

Moving Forward

Yuanming

Zsoldos

41 ABY

If you looked at Yuanming, you would see a side of Mandalorians that the galaxy rarely experienced. Humidity hung in the air as the scorching sun beat down below in the Zsoldos afternoon. If the ban on weapons wasn't already enough to signify something was amiss, the lights flashed through the streets as the festival commemorating the dead buzzed with food, drink, and dancing.

So much dancing.

Mandalorians were known in only a handful of ways. Honourable warriors following a code, blood-thirsty mercenaries looking to fill their pockets with *credits, not words*, or in rare cases, pacifists the likes of which Satine Kryze would have approved. All three types made a resurgence within the Brotherhood, especially within Clan Vizsla. They were not, however, known as the type to party like meandering teenagers after the last day of school.

Anders didn't approve. It just wasn't his scene. The loud noises, the music, the smell of sweat and vomit, and not to mention the drunken rapport of people barging into his shoulders with every step they took. Hell, if he didn't know any better, he could have sworn he felt someone try to steal the credits out of his pockets once or twice. Where was the respect for the dead? Where was the camaraderie for those lost, Mandalorian or otherwise? It was completely disrespectful in Anders' eyes. The temptation to retrieve his weapon and slice a few arms swelled within him like a sandstorm. He felt it grow, rising to the surface like a balloon ready to burst.

Alas, he was an Inquisitor. He knew how to show restraint when required. A diplomatic incident with Clan Vizsla was *not* something he cherished the idea behind.

The thought of the ensuing paperwork alone made him shudder.

Anders believed he understood Mandalorians fairly well, but this just went and proved you don't truly know a culture until you experienced it first-hand. He

wasn't impressed. From under the shade of the resort, it seemed more like an excuse to get drunk and cause trouble, little more than a reason to celebrate for celebration's sake. It was tactless. He scoffed at a nearby citizen throwing up the contents of his stomach on the sidewalk outside the resort, only to give a loud cheer as he ran back into the festivities supported by the rest of his hooligan entourage.

Luckily, Anders had BUDD-E and Draca to keep his thoughts preoccupied. Whenever the little droid felt the Chiss tense, it would nestle its head into Anders' shoulder, gently reminding him that it was there. It was a small gesture, but a comforting one nonetheless.

Draca, meanwhile, hadn't left Anders' side, likely out of respect, and also likely out of concern. The young Zabrak Jedi had intelligence beyond his years, both intellectually and emotionally. Anders wasn't stupid. He knew Draca was eager to explore the festival and see what was what. Yet, he stayed by Anders' side out of concern, and perhaps a bit of obligation too. Yet, the young man shifted from one foot to the other constantly. He wasn't the type to sit still and do nothing.

For a Jedi, he had very little patience.

"Are you having fun, Draca?"

Anders posed the question out of the blue, surprising the young Zabrak.

"Oh, um... yes, yes I am."

Anders rolled his eyes. What Draca lacked in patience, he made up for with blind loyalty. "You are a terrible liar. You don't have to stay with me, you know. You can go explore. I don't mind."

"No," Draca shook his head. "It's OK. I want to be here with you."

"Draca," Anders looked him dead in the eyes. "There's no sense in us both moping here. This sort of venue isn't for me, but it's obvious you want to have a look around. You are practically ogling at anyone who walks past with anything from the festival."

The Zabradi Jedi turned his head away, his cheeks flushing a bright red.

"Go. I'll be fine," Anders folded his arms across his chest.

"Are you sure?" Draca said, concern evident in his tone.

"Draca, I will Mind Trick you in a minute," Anders deadpanned.

The young Jedi held up his hands defensively. "OK, OK! I'm going, I'm going! Just... look after yourself, yeah?"

Anders rolled his eyes. "I'm a grown man. I will be fine."

Draca smiled at him, then attempted to close the distance between them with his arms stretched out wide.

'Seriously, Again?'

Anders held out his hand, stopping the young man from approaching further. "For the last time, Draca. I do not like hugs. Stop asking for one. The answer will always be no."

