

STAR WARS®

FATE OF THE JEDI

DRAMATIS PERSONAE





The Saga Continues...

For over three decades, the *Star Wars* universe has been expanding. New drama, new adventures, and new revelations have played out in the pages of bestselling *Star Wars* novels.

Now, a new nine-book series is set to begin. It takes place almost 40 years after the end of *Return of the Jedi*. The classic characters of the *Star Wars* saga are now living legends, starring alongside a new generation of heroes in their endless struggle to bring peace to a beleaguered galaxy.

This is the start of *The Fate of the Jedi*. This brief guide serves as an introduction to this bold new era of *Star Wars* storytelling for those who have never read a *Star Wars* novel before or just need a refresher on the current standing of the characters and worlds of the galaxy far, far away....

The State of the Galaxy

The Clone Wars are distant history. The Galactic Civil War between the Empire and the Rebel Alliance is a fading memory. In the four decades that followed the deaths of Darth Vader and the evil Emperor, the galaxy has known only a few scant stretches of peaceful times.

The Rebel Alliance transformed from a revolutionary military force to a legitimate government—The New Republic—in a long process as it liberated worlds from the iron grip of the Empire. The Senate was restored. Luke Skywalker rebuilt the Jedi Order.

Then, the Yuuzhan Vong came. A violent species of alien invaders, they destroyed entire worlds in their quest to conquer the galaxy. The New Republic teamed with the shrinking Imperial Remnant to counter this threat, and although the alien menace was defeated, the galactic government was just one of many casualties of this brutal war.

From the fragments of the New Republic emerged the Galactic Alliance, but its attempt to enforce order on a war-weary galaxy proved difficult. Isolationists and independent-minded cultures like the Corellians did not bow down to Alliance rule. When the Galactic Alliance came under the draconian rule of a fallen Jedi, Jacen Solo, who adopted the Sith guise of Darth Caedus, this tinderbox exploded into the second Galactic Civil War. Violence erupted between the Alliance and a Confederation of worlds wishing independence. The Jedi Order split from the Alliance, going rogue to take down Caedus, slain by his twin sister, Jaina, the Sword of the Jedi.

By the end of this latest conflict, the galactic players were once again rearranged. The Galactic Alliance is still in power, but a new Chief of State has been installed: a former Imperial, Natasi Daala. The Galactic Empire's influence has grown, as beings everywhere see and appreciate its relative stability and order compared to the shaky years of Alliance rule.

But Daala has never had great love for the Jedi, and their willingness to abandon the Galactic Alliance has given some reason to doubt their reliability or even loyalty. How exactly the Jedi will fit comfortably into this new order remains to be seen....

LUKE SKYWALKER

Farmboy. Pilot. Rebel. Jedi. Grand Master. Father.

Luke Skywalker has come a long way from the starry-eyed farmboy whose biggest concern was picking up power converters from Tosche Station. After helping defeat the Emperor alongside his redeemed father, Skywalker carried out Yoda's dying command to "pass on what he had learned."

At first, Luke's role was very similar to the one he had during the Rebellion. He continued serving as a pilot and military leader for the New Republic, but he gradually withdrew from this active service to pursue his studies in the Force. His travels across the galaxy led him to uncover fragments of Jedi knowledge that the Emperor and his agents had not wholly eradicated. Luke, though, had to improvise in his teaching methods, adopting practices that would have been considered forbidden during the time of Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker. For example, there was no age limitation placed on prospective students, and the idea of romantic attachment was not taboo among this new generation of Jedi.

For many years, the idea of settling down and starting a family seemed impossible to Luke, who was much more focused on larger galactic matters. But fate has a way of laying unexpected paths before a Skywalker. He fell in love with and married Mara Jade, a former Imperial agent who was also powerful in the Force. Together, they had a son, Ben, during a time of great conflict in the galaxy—the invasion of the violent Yuuzhan Vong.

The Yuuzhan Vong War tested the Jedi Order, and ultimately forced Luke to adopt the mantle of Grand Master of the Jedi and reinstate the Jedi Council. The new Jedi Order found difficulty in fitting into the structure of the Galactic Alliance, a situation made worse when the Alliance began adopting some draconian methods of enforcing loyalty among its member worlds. Jacen Solo, Luke's nephew and former student, grew powerful in the Force and—like his grandfather Anakin Skywalker—turned to the dark side in a Faustian bid to bring order and protection to the galaxy and his loved ones. He emerged as Darth Caedus, a Sith Lord, and brought more war and heartbreak to the extended Skywalker family, including murdering Mara Jade Skywalker.

