

# One More Day

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“Another job, another drop.” Wulfram told himself as he loosed his harness and dropped from The Somber Respite.

The Respite slowed only enough to disembark Wulfram and Alexandyr on the move to secure their landing zone before it exited the airspace and circled back. The pair dropped to the planetary surface and established themselves with their sister forces in the theatre, linking their data network with the network on the ground. Wulfram looked to his brother and lifted a silent hand, palm flat and fingers together. He waited for the return ping from his telemetry pod to reach his MFTAS and linked the information to Alexandyr to be sure they were receiving identical information; the other man nodded a silent acknowledgement and then tapped the sensor array of his helmet. Wulfram motioned forward with his hand; he gestured ahead with the knife’s edge, and the two Clan Aramis Mandalorians proceeded on foot towards the proposed landing zone.

“Wulfram, you’ve been quiet since.” Alexandyr began before an exasperated and dragged-out grunt from Wulfram cut him off.

The elder Mandalorian sighed and brought his hands to his helmet, his frustration palpable. The situation with Lillian was tense; Wulfram had known for the last few years that Alexandyr was alive and well, had even gone out of his way to keep the boy moderately comfortable, and arranged to allow Alexandyr the chance to continue his stargazing ways, all the while he provided him silent backup over the last few years. Lillian had taken the better part of two decades to follow his trail, completely ignored the open-radio comm he left open to her through the years, only to arrive spitting piss and vinegar when she learned Wulfram was alive and thriving.

Worse, when she found out that Wulfram had been in contact with her brother and helped acquaint him with the organisation he had found himself in by his own measures.

“It’s nothing, Alex. I’m just frustrated.” Wulfram lied to his subordinate as he signalled to check the path to the right.

“I get that, but she’s my sister, even if we haven’t been close in years. I’m sure she’ll talk to me about whatever’s going on. Maybe she won’t be as mad at you? Or maybe I can get her to talk to you?” Alexandyr asked as he raised his blaster and poked around the stone marking the head of the trail, checking for anything hiding in his sensor’s shadows.

“So, and please, take this for everything it’s worth; how are you confident that you can intervene in the situation between your sister and me when... Well. How’s the situation between that Chiss woman and yourself going? Didn’t she join Qel Droma just to get away from you? So painfully awkward you can’t even keep a conversation with her.” Wulfram said as he turned to face his clanmate, looking at him between the trees.

Alexandyr’s posture deflated, and he looked at Wulfram, visor to visor.

“You really are a bastard; you know that. Maybe Dad was right. Maybe it really was the folks like you who caused that ‘Night’ to happen. Not because of your lack of faith, but because you thought you were better than everyone else and just kept making it worse for the rest of us.” He called back as he looked down at the pauldron bearing the Armis crest and pulled it from his armour.

“Keep this. I’ll find my own unless you can actually gather the gett’se to nut up and own up to your own issues instead of abusing your own aliit because you’re an insecure little man, too old and set in his own ways to deal with his haastal. Instead, you’re taking them out on everyone else.” He shouted as he threw the plate at the man.

“K’atini, laandur or’dinii. Foolish child. Get your childish feelings hurt once and you throw aliit at your feet. What do you even know of our culture, our history? You dare speak on something you weren’t even ALIVE for: like you have any idea of the world that existed, instead of just the lies your father told you!? How he pretended to be Deathwatch, but until the fall, your father was part of House Kryze’s Pacifist government! He filled yours and your sisters’ heads with lies about his life as a soldier when the most work he ever did was as aran to a fallen government. He learned to shoot at droids and unmoving targets to score competency ribbons and ran away with his tail between his legs when the Deathwatch first came to siege the Capital, then again when they fought against The Resistance for control of Mandalore. He lived with that shame until he saved us that ‘Night’ because he hid at home instead of choosing a side. Don’t you dare try to lecture me, using the words of a man who never believed a shred of what he said.” Wulfram barked as Alexandyr turned his back on him and strode away into the woodline.

