

Personal log: 37:07:15, Coruscant

I have often heard it said that bad news travels faster than light speed but that is not always true because were it the truth I would have heard about what had happened to Merlyn at the Bunduki Trials long before my return to the Core.

It was late when I landed on the small secluded pad at the palace. I do not feel the need for a loud flashy welcoming party upon my return and take great pains to assure my comings and goings are kept quiet. To my surprise I was met by Taisto Kjestyll. He is a remarkable man and I had already heard many good things about him from Merlyn but this face to face was unexpected. Before he even spoke I knew the news would not be to my liking and it was his wish that I be briefed by him on what occurred at the trials before I could hear this news from anyone else.

I sat in the quiet of his private studio and listened without interruption while he told me what had taken place. Although he did not embellish the events which had taken place I found his retelling disturbingly vivid and it was difficult not to react emotionally. Only once he was done did I ask the unanswered question. *Why.*

His explanation was succinct and placed the blame squarely upon the Griff boys whose plan, despite the outcome, was remarkably clever however he managed to make it clear without actually saying a word that there was much more to this story than he was telling me. I was most intrigued to learn how there was no way that under normal circumstances these boys would have known about the Rite of Tet'zais-tjiumei but of course such information is always available to those who seek it. I read between the lines and when I hinted at my summation I was rewarded with a slow nod. This has Palpatine's stench all over it and I find, even now, my anger at him knows no bounds. When I asked Taisto if he had spoken with the Emperor about discussing these events with me upon my return he replied with the negative.

"I understand you wish to know why I am telling you this now before you meet with anyone else so I will explain. I felt that you should be made aware of her situation as soon as possible by me. As her teacher and trainer I am responsible for her and I feel that in this case I have failed her. I could have stopped this fight but I did not there are many reasons for this not the least of which was I felt it necessary to allow her to choose her own path. I did not think it would go as far as it did. I believed that she would best the Griff boy and then walk away, which she tried to do, but instead of being satisfied with this outcome he chose not to stay down, he chose to take the fight to the bitter end because his anger and his rage blinded him. She had a split second to decide between life and death. As I have always known and I suspect you do as well, she chose life. However, as I have explained, the injuries she sustained were dire. It was your name she kept crying, it was for you she whispered as her heart stopped the first time." He told me. "In my experience people on the edge of death do not call out for those they do not care deeply for."

I asked for clarification on his statement about her heart stopping the first time.

"She had broken ribs one of which had punctured her left lung, she was bleeding internally and the shock of the trauma was quite hard on her system. We were fortunate that we had expert medics at the event and the trauma team at the emergency med lab knew their jobs. Once Lord Vader was informed he had her moved to what is probably one of the best medical facilities on this planet and the care she received there is what saved her arm and her life. She crashed while they were preparing her for tank immersion and her heart stopped twice." He explained. He paused and took stock of how this information affected me. "Admiral, I have

trained this girl for long enough to understand that you are important to her and now that we have met I can see that it is you who helped to guide her on her warrior's path. It was you who were present at her first kill and if I am not mistaken it was also you who recognised this and named her in a traditional rite of passage."

When I asked if she had told him about this he negated by shaking his head.

"I did not need details to see she had changed upon her return to Naboo. She also does not always do a very good job of hiding things from the people she likes and trusts. This was easy for me to read. You must remember I have been training young people for a very long time and reading this girl is not difficult. She had changed and I was able to piece together much of the story without her having to betray secrets or confidences. You honoured her by acknowledging this rite of passage and in doing so you also honoured me. I return this honour now by making certain that you have been properly apprised of her situation. She brushed death several times after her fight with the Griff boy but her will to live is very strong and you needed to be made aware of this before you see her because even with all the medical care and time in the bacta tank her appearance will upset you as I see my news has done. She has lost weight and she has killed another human. You are a warrior, you have been in combat so you will understand what taking a life means but she did not until that moment. I can assure you once she has time to think about this she will need compassion and someone who not only cares about her but comprehends the traumatic experience and all its meanings and implications."

I acknowledged my understanding in this and we would have spoken more but my comm interrupted letting me know that Palpatine was ready to see me for our arranged debriefing.

"I am at your service Admiral. I believe that you will wish to speak with me further on this matter. Now I believe you should not keep the Emperor waiting."

He was right and keeping Palpatine waiting is never a good idea.

The meeting with the Emperor meeting was long and difficult and I have never been more grateful for my Chiss training than at that moment nor was I ever more grateful for the forewarning from Taisto. I did not flinch when Palpatine casually brought up the fight and the fact that Merlyn was injured. He seemed to take great delight in giving me some of the messy details as if he were hoping to see a reaction from me but if raising a single eyebrow and casually asking about her status gave him any satisfaction then there is not much I can do about it. He is more than aware of the situation between Vader's assistant and myself but I do not wish to give him any more ammunition than is necessary. I am already quite certain that he will eventually find a way to use this relationship and my attachment to his tactical advantage I certainly do not need to help him.