Though tragic, the death of Mara Jade brought Luke and Ben closer than they had ever been before. In *The Fate of the Jedi* series, father and son will depart on an important quest together that will test that bond and their formidable Jedi skills.



HAN SOLO

No one could have predicted that a Corellian smuggler would someday become a First Husband of the New Republic and the father of a new generation of Jedi. But these unlikely events came to be. As Han would say, “Never tell me the odds.”

After the defeat of the Empire, Han was branded as “respectable” by the rogues and pirates he had once done business with. Solo’s role as a general in the Rebel Alliance meant that he became a key player in the New Republic’s formative years. His numerous underworld contacts helped the New Republic in its continued battle with the shrinking Imperial presence in the galaxy. Han eventually married Princess Leia, and together they had three children—the twins, Jacen and Jaina, and their younger brother, Anakin.

Han’s most recognizable traits were passed on to his children—they all exhibited a mix of his sense of humor, his me-

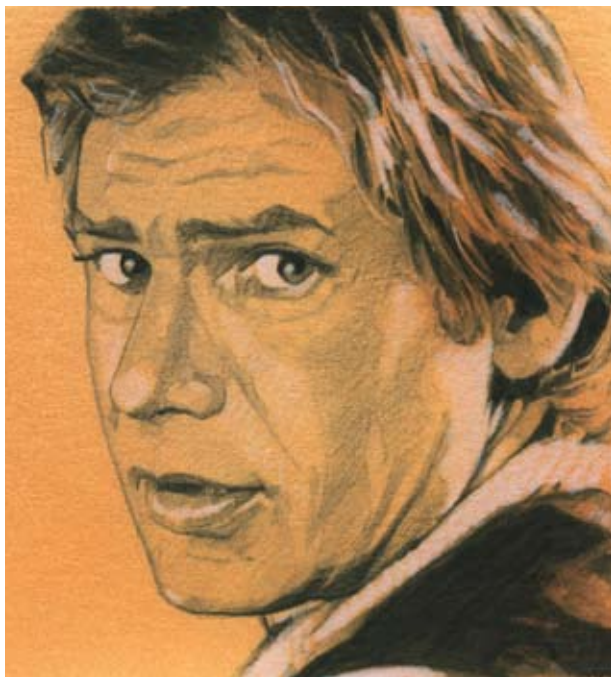
chanical aptitude, and his amazing piloting skills. But the three Solo children were known foremost as some of the most capable Jedi of their generation. It was a world that was alien to Solo—he could not touch the Force and couldn’t experience this particular connection the children shared with their mother. He was nonetheless often dragged into the affairs of the Jedi, in much the same way that he ended up pulled into Leia’s political involvements.

The Yuuzhan Vong War took a heavy toll on the Solo family. One of the earliest casualties of the invasion was Solo’s oldest friend, his beloved Wookiee co-pilot Chewbacca. Chewie’s death hit Han hard, and for a time, he turned his back on his family to exorcise his demons in some of the shadiest corners of the galaxy. Han smartly returned to the love and security that Leia and his family offered him; he would need it, for the next tragedy was the death of his 16-year-old son, Anakin Solo.

By war’s end, Jacen and Jaina would take on principal roles in defeating the Yuuzhan Vong—this war was to their generation

what the original struggle against the Empire had been to Han, Leia, and Luke. Jacen in particular proved to be irrevocably changed by his experiences in the war. During the growing conflict between independent-minded Corellians and an over-reaching Galactic Alliance, Jacen succumbed to the dark side in an attempt to enforce order in the galaxy.

Jacen became Darth Caedus, an evil warlord whose actions resulted in even more destruction and betrayal. To Han, his son was no more—a casualty of the last war. The abomination who replaced him, Caedus, needed to be stopped no matter the cost. It fell to Jaina to defeat and ultimately kill her brother. His reign of terror ended, Jacen left a surprising legacy—a young daughter, Allana, born to the Hapan Queen and former Jedi, Tenel Ka. To keep Allana safe, Han and Leia have now resumed the role of parents, adopting the young girl and raising her under the alias *Amelia*.