“I know my father’s shame, Wulfram. He sold me and my mother into slavery to try and bury it. But are you really any better right now, brow-beating your own family because of your insecurities?” Alexandyr shot back with a deadpan stare before he turned on his heel and retreated.

The two men parted in separate directions, Alexandyr towards the Qel Droma landing team that had landed in the distance, putting as much distance between himself and Wulfram as possible, and Wulfram towards the designated landing zone for the Somber Respite. His eyes tracked the locator beacon for Alexandyr as they parted, still mindful of his junior, but in frustration, he clicked off the MFTAS to let him tread on his own and allow both men to cool off.

A sinking feeling of regret set into Wulfram's gut. He knew he had been overly cruel to the younger man initially. He had barked him down and drug out his own insecurities; in a moment of frustration, all because the boy just wanted to help resolve the space between him and Lillian. Perhaps it was simply a sore spot, which Wulfram did need to deal with, but this wasn't the place to handle these kinds of feelings. He turned on his heel to face the path Alexandyr had taken into the mountain path and sighed.

"Cuy ogir'olar, he'll come around. Kid's just as upset as you are." Wulfram told himself as he made his way deeper into the woods before he felt something off.

His hand went for his blaster, but it was too slow, and he wasn't sure where to aim without the feedback from his MFTAS. He cursed himself for disabling it as he felt the impact on his armour. The first round caught him mid-chest, scarred his armour, and took him from his feet. The second round punched his torso plate and took the wind from him. The distinctive crack and fragmentation told Wulfram that he was dealing with a slugthrower, all too late. Several soldiers crossed the field and levelled blasters on the Mandalorian.

"Take off his helmet; he's beaten, might's well shame him too." He heard a voice call, though Wulfram smiled when his helmet came off.

"Good, at least I can breathe. Smells of osik, but I'll manage." He chuckled through gritted teeth and bruised ribs as the men lifted him to his feet and pulled his blaster and sword from him.

"We've got a live one, at least. Take him in; maybe his people will pay a good ransom for him. Judging by his attitude though, doubtful." The bandits' leader said, smirking, as they bound the Mandalorian to drag him along and left his helmet behind.

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"He's a right cunt!" Alexandyr's exclaimed to his sister as he settled in at the Qel Droma encampment, which drew the attention of several others.

"We dropped in ahead of our ship to make sure that nothing was obscuring our Landing Zone, ahead of linking up with you, but His Eminence decided that berating me was more important than actually working together." His eyes met with those of his sister, for as well as one could tell through their helmets, and he placed his hand on the empty pauldron where the Clan Armis emblazon had been.

The lack of signet made Lillian tilt her head before she grabbed her younger brother's wrist and yanked it from his shoulder. She sighed audibly inside her helmet, and her stance softened as she shoved his arm into his chest.

"Where is it?" She asked as she punched his bare body suit.

"Aliit ori'shya tal'din. He may not be blood, but he made you family. You joined that clan while ours is falling apart. You do not just walk away from duty or family. No matter how hard-headed, stubborn, or foolish they can be." Her voice and stance shifted once again as she made herself larger than her brother.

Alexandyr checked the MFTAS scanner, and his eyes widened. Something wasn't right. Wulfram hadn't moved since they went their separate ways on the trailhead. He pinged his data to Lillian's visor.

"Something's wrong. Wulfram hasn't moved." Alexandyr whispered before repeating himself in a shout as he grabbed his blaster off of the table and ran back toward the woods.

"Alexandyr, wait!" Lillian commanded. "There's a known entity out there. We've dealt with them since we made landfall, a group of ransomers and slavers. They've been taking hostages from smaller settlements and returning them for high ransoms. Look, you have a job to do still. Solemn Respite needs an LZ, and your crew is going to need to be apprised of the situation; we'll get a team together to go with you to take care of that. Let us handle the first steps in helping Wulf while you sort your ship.

