no venting, which caused heat exhaustion and collapse. Several sprains and strains from falls on the ice and slick equipment. The defence won, with their own toll of frost injuries.

It was decided after the first week that the participating forces would take a reprieve and rejoin during the secondary training session once cleared medically.

An annoyed Mandalorian conceded his defeat alongside the DDF Soldiers he had joined and joined them all for a conciliatory dinner.

He carried the experiences of the week with him, the successes and failures of the training mission, as well he would keep close that which he learned from the Tuncans that had sought to visit upon them as they trained and thought to seek the Tuncans that had met with their people closer to the port. Before he left he made sure to seek out the translator once more and learned a simple name.

Inpa.