LEIA ORGANA SOLO

Since her teen years, Princess Leia has been trying to make the galaxy a better place. Once a Senator from Alderaan, she later served as a leader in the Rebel Alliance. When she discovered she was Luke Skywalker's sister, she found she had to make a choice as to what her role in the changing galaxy would be. Would she pick up the lightsaber?

The needs of politics won out. Leia became one of the foremost leaders of the New Republic, eventually serving as Chief of State. Another important role she played was that of mother—she married Han Solo, and together they had three children. The twins, Jacen and Jaina Solo, and their younger brother, Anakin, all proved strong in the Force. Leia practiced her skills as a Jedi with her brother, but a galaxy of distractions kept her from reaching her full potential.

It was the turmoil of the Yuuzhan Vong War and its fallout that caused Leia to return to her Jedi studies with renewed focus. The tragic deaths of Chewbacca and her youngest son, Anakin, greatly tried the bonds of the Solo family, but they emerged stronger from that terrible crucible. Leia would rarely leave Han's side, and she became the *Millennium Falcon's* co-pilot, capably filling the role left void by the loss of the mighty Wookiee.

Once more, Leia had to let go of one of her children, when it became apparent that Jacen had succumbed to the dark side. It was one of Leia's longest held and deepest fears—that one of her children might one day follow a dark path similar to that of her father, Darth Vader. That it fell to Jaina to kill Jacen was all the more appalling, but Jaina did her duty as a Jedi Knight.

After a lifetime of struggle to keep the galaxy from falling apart, Han and Leia have no real grasp of the concept of retirement. By all rights, they could retreat to a remote and peaceful world and live out a quiet life together, but they are once again thrust to the center of galactic conflict. A new wrinkle this time is that now, decades after their last child reached adulthood, they are once again playing the role of parents. Han and Leia have adopted the daughter that Jacen Solo left behind, and are raising her as their own.