Alexandyr sighed as he heeded his sister's advice.

"Alright, better together instead of going alone." He said as he went with another Qel Droma housemate.

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"That scuffed idiot; managed to get himself caught by a handful of nobodies on this backwater moon." Lillian shouted as she picked up Wulfram's helmet and inspected it.

Panic played in her mind as she linked her sensors to his helmet's internal network; to see if the fool had left her any clues but just as well to see if he had gotten a still of the kidnappers. He always let himself get in his own way, arguing with others or running off alone. This time, it was both, but Alexandyr was just as much to blame. Her little brother left Wulfram alone, though neither knew the dangers they had drug up out here either.

“Got signs of a struggle over here. It looks like someone was in the mud, picked up by at least 3-4 other people, and drug off. Imprints are all over the place, different heights, weights, you name it, until they get to whoever was in the ground, and then it looks like it’s pretty uniform, so I’m guessing they carried him off together.” One analyst detailed as her dataslate ran down calculations based on the provided information.

“Got metal fragments over here too, unsure exactly what they are made of, but the slavers went old-school. They shot your boyfriend with Slugthrowers, Lillian. I need to get somewhere where I can see things a little more clearly, can likely tell you what they’re firing and how powerful it is.” Another shouted as they inspected a small piece of metal, unsure of what exactly fired it, but sure it was, in fact, a ballistic munition.

“Wait, isn’t this guy another Mandalorian? If he’s anything like you and your brother, he should have known these guys were coming, shouldn’t he? Don’t you guys all have...” Lillian waved the other voice off.

Wulfram’s helmet lit up, recognising Lillian as an authorised user before a series of screens lit up in Lillian’s visor. Audio-Visual recording logs, MFTAS Sensor Pod, Comms Chatter with the Somber Respite, and a log of Sensor Beacons. One specifically was highlighted and flashing, Oxenfree. It referenced how the pair of them used to find one another when they were children. They had used low-tech radio telemetry back then. Wulfram would pulse a signal from a cheap crystal radio while she’d listened to the whining on her personal radio to determine how close to his current hideout she had gotten.

Old tricks served them well.

“He’s a jackass who only thinks of himself half the time, but I’ll be damned if he doesn’t know what he’s doing. As long as they didn’t strip everything off of him and dump it in a different place, we’ll probably be able to find him.” The woman shouted to the others as she gestured with her hand, calling them to her.

“Lillian, incoming from camp. There’s a channel open with the bandits. They claim they’ve got one of ours in custody. They’re shouting about how they’ve taken his helmet from him, and now he’s dishonoured. If we want him back, we need to pay, kark! There’s no way we can pay that much!”

A snide smirk played on the woman’s lips as they accused Wulfram of being Kyr’tsad.

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Wulfram sighed as he adjusted to the dim lighting in his new environment, damp stone walls on each side, with a matching floor and ceiling. Occasionally his captors would pass by the barred entrance to his enclosure, either to throw a snide remark or, at one point, to leave a bowl of the slop they called food. They had the decency to leave him in his armour, but took his sword and blaster, the visible threats. The wrist link he wore was one of the real threats he carried. Unlike his helmet, which pinged an audible FOF signal to any sensor that knew to look for it, his wrist unit emitted an out-of-date radio signal, ignored by all but the furthest colonies on the Rim that still used them for personal communications. Worse still were the glow rods they had left him with, one, nothing more than what it seemed. The other housed a lightsaber that he kept on the off chance he matched up with a Jedi; admittedly, it was in a precarious position as his hands were bound in front of him, and it was behind him on his hip.

“Boss, we got word from the off-worlders! They’re interested in the tin-man back there. But they demand we give him back, gear and all.” A voice shouted from down the hall, drawing the Mandalorian’s attention as he tried to push himself against the wall.