"Sorry, sorry! You never tell me anything about yourself. How am I supposed to know?" Draca backed away slowly, flashing a sheepish smile as he did before running out of the main entrance to the resort.

Anders ran his hands down his face and let out a heavy sigh. There was a reason he didn't talk about himself very much. "That boy, I swear..."

One day, Draca was going to be the death of him. He didn't know how, but he would bet his ship on it.

"So I hear you are looking for a place to pay your respects?"

A Mandalorian woman practically encased in their precious beskar approached Anders. She was lithe from what he could tell, her armour a pristine white mixed with orange flames down the left side. Anders' eyes were drawn to her figure which, somehow, her armour seemed to cling to.

"Hey!" she clicked her fingers in front of Anders' face. "Eyes up here!"

The Chiss smiled coyly at her. "I apologise. Though, I must say, your armour fits you quite nicely..."

"Meshita," she held her hand out towards him, which Anders graciously took.

He *liked* her.

That is, until she leaned towards him. A sudden tight, shocking pain encompassed his wrist. Anders' eyes shot fully open.

"I heard what you said to that Jedi, Anders was it? Try any of your space-wizard kark on me, and I'll make sure to put you through the nearest wall. Understand?"

She let go before Anders could give his response. OK, *maybe* he didn't like her so much anymore. He tentatively rubbed his wrist as Meshita tilted her helmet back, not enough to reveal her face, but enough to allow her a good gulp of the drink in her hand.

So, she was one of *those* kinds of Mandalorians.

BUDD-E beeped its concern into the Chiss' ear, ready to leap from his shoulder and defend its master with righteous fury, though Anders halted it before it could.

He wanted to handle this matter himself.

"Strong words from someone who won't reveal her face in public," Anders scoffed.

"Oh, yeah? And what do you know about Mandalorians, huh?" she got right in his face.

"Enough to know that if you refuse to show your face, that means you have something to hide. I specialise in extracting such information, willing or otherwise. I can take your worst memories and force you to relive them. I would think carefully before you threaten me again."

Meshita didn't budge, holding her ground like a stubborn rancor. Then, to Anders' surprise, she burst into raucous laughter. What in Yuanming was with this woman?

"You... I like you." she gasped between her fit of laughter. "Alright, you've got spunk. I like that. Come on, I'll take you somewhere proper where you can pay your respects."

Anders raised a brow. "What reason do you have that I should trust you?"

Meshita shrugged. "You don't have to. You can just stay here and sulk instead for the rest of the festival if you prefer. Better make your mind up quickly, cause I'm out! See ya!"

The Mandalorian woman waved as she disappeared out of the resort entrance. Anders didn't know what to do. He didn't necessarily trust her, but staying rooted in place didn't appeal to him either. Should he stay, or should he go?

"Buddy, go find Draca. Make sure he stays out of trouble."

The little droid tilted its head, asking the obvious question.

What about you?

Anders groaned. "You as well? I'll be fine, really," he gave BUDD-E a reassuring smile as placed the little droid on the ground. Anders had made up his mind. He was going to follow her.

Though, where she was taking him remained to be seen.

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Great Fields of Yuanming

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"Here we are!" Meshita proclaimed with wide-open arms. "The Great Fields!"

The scenery, to Anders, didn't justify the gesture. It was a set of wide-open desert fields with various trees growing among them. Amidst the sand were pathways that snaked along various mounds. Alongside them were various ornaments of origins that the Chiss couldn't fathom.

Anders was *not* impressed, to say the least.

"This is it?" he deadpanned her, not hiding his disappointment.

"Yep!" Meshita placed her hands on her hips. "I come here all the time. It's one of the few places that is left untouched by the festival."

She could say that again. It was practically deserted. There was no-one as far as the eye could see, yet the pathway seemed to stretch on for miles. All in all, it felt forgotten. Yet, it seemed at least *someone* had been taking care of it.

"I come here all the time," Meshita's tone had gone soft. She placed her hands in front of her as she slowly walked down one of the many pathways, stopping at one of the ornaments buried in the sand. She dropped to her knees, clearing away some dirt from the ornament.