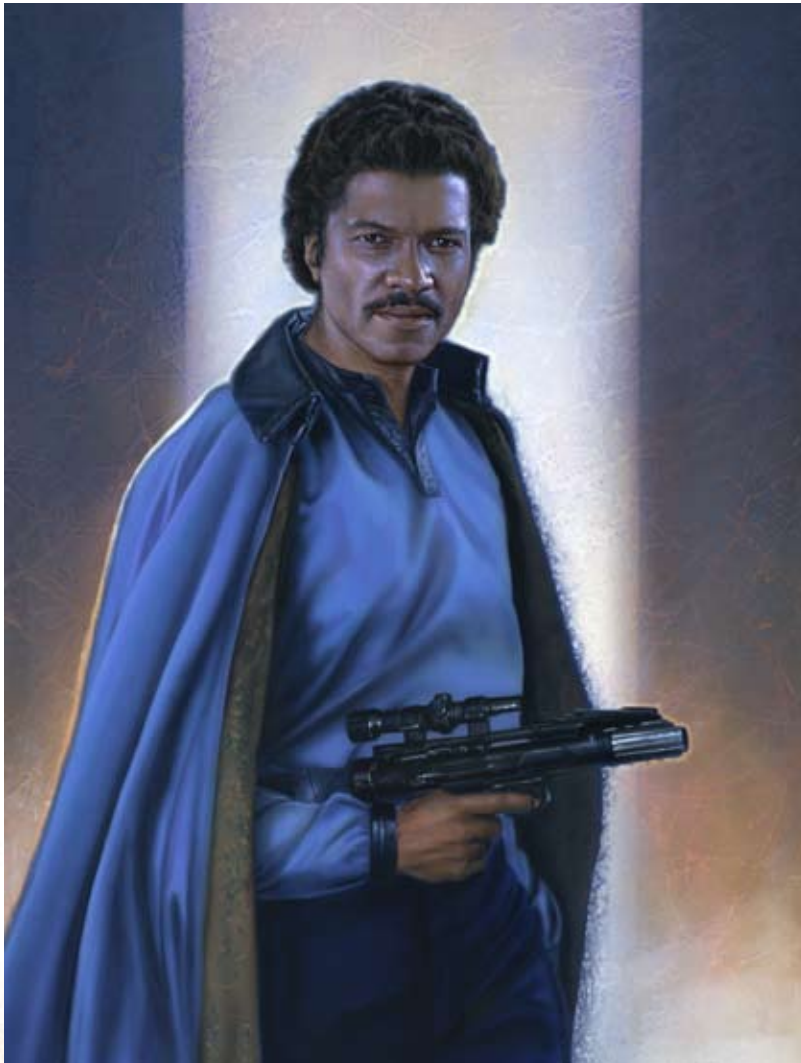


LANDO CALRISSIAN

The consummate gambler and lady's man, Calrissian is always looking for angles and opportunity. Though he stepped up to a larger calling by serving as a general in the massive space battle that saw the destruction of the second Death Star and the deaths of Darth Vader and the Emperor, Calrissian quickly returned to his entrepreneurial ways after the war. In the four decades since, he has started many businesses and made and lost a few fortunes along the way. Always looking for a challenge, he tackled the biggest one when he decided to find a wife.

After a lengthy search for a possible partner compatible in both business and romance, he discovered Tendra Risant. She was a wealthy businesswoman, and together they founded several mining ventures and other profitable enterprises. They are the co-founders of Tendrandro Arms, a weapons-development firm that was a key supplier during the Yuuzhan Vong War.

Lando is now the father of a young boy, Lando Calrissian, Jr., whom he nicknamed "Chance." Lando and Tendra currently own and operate the spice mines of Kessel and remain close friends of the Solo family.



BEN SKYWALKER

The son of Luke and Mara Jade Skywalker, young Ben was born at a time of brutal war. The vicious Yuuzhan Vong destroyed entire worlds in their crusade to conquer the galaxy, and targeted the Jedi specifically as heretics that needed to be destroyed. As the son of Luke Skywalker—grandson of Anakin Skywalker—Ben was genetically predisposed to be an immensely powerful Force user. But, as a young boy, Ben shied away from his connection to the Force. He withdrew, possibly retreating from the constant disturbances in the Force caused by the terrible destruction of the war.

Only one person seemed to be able to coax Ben from out of his shell—his cousin, Jacen Solo. Ben grew connected to Jacen, learning the ways of the Force as his apprentice. When Ben was a teenager, Jacen's explorations of the Force's strange, darkened corners, as well as the growing conflict between Galactic Alliance and independent-minded Corellians, led Jacen to the dark side.

Ben did not see it at first. He saw Jacen as being forced to take the necessary steps to enforce order in the galaxy. Jacen founded a secret police—the Galactic Alliance Guard—to deal with insurrectionists or any who would threaten the peace of the Galactic Alliance. Ben became one of its youngest members, learning effective investigation and combat techniques. In time, Ben came to realize what Jacen was willing to sacrifice in his obsessive pursuit of order. He even discovered the horrible truth that Jacen was a Sith Lord, and that he had murdered his mother, Mara Jade.

The loss of Mara brought Luke and Ben closer together. Ultimately, Jacen was defeated, but at great cost to the Jedi Order and its standing in the galactic government. During The Fate of the Jedi series, Luke will leave the comfortable borders of the Galactic Alliance, heading to parts unknown to find clues to whatever may have twisted Jacen Solo's fate to the dark side. Ben will accompany Luke, bringing his fresh insight, as well as a hard-earned pragmatism far beyond his teenage years.

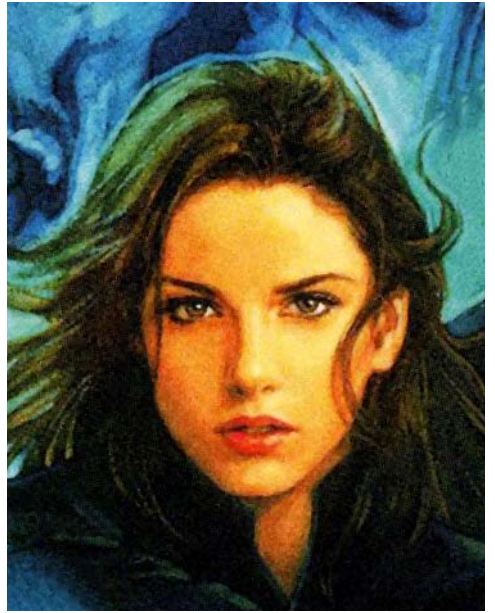


JAINA SOLO

The daughter of Leia and Han Solo, Jaina Solo is, sadly, the last remaining Solo child. She was born a twin, with her brother Jacen. Only a few years later they were joined by their younger brother, Anakin. All three were very strong in the Force. As a child, Jacen exhibited a compassion for animals and a natural attunement to the Force. Jaina's skills leaned toward the mechanical, for she, more than her brothers, inherited her father's talent for piloting and mechanics.