Wulfram hoped whoever was on the other end of that comm-line didn’t mention what was in his kit, much less even know, because if they said anything about the lightsaber, his shot at escape would be lost on their loose lips.

“Tell them where to meet us. Then prepare to move. If they’ll actually pay us that much for one tin-man, imagine how much they’ll pay for several. Especially if we take the women.” A gravelly voice called out from deeper in the cave before a chorus of laughter broke out among the bandits.

Boots on bare stone and long shadows cast down the halls toward Wulfram’s cell. The group that had captured Wulfram in the woods came around the bend, sneering, and raised their rifles to point at him through the bars as one opened the cage. The point man had a hooked scar under his brow and spoke with a cruel laugh.

“Come on then, tinman; you’re going further in, gotta make room for your lady friends to come and join us. So, up you get, or we’ll shoot you enough that we can carry what’s left of you down into the mine without any trouble.” He said through his laughter as he turned to the others and gestured at their rifles.

Relatively unarmed and unaware of how many more men were in the caves, Wulfram lifted his hands and made a show of getting himself to his feet. He eyed each man in the crowd and took in the fine details of their person. One was short, missing an eye, another lanky with a scar over his left hip, exposed when he stretched to point the rifle. The ‘muscle’ of the group was a Gamorrean with broken tusks. There was the smell.

This was not going to go smoothly at all.

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Frustration mounted as Lillian listened to the camp commander run down the rescue plans. Appeasement and slow movement too often led to situations merely repeating themselves, and she understood that all too well; she had seen it several times across the Galactic Rim. Lillian also understood Wulfram, that he wouldn't make things easy as a prisoner; he was pig-headed, stubborn, and loud. She decided quiet acceptance and appeasement wouldn't be an option. Lillian knew Wulfram's location and would get him herself. After the briefing, she returned to the armoury and gathered her gear. A comm ping went out to her squadmates.

"I'm bringing him home; slavers be damned, I'll burn them out of their caves if I have to. The only person allowed to kill that drydak is me." An enraged Lillian quipped over the comms as she stared down the armourer and pointed to her rifle.

"Give it to me. Now." The woman grimaced, her vox sharp, before another voice chirped over her shoulder.

"Give it to her... With her full loadout. Go on then, Lillian, go in there after him. I know his helmet gave you 'something' that you're not going to share with us. What you are going to do, however, is keep your tracker on because we've needed an in for weeks now. And they think we'll play fair and just give them credits for your boyfriend? Gives us a chance to use you as a knife in the back before we bombard the karking bastards into submission. Give the all clear when you're out, and we'll start." The Commander said with an airy sigh before they turned to the others and gave quick orders to ready the camp for a quiet assault.

"But know you're going in there without backup, but I can't afford to give them more than one person as an additional hostage. And if you don't report back to me, I'll order the bombardment of their caves, then personally come remove your corpse and make damned sure you see just how bad you messed up."

Lillian shrugged off her commanding officer's consternation and took her rifle from the armourer. She knew exactly where they came from, everything Lillian believed told her she shouldn't go in after Wulfram alone, but the heart didn't listen to reason, nor did loyalty for even the most idiotic of friends.

"Heard." She called back as she shouldered her rifle and made her way outside. "He'll come back, alive or dead. But if he's dead, it's because I killed him, not the slavers. Karking bastard should never have gone off alone."

"Alive, or I kill you both." The commander barked as Lillian stormed off, the roar of her jetpack splitting the air between them.

The Mandalorian woman felt horrible, as it was, between her brother being the spark of this situation and their inability to get along over her. Then, with the clarity of the skies around her, it dawned on her; Wulfram's hardheadedness and aggression about her father came from a place of concern. For her and her brother to be arguing over her, of all things, it meant that the cantankerous bastard had been comfortable enough to confide in his foundlings and clan mates but still found trouble speaking to her about it, though, would she have believed him even if he came out and just told her how he felt? Had he, and she just ignored him over countless years?