Anders' curiosity got the best of him. Sure, he should have left her, but he wasn't an Inquisitor for no reason. He approached cautiously, looking down at the ornament Meshita was cleaning. Upon further inspection, there appeared to be

inscriptions upon it in what Anders could only assume was Mando'a. It looked like a plaque, given its rectangular shape.

"What does it say?" he asked her.

"Ronnesh Ingot entered *Manda* giving his life for Clan Vizsla. This is the way," Meshita returned to her feet, standing over the plaque with her hands held together in front of her. Her helmet never left sight of it. "He was my brother. He died defending Zsoldos from the Children of Mortis when they attacked."

Anders let out a soft sigh. He knew what this place was now. It was a place of remembrance. That's why it was maintained, and why Meshita brought him here. His view of it changed instantly.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

"It's OK. He died protecting his home, fighting alongside his brothers and sisters in arms. For a Mandalorian, there's no better way to die. He at least took a few of those *things* down with him. In the end, we drive them out."

"Ah," Anders nodded approvingly. "Then justice was served."

"Not really," Meshita shrugged. "We'll never get him back, or all those who died that day. How can you call that justice?"

"The Children of Mortis will pay for what they did. Not just for here, but all across Brotherhood space."

"I hope so. No-one deserves to see their sibling die, no matter the circumstances."

Anders and Meshita fell into a comfortable silence, neither saying a word to the other for several minutes. The Inquisitor got the impression that she was often out here alone, and just proffered the company for a change. Anders wasn't one to comfort others. He didn't really know how, but if being here helped, then that was good enough.

"What about you?" Meshita finally asked. "Got any family you are mourning?"

Anders chuckled lightly. "I have family, but I am certainly not mourning them."

The Mandalorian woman tore her gaze away from the plaque to look at Anders, the obvious question implicit.

"I was a Force-sensitive youth on Csilla, or as my father would often shout, a *freak*. The Force is not easily tolerated within the Chiss Ascendancy. I was kicked out of my home, only to be taken for my talents rather than who I was."

Anders didn't know why he was revealing so much about himself. Information was the downfall of greater enemies, that was what his training within the Inquisitorius had drilled into him. Yet, he felt an odd sense of calm and comfort with Meshita he had rarely experienced.

It was... nice.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"Don't be," Anders waved away the condolences "I miss them not. Truthfully, I am blissfully unaware if they are alive or dead. I prefer to keep it that way."

"What about anyone else?"

The question posed by Meshita was a tough one to answer.

And yet...

"There is... one," Anders stated. He took a deep breath to steady himself. "I was four years old when I was taken into the Seekers Program within the Chiss Ascendancy. I befriended a young girl. We took every class together, learnt together, ate together... we were inseparable."

The briefest of smiles flashed across Anders' face before it vanished altogether.

"Then she got sick. It started with something like the common flu, but she never got better. She had a rare variant of a treatable illness that infected her bloodstream. She was my best friend for a full year before she passed. The Ascendancy..."

Anders clenched his fists.

"They treated her like an expendable tool. We were only as valuable so long as we could make use of our *gifts*. She received medical attention twice in the lead-up to her death, but they claim to have found nothing until they examined her blood after she passed."

"You suspect she was neglected?" Meshita asked.

"I don't suspect it. I *know* she was. Twice she received the best possible care, and yet the result was death?" Anders shook his head. "Regardless... it doesn't change anything now. What happened, happened. Justice will eventually be served. I'll make sure of it."

They fell into another silence, though this one more tense than the last.

It was Meshita who broke it again moments later. "You haven't had many friends, have you?"

Anders let out a snort. "Is it that obvious? Outside of her, my only real companions in my life have been my fellow Sky-walkers during my youth, my little droid, and Draca."

"Have you considered letting him know more about all this?"

The Chiss Inquisitor raised a brow towards her. "What makes you think I haven't?"

"Just a... hunch I've got. You don't seem like the type to share much. You seem like a bit of a recluse. Can I give you a bit of advice?"