During the Yuuzhan Vong War, Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin were all pressed into frontline service, fighting against the brutal alien invaders. Jaina became an ace starfighter pilot, flying an X-wing in the legendary elite unit, Rogue Squadron. This war would claim many of Jaina's closest friends, and her brother, Anakin, as well. It would also force her to mature and recognize her role in the future of the Jedi Order. Luke Skywalker branded her "The Sword of the Jedi" during the ceremony that saw her elevated to Jedi Knight.

It was this role that required her to confront and defeat her brother Jacen once he had turned to the dark side. Jacen Solo, in an effort to enforce order in a rapidly fragmenting Galactic Alliance, succumbed to the dark side and emerged as the Sith Lord, Darth Caedus. It was only Jaina who could confront and defeat him. She studied new deadly combat techniques from armored Mandalorian warriors, coupling them with her natural Jedi abilities and her attunement to her brother to ultimately defeat him.



For a long time, Jaina's role as a Jedi prevented her from establishing a romantic connection to anyone, though she had no shortage of would-be suitors. It was often Zekk, a fellow Jedi, or Jagged Fel, a fellow pilot, who would vie for her affections, but she could not let herself choose between them nor allow herself the luxury of romance. Now, though, after having faced the hardships and threat that she has triumphed over, she recognizes how fleeting moments of peace and tenderness can be in a war-torn galaxy. She has lowered her guard to let Jag into her heart.

JAG FEL

Jagged Fel is an amazing pilot, the son of a legendary Imperial flying ace. Jag was raised in an extremely regimented environment, a militaristic upbringing surrounded by coldly methodical aliens known as the Chiss. This resulted in a very serious, disciplined, and focused young man. Opposites truly attract, for this coolly collected, even-tempered man established a strong connection to the fiery-tempered child of the fates, Jaina Solo. The two shared a love of piloting and a skill behind the controls of a starfighter, and during the war against the Yuuzhan Vong, they found that their complementary approaches to problems balanced each other well.

As part of the fallout of the Second Galactic Civil War, the ruling council of the Imperial Remnant was reprimanded for its attempt to take advantage of the internal strife plaguing the Galactic Alliance. Luke Skywalker negotiated terms with the Imperial Remnant, and surprised everyone when one of his conditions of peace was the installation of Jagged Fel as head of the Imperial state. As Luke explained it, the Empire suffered from no shortage of overly ambitious short-sighted leaders, and needed someone in command who did not crave power for its own ends. Jagged Fel fit the bill perfectly.



NATASI DAALA

Natasi Daala is a former Imperial officer who is now serving as Chief of State of the Galactic Alliance. She sat out much of the Galactic Civil War, sequestered in a top-secret Imperial weapons think-tank. She is one of the very few high-ranking female officers in the Galactic Empire. Some whisper that she only landed her position because of an illicit love affair with Grand Moff Tarkin, but talk like that belittles her command skills.



When the Empire was defeated at the Battle of Endor, Daala never knew of the government's fate, for no one knew of her secret installation in The Maw. No news of the Rebellion or the New Republic's victory ever reached her ears. When she emerged from the facility, in command of a task force of Star Destroyers, she attempted to continue the war against the enemies of the Emperor, even though he was long dead. She was eventually defeated, and she retired from galactic view and military life.

Daala returned decades later to stop Darth Caedus, and her forces helped in the defeat of the Sith Lord. She was installed as Chief of State of the now leaderless Galactic Alliance, as she was the only choice that all the various fragmented factions could agree upon. But the haste to find leadership resulted in the Galactic Alliance now being led by someone with strongly voiced anti-Jedi sentiments.

THE NEW JEDI ORDER

Luke Skywalker's Jedi Order is in many ways different from the previous generation of Jedi Knights that produced such legends as Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker, and Mace Windu. The necessity of rebuilding the Order from scratch and the lack of records of its predecessors forced Luke to allow exceptions to longstanding Jedi traditions. In this new order, prospective candidates were allowed to undergo training regardless of their age. No longer was anyone "too old" to begin training. A Jedi Master could also have multiple apprentices at the same time—the old Master-Padawan one-on-one relationship was left in the past. Furthermore, the concept of attachment as it pertained to romantic relationships or family was no longer forbidden. Jedi were encouraged to stay connected with their families or to start families of their own.