The radio signal pinged louder as she flew over the woodlands. She spotted a campfire and tents, most likely where the slavers had intended to make their 'initial' handoff. Right where the Commander told her it would be. She scanned the field for signs of their 'hosts' and dropped in further into the woods, listening to the static from Wulfram's radio as it swelled. Topographical maps and surveys from the region showed multiple cave entrances.

Of course, anything to do with this bastard would have to be complicated.

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Leather boots shoved into Wulfram's back and threw him into a shallow pit in a new smaller cell, and his accessories bounced from his belt and scattered along the floor. The sound behind him as the gate clinked shut made it clear as day that he was only in for more of the same. They had gone beyond treating him as a regular guest and now moved into the less humane treatment. Something good had come from this, he realised, as he gathered his scant belongings and investigated the glow rods that had bounced away from him. Now he was armed, but the numbers were still unfavourable, and the terrain was against him. He cursed under his breath as he recounted the situation that led to this.

Had they captured Alexandyr too? Would they harm any others that came for him? The Somber Respite crew, his daughters? Lillian? His mind raced with potential outcomes, and it only agitated him worse. There had to be a way to tell others exactly where he was, to warn them about what was waiting for them.

"Haar'chak! If they accept the agreement and come unarmed, they'll get it worse than me. I shouldn't have gone down in just a pair. I should have let Alex just talk. The kid wasn't hurting anyone by talking. Now, I'm going to end up getting everyone else fragged or gutted." Wulfram spiralled, beating the back of his head into the wall as he tried to figure out a way to get himself free without alerting the guards that he was armed.

The sound of running boots and a man shouting broke the air before a single, suppressed blaster bolt split the air. A soft groan followed the blaster discharge, and Wulfram turned to face the entrance of his cell.



“Wayii! Maybe, just maybe, there is some grey matter in that skull case of yours, after all, Wolsha. You realise you’re not entirely blameless about *why* you’re here. Yet you’re still suffering under the delusion that everyone’s just dumb enough to rush in under the expectations that slavers tell the truth, especially when there’s a bigger pot out there. Nah... Only my dumb ass is scuffed enough to come out under enemy fire and get you.” Lillian chirped while she pulled a silvered blaster and his helmet from her hip and threw them at Wulfram’s feet.

“Don’t know who has your long knife or if you even thought about bringing a saber for this mission, but we need to move.” She commanded as Wulfram held up his handcuffs.

“Kinda stuck, here, Dove. Got a way to unbind these.” He questioned as he did his best to shuffle his gear into place, then walked towards her, holding the cuffs forward again.

A single blaster round between them split the links of the cheap chain.

“Next time, I’ll leave you bound, so your kids can keep you under control. Old bastard.” She menaced as she pushed the blaster to his chest, then pointed down the hall.

“How do I know that’s really you under there, Lil, and not one of the bandits just using a holoprojector to show me the armour of the only other Mandalorian besides the one I was arguing with at base camp?” Wulfram asked as he checked the fittings of his helmet and pulled the hookups loose so he could hook back into his bodysuit.

“Always making me show you my face. Karking...” The woman turned to face him and unlinked her helmet from her bodysuit, lifting it to expose her face and her braided crown of hair, only to have her face grabbed by Wulfram and pulled to his in a kiss.

Shocked, she dropped her helmet. Outright displays of affection had never been either soldier’s forte but after the last few botched extractions, and the constant ‘family time’ with his daughters, neither one of them felt the need to question this moment.

“Gedin’la’dala!” He exclaimed after he let his lips fall from hers and picked her helmet up. “You risked so much more than my worthless life coming here.”

“Don’t you start! You have no right!” She shot back as she raised her blaster and shot a single round down the hallways, a resounding scream falling as a man fell behind Wulfram.

“You have so much to answer for and your daughters are going to chastise you for calling yourself worthless, you petty, oafish, bastard!”

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