"Do I have a choice?" Anders rolled his eyes at her.

Meshita, however, seemed to ignore his snide remark. "Trust him. He seems like a good kid, and for whatever reason, he looks up to you. I can see it in the way he talks to you, looking for your approval."

"He shouldn't *need* my approval," Anders scoffed and folded his arms across his chest.

"Well, he does," Meshita put her foot down on the matter. "Thing is, friendship is a two-way deal. You can't take it without giving back. It's unhealthy. This trauma you've gone through, you might find it easier if you open yourself up a little bit at a time. It's never easy, of course not. Every day brings its own challenges, but bit by bit, it might help you move forward."

"I..."

"Anders!"

Speak of the hawk-bat, and he shall appear. They both turned in the direction of the voice to see Draca running towards them with BUDD-E nestled on his shoulder.

Meshita looked at Anders, and if the Inquisitor didn't know any better, he could have sworn she was smiling at him behind her helmet.

"Think about what I said, OK? It was nice meeting you," she offered a hand out to him.

Anders smiled as he took her hand in his own, giving it a firm shake. "Likewise."

She walked away from the fields just as Draca arrived. He seemed somewhat out of breath judging by his raspy breathing. Had he run all the way here?

"Hi, Anders!" He said, taking a moment to catch his breath. "Who was that?"

"A... friend," Anders watched as her figure disappeared out of sight. "What made you come here?"

"Buddy," Draca stood beside him, providing the opportunity for the little droid in question to jump onto Anders' shoulder. "He found me in the middle of the festival. He seemed panicked about something so I came to find you. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, like I said I would be," that came out a little harsher than Anders intended. Meshita's words echoed in his thoughts.

Trust him.

"This is the Great Fields. It's a place to pay your respects to those lost," Anders continued, gazing back towards the plaque on the ground.

"Oh..." Draca placed his hands in front of him and lowered his head, paying his respects to those departed. After a few moments, he raised his head. "It's a beautiful place, Anders. Peaceful. I like it here."

"Zenod'ande'rson."

Draca tilted his head. "E-Excuse me, sir?"

"Zenod'ande'rson," Anders said slower this time to make sure Draca heard it properly. "It's my name. The name I was given at birth."

Draca went wide-eyed and slack-jawed. He couldn't believe it. Yep, that was the reaction Anders expected. Even BUDD-E nearly fell off his shoulder.

The Chiss turned his head slowly, facing Draca. "Under no circumstances are you to reveal that information to anyone. Am I understood? Not the Inquisitorius, not Taldryan, not even the Grand Master should it ever happen."

"O-Of course!" Draca stammered, still reeling from the revelation. "I'd never betray you like that!"

"Good," Anders gave Draca a small nod, then tore his gaze from him again. "My name is a... particular sore spot for me. It's a reminder of my youth, which was far from pleasant. I do not trust easily, as you know, but... I will... try... for your sake. You deserve that much at the very least."

Anders stopped when he felt a pair of arms embrace him at his side. He tensed, his heart skipping a beat. He ground his teeth together. How many times did he have to tell Draca that he did not like hugs? Why did the young man never listen to him on the matter!? Anders was ready to chastise the young man but...

No words left his mouth.

Trust him.

The Chiss took several deep breaths. Truth be told, he couldn't remember the last time he was hugged with fondness and comfort. It was alien to him. What should he do? Stand there? Return the gesture?

In the end, he settled for patting Draca on the shoulder, prompting the young man to let him go.

"Sorry," Draca rubbed the back of his neck. "You don't like hugs."

"No, I don't," Anders' tone was almost scolding in nature, but then his lips curved into a smile. "Thank you, Draca. I feel... better. Come along, I think it's time for us to leave."

"Yes, sir."

"Do not turn that into a habit. Like I said, I don't like hugs."

"Of course not, Anders. I would never dream of it."

Somehow, Anders got the feeling that wouldn't be the last hug he ever got from Draca. Weirdly, he felt lighter at the thought. Maybe in time, he could learn to accept it.

For now, he needed to move forward, one step at a time. At least he wasn't alone...

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