Among some of the more notable members of Luke Skywalker's Jedi Order:

Tahiri Veila: She was a young girl from Tatooine who befriended Anakin Solo during their time as young Jedi students. As they grew older, a romance between the two began to blossom but was tragically cut short by Anakin's death at the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong. Tahiri has never really recovered from that loss, and her instability was recently exploited by Darth Caedus, who attempted to groom her to be his apprentice. After Caedus was defeated, Tahiri's life was spared and she has withdrawn from the Jedi in an attempt to understand her own motives and find her true destiny.



Tahiri Veila

Cilghal: A gentle Mon Calamari, this Jedi Master is also a biological scientific expert and renowned healer.



Cilghal

Tekli: A short, bat-faced alien Chadra-Fan, she is a Jedi healer.



Tekli

Kyp Durron: When he was a teenager, he was possessed by the spirit of a long-dead Sith Lord and wreaked much havoc on the galaxy. He has long since reformed, and is now one of the most powerful of the current Jedi, with a reputation for recklessness that did not prevent his elevation to the rank of Master.



Kyp Durron

Saba Sebaytne: A powerfully built, lizard-like Barabel alien, she is a natural hunter who, as a Jedi Master, also served as an instructor for Leia Organa Solo.

Corran Horn: A former Corellian security officer turned Jedi Knight, he is now a highly respected Jedi Master.



Corran Horn

Kenth Hamner: A former colonel in the New Republic military who resigned his commission to study in the Jedi Order, he is a level-headed, extremely reliable Jedi Master.



Kenth Hamner

Valin Horn: The son of Corran Horn, he was a child during the Yuuzhan Vong War, one of many sequestered from the fighting in the hidden base in The Maw. He became a Jedi Knight and served during the Second Galactic Civil War.

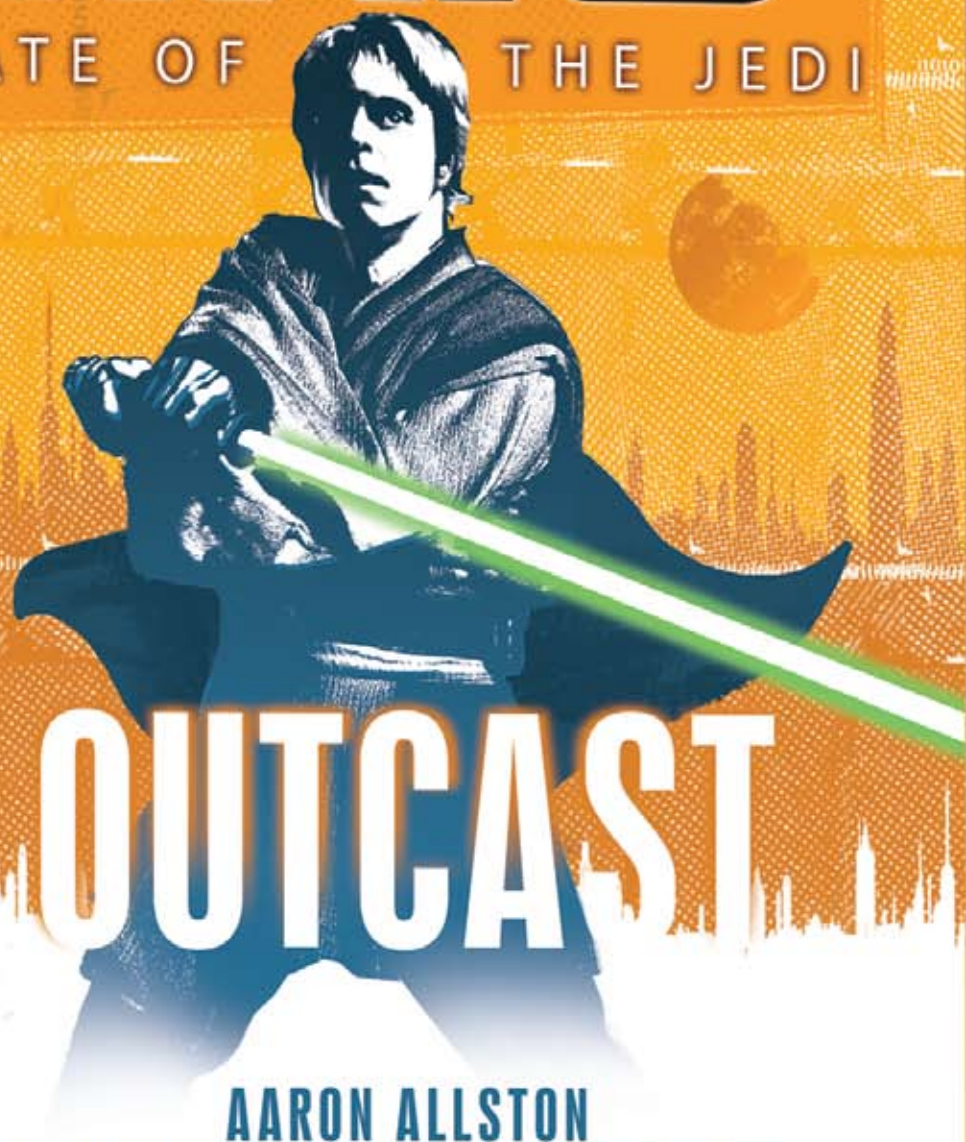
Zekk: A friend of Jacen and Jaina Solo since childhood, Zekk climbed up from the lower levels of Coruscant to become a prominent Jedi Knight. He was very close to Jaina, but her focus on her role as a Jedi prevented them from exploring their strong connection any further. He vanished from sight and from the Force during the final battle against Darth Caedus, and his current whereabouts are unknown.