The briefing was tediously lengthy and for the most part unnecessary as Palpatine already had most of the information I gave him but again this is one of the ways in which he asserts dominion over those who work for him and I have long since learned that sometimes one must simply play it his way in order to move forward. I do not mind repeating superfluous information but I dislike the wasting of time. It was late by the time we were through and I considered going home but my desire to see for myself that Merlyn is alive and recovering was stronger.

This is not the first time I have seen her injured or even near death but it is the first time I have seen her looking so broken and so horribly frail. According to Master Taisto she was submerged in bacta for nearly two months and the surgeries required to put her shoulder back together took many hours. The recovery and physical therapy will take even longer and be very painful.

She was sleeping when I arrived at the private medical facility and I did not wish to wake her so I sat by the bed and rested. Most of the bruising has long faded but I read the medical report and truly it is a wonder that she is alive. The strength and sheer will power she has amazes me but I worry now at how killing this boy in such a manner will affect her. She has a remarkably bad habit of not dealing very well with traumatic experiences, bottling the negative emotions deeply with her and withdrawing from the world around her

When she awoke I cannot believe how much relief flooded through me, surprising me with its intensity and even more so when she joked with me. Nearly dying, it seems, does not impair her quirky sense of humour any and I was oddly grateful for this even if I didn't laugh. I recall the feeling of concern I had when she nearly lost her life onboard of my ship due to an allergic reaction and when I compare that with how I feel now I understand how far my own attachment to her has grown.

We spoke a little of what happened and I could see the anguish and the guilt in her face as she talked about Riori Griff. She is not motivated by greed or vengeance and knew nothing of such things yet she has become the center for those who do and the pain it has caused her makes me so very angry, an emotion I thought I dealt with effectively and yet I find in this situation I do not. I am furious that someone deliberately placed her in such a life and death situation. I am too emotionally involved. I wanted to gather her in my arms and take the pain away and when she started to cry the sensation of helplessness grew. What is it about a woman in tears that can reduce a man to this? All I could do was try to be a comfort and I am not certain I succeeded in this. She needs time to heal.

I kept the visit short. She was weak, depressed and in pain. I did not want to add to her current stress instead I remained at her side until she fell asleep and then after consulting with the doctor in charge of her I went to my apartment and slept.

For the next few weeks I will be entrenched in meetings with the Council of Twelve as well as with Palpatine and several of his advisors. This means I shall be busy and have little time to consider my current emotional state as far as Merlyn is concerned. The work I have been doing will come under scrutiny and the endeavours to balance both the vision that Palpatine has of conquering the Unknown Regions with the desire to amass more wealth and knowledge in a manner that does not antagonise those who will eventually come under the Empire's rule is difficult at best.

I understand that underneath much of the superficial reasons given for my role in this there lies the malevolent threat of invasion from a force of beings far superior and far more vicious than most denizens of this galaxy can imagine. As we make slow contingency plans for a possible attack I formulate strategies of my own. It was never my intention to remain under Palpatine's rule forever but rather to stay for as long as being here served my purposes, one of which was protecting my own people, something I cannot do effectively while under Chiss narrow minded constraints. I certainly never intended to find friends or become emotionally attached to anyone here yet these things have happened and I find that I am not unhappy about it although in some respects such attachments do complicate things slightly. I am certain Palpatine feels that he will eventually use these attachments to his advantage, sometimes he already does although he is careful when it comes to playing this game with me. While he feels he is in control he does not know where my boundaries are nor does he know how far he can push me. So far the jax and rodent games have been civil but I wonder how long that will continue for as he searches for more ways to hold me to his will. What is even more intriguing is the fact that he thinks he can. Unfortunately for him in spite of or perhaps because of all of his power

he has not quite figured out that undying loyalty does not come from fear but from respect and in the end respect is earned not coerced. One only has to look in the direction of the rebels who have managed to destroy a great deal of military and strategic targets to see this theory at work. What was thought to be a small group of unhappy troublemakers has turned into a fully blown rebellion and I do not believe they plan on stopping their campaign until they overthrow this government. If that should happen I dread to think of the consequences should this empire fracture and fall especially if such an invasion as we currently speculate upon should happen.

In the mean time I endeavour to keep myself busy because in the small hours of the night when things are quiet and I have time to reflect on things of a more personal nature I find myself thinking about a possible future with someone at my side instead of being alone and while there is much joy in such a possibility there is also fear. I have lost people I care deeply for in the past and these losses have challenged my Chiss sensibilities. I have no wish to experience that level of emotional pain again but of course such a desire is foolish, there is no such thing as life without loss or pain. I am a coward for trying to avoid it by burying myself in my work instead of doing what I really wish to do which is to see if Merlyn is well enough to receive visitors and spend some time in her company assuring myself that she is still alive and well and that her delightful spirit is still intact and not broken by the most recent and unfortunate event.