

Ahsoka could literally feel people watching her as she made her way out of the hangar and deeper into the tunnels of Thila command. The Force sang with curiosity as she walked, the people around her wondering just who she was and why she had been given such quick access to the high-level hangar bay. She wasn't surprised, and it didn't slow her down in the slightest. She was used to being stared at. She was even used to the curl of suspicion that ran under all of that curiosity.

She made her way down a few floors, confident in her steps, despite never having been to this base before. Eventually, she arrived at her destination and stopped in front of a thick metal door, armed guards on either side. Rather than admit who she was, she reached through to the other side, where she felt the familiar presence of an old friend.

"Let her in," General Syndulla called from inside her office, surprising the two guards, as they had yet to announce her.

"Yes, General," The taller of the two guards said, reaching behind himself, the door opening a moment after.

Ahsoka nodded and stepped into the room, casting her eyes around as she subconsciously looked for any hidden threats. Finding none, she focused on the green-skinned Twi'lek sitting at her desk, looking down at a large datapad. The Togruta sat down across from the rebel general, wordlessly waiting for the general to finish what she was working on. After about a minute, she tapped a final time, the datapad going dark as she looked up at her guest.

"Sorry, just working through the first stages of our plan for the final exodus from Yavin IV," She admitted. "The ground forces that are still stuck behind the blockade are getting desperate, so we are working around the clock to get everyone out. It's going to be close... We could use your help."

"...Will he be there?"

"Luke?" Hera asked, the red-skinned Force user nodding in confirmation. "Most likely, he has been working hard to put the move together."

"... I will think about it," She responded after a long moment. "I am worried that once he learns about me, he will assume that I am there to guide him. Or worse, training him. That cannot happen, I will not accept it. I am not a Jedi, I will not train one."

Hera nodded, leaning back in her chair, grabbing a glass of some sort of liquid as she went. Silently she took a sip, gesturing if Ahsoka wanted anything. When the once Jedi Knight shook her head, the rebel general continued.

"How is he?" She finally asked, her voice soft, showing just how worried she was about the answer.

"He... will survive," Ahsoka responded, a frown on her face. "He spent nearly a year submerged completely in the Force, resisting Thrawn's... interrogations. When Thrawn couldn't break him, he locked him in a cell and threw away the key. Probably meant to use him as bait, or as a hostage."

"Where? On the *Chimaera*?" Hera asked. "How did he keep it functioning? How did he escape? The Purrgil...?"

"Thrawn... he had resources out there. I don't know where from or how, but when we reached the end of Ezra's Force trail, Thrawn had managed to build a base of power, something like a governor of a planet," She explained, shaking her head. "He is dangerous, brilliant, and cunning, but even that doesn't explain how fast he managed to build a power block, even out in the unknown regions, and even with a fully functional Star Destroyer, never mind the wreck that his flagship was when it disappeared."

"You think there was something else at play?"

"I *know* there was something else at play, I could feel it," She responded. "He had to have been getting help from somewhere, whether it was money, materials, or other resources, I don't know. I'm reasonably sure it wasn't the Empire, simply because of how lax security was, but that's all I can really say."

"That is worrying," Hera said, chewing her lip. "We will keep an eye out to the Unknown Regions, but there isn't much we can do right now. We barely have enough resources as is, and we don't have the manpower to send out on exploration missions."

"I know, but we need to be careful."

"What kind of shape was he in when you found him?" Hera asked, bringing the conversation back to Ezra, the whole point for Ahsoka's mission into the unknown regions.

"He spent so much time open to the Force it took us a while to get through to him," Ahsoka admitted. "It was slow going, but he is recovering. Sabine is staying with him, she brought him somewhere he could connect with to help ground him to the present."

"The Comm Tower?"

"The Comm Tower," she confirmed with a small smile before frowning. "Mentally, he should recover. Physically... he will need a few prosthetics and.... And cosmetic surgery."

Hera was silent for a long moment before letting out a series of curses, some of which Ahsoka understood, but many she didn't. Her R'yloth accent came through as she let her frustration and anger loose. When Hera was done, she all but slammed her drink down on her desk.

"Thrawn has a lot to answer for," She said, a dark look on her face. "When Yavin IV is finally evacuated..."

"As much as I would like to join you, we can't," Ahsoka said, shaking her head. "We couldn't spare the ships or the manpower. At least, not enough to take down what he managed to build up."

Hera took another deep breath, grasping at her frustration and slowly getting it under control. After about thirty seconds of failing, she settled for distracting herself, leaning down and opening a drawer in her desk, pulling out a normal-sized datapad. She put it on her desk and slid it across to Ahsoka, who caught it as it fell off the side, using the Force just enough to keep the Datapad from falling.

"What's this?" She asked, activating the device and scrolling through a series of videos.

"That is a recording that one of our newer commanders gathered for us. He went missing for a few months, long enough that we pronounced him dead, before he showed up here, very much alive. He was captured and sold into slavery on Nar Shaddaa, stuck there for close to six months," She explained. "He was rescued by a team of escaped slaves, who were harassing the slave traders to gather credits in preparation to leave the planet and start a mercenary company. The leader was a man named Deacon Roy, who Commander Loc reported to have strange abilities."

When she was done, she gestured to the tablet. Ahsoka activated the handheld computer and watched the video feed displayed. After a few seconds of watching, her eyes went wide, darting up to look at General Syndulla.

"Is this real?" She asked, eyes dipping back down to the handheld computer screen.

"Commander Loc swears it is, and the trusted data analysis expert I had verify it seems to agree."

Before Ahsoka could comment, the video continued, this time with the voice of the camera's focus coming through, explaining that they weren't a Jedi and that they were not using the Force.

She looked down, focusing back on the video, her jaw dropping as she watched Deacon Roy summon something from nowhere, heal with a glowing outstretched hand and cover himself with some sort of energy barrier armor.

"I... I don't know what to say... I have never seen anything like that," She finally admitted, shaking her head as she scrolled back through the footage, letting it play through

again. "The closest I could say I've seen is the magic of the Nightsisters... but even that is something very different."

"How so?"

"Their magic was a Force ability similar to Sith alchemy. They used chants and mantras instead of rage, will and an iron grip on the Force to change the physical world around them," She explained, eyes glued to the screen. "It requires a grip on the dark side, at a level that is... It's not something you can have without signs. You can *feel* it in the air, feel it pressing down on you."

"Even if you aren't force-sensitive?" Hera asked, leaning forward and putting her elbows on her desk.

"When it's used so obviously? Absolutely," She answered confidently. "Drops in temperature, bouts of anger, disgust, fear... Do you consider this Loc to be a good person?"

"As much as I can anyone under my command," She answered, looking curious. "Why?"

"If this Deacon was tapping into the dark side of the Force deep enough to perform that level of physical manipulation, a good person would feel the rage and would probably feel revolted. It would be like standing next to a rampaging, dangerous animal," She explained. "To just stand there like that? I can't imagine anyone being able to do that, at least not someone with any decency at all."

"And the light side of the Force?" She asked. "It couldn't do something like this?"

"I... General Syndulla, you know my past. You know why and when I left the Order behind. Maybe if I had become a Master, I would have a better answer for you, or at least speak with a little more confidence..." She trailed off, taking a deep breath, visibly trying to rack her brain for answers. "I know there are many abilities the Order did not teach to Padawans or Knights. I don't know why, though if I had to guess, it was because they saw such direct manipulations of the Force, taking it and forcing it to do exactly what you wanted, as leaning towards the dark. The Sith saw the Force as a tool, a hammer, to use it as such was beneath, or even dangerous for a Jedi."

Despite all her training and experience at keeping her emotions calm, it wasn't hard to see the conflicted thoughts that ran through Ahsoka's mind as she looked back on her time as a student in the Jedi Order. Eventually, after a long time sorting through the thoughts bouncing through her head, she spoke again.

"I don't know what to make of it. The Force... it's telling me he isn't to be feared," She admitted, leaning back in the chair, looking up at General Syndulla. "Beyond that... I don't know. Where is he now?"

"After rescuing Commander Loc, he came here, dropping him off in a ship they stole to escape Nar Shadda. We offered our connection with a shipbroker as a thank you, both for rescuing the Commander and for selling the ship and its cargo to us for cheap," She explained. "Commander Loc left with them to the shipbroker since he was familiar with them. He then got roped into a material gathering mission, which Deacon Roy suggested as a way to earn the credits required to buy him and his group's new ship."

"Oh really?" She asked, raising an eyebrow. "How did he manage that?"

General Syndulla spent the next fifteen minutes describing the mission outline that Commander Loc and his subordinates had joined Deacon and his crew on, including the resulting resources and credits they saw as a result. Ahsoka listened silently before eventually speaking when she was done.

"Have you made any progress in decoding the computer core?"

"We have. There are two locations so far that we are investigating, one of them is even an option for a temporary base if it turns out like the records described. Once we get some general scans to confirm anything useful, we plan on contacting Deacon's group."

"I want to be a part of that," The orange-skinned Togruta said. "I want to meet him."

"Do you think you will be able to figure out the truth of his abilities?"

"In the same room as him? Absolutely," She answered confidently. "Especially if I am on the ground with him, watching him use his abilities."

"Alright, the investigations should be done in the next few days, you are welcome to stick around and rest... In exchange, I want you to help plan the exodus of Yavin IV."

"... Are you extorting my curiosity to get my help with Yavin IV?" Ahsoka asked, her eyes wide in surprise. "Why? You want to know the truth as much as I do."

"Not really," The Twi'lek rebel corrected, smirking as she crossed her arms, her eyebrow raised in a challenge. "All I care about is if he is a threat to the Rebellion, if he can actually do what Commander Loc claims, and if he is willing to help us. I don't need you there to answer any of those questions."

For a long moment, Ahsoka was silent, studying the woman across the desk from her. Despite her challenging expression, Ahsoka could feel through the Force that she wasn't *really* drawing a line in the sand. If she pushed, she would most likely give in, and given who she used to work with, the General probably knew she could feel that. Still, she could tell she wanted her input badly enough to at least attempt to steer her, even half-heartedly.

"Fine, I will help plan, but that does not mean I will be participating," The ex-Jedi Knight said.

She was lying, of course, there was no way she could take part in planning a skirmish like that and then not be on the ground, not when she could be. She was not the type to make plans and let others fight her battles. And General Syndulla knew that.

"Thank you," She said with a smile. "There is a meeting tonight where we will discuss the recent troop movement and resource additions we have access to."

"... Luke is going to be there, isn't he?"

"Assuming he returns from his duties on time, yes," She responded with a victorious smirk.

"... Dammit."

"Ahsoka, he is a kid. Would it really be so bad if you-"

"Yes. It would." She responded harshly, cutting her off. "I can't be a mentor to him."

"Very well. But you will have to tell him that yourself."

Ahsoka nodded before casting a look back down at the tablet, which was paused with an image of Deacon spraying fire along a duracrete wall. After a few seconds, she placed the compact computer on Hera's desk before standing.

"Thank you for sharing this with me," She said with a slight nod, turning to head for the door, stopping when Hera called out to her.

"Ahsoka..." She said, the Force-sensitive woman turning to face the rebel General. "Thank you for bringing him back. Sabine was desperate but had no idea where to start. Without you..."

"I was keeping a promise," She said, her expressionless face cracking with a small smile. "I couldn't leave him to the mercies of Thrawn."

"Still... Thank you."

Ahsoka nodded again, this time with a much less stoic expression, before leaving back through the door, her mind spinning both with old memories, new mysteries, and coming confrontations.