Zekk

STAR WARS

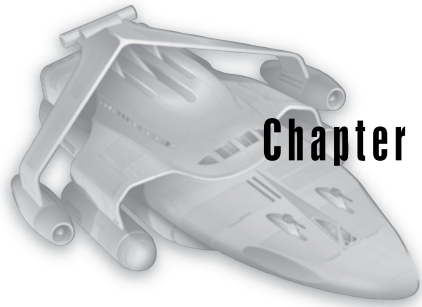
FATE OF THE JEDI



OUTCAST

AARON ALLSTON

New York Times bestselling author of *Star Wars: Legacy of the Force: Betrayal*



Chapter Five

“COME TO COURSE TWO-SIX-NINE.”

Han, following his wife’s directions, banked the *Falcon* around and headed toward the government district. Leia, in the copilot’s seat, had her personal comlink to her ear.

The *Falcon*’s comm board was alive with Coruscant Security and traffic monitors warning Han to return to designated ship traffic lanes or be subject to arrest. He growled and switched the thing to silent mode. “They found him?”

“They found him. He’s in an X-wing with a hole in the cockpit.”

“Armed?”

“Fifty-fifty chance. It was in the Senate Building, so it’s either a fully functional security vehicle or some Senator’s unarmed memories-of-youth vehicle. I’m hoping for the second option.”

“Me, too.”

“Come to two-five-nine.”

“Nah.” Han put the *Falcon* into a dive. His stomach fluttered, and the sensor screen filled up with tiny objects getting larger—small-

vehicle traffic at and below building-top level. Flashing down at terrifying and illegal speed, he twitched the controls right and left, nimbly dodging the much smaller civilian vehicles.

"Han, what do you think—"

Then he was fully among them, streams of traffic above as well as below. He pulled out of his dive two hundred meters below the average height of the buildings.

"—you're doing?"

"This way, we're off the major sensor boards. Only vehicles with line of sight on us will complain."

"I understand *that*. I mean, why not turn to two-five-nine?"

"His course changes are just to jerk us around, to confuse us. *I* know where he's going."

"Where?"

"The spaceport, right at the edge of the government district. He stole a starfighter; that means he wants to make space. It's damaged, so he can't. He needs another one. Right?"

"Right."

"When it comes to piloting and pilots, I'm all-knowing."

Leia put an artificial sweetness into her voice. "I'll never argue with you again."

Han snorted and increased velocity. A Coruscant Security speeder following in his wake dropped back, left behind as though it were suddenly standing still.

Luke and Ben, in Ben's nimble red airspeeder, received the transmission with Han's guess about the spaceport.

Luke, at the controls, shook his head, not pleased. The spaceport, comparatively flat and built at a much lower altitude than the surrounding residential, business, and government zones, was not, as most supposed, actually situated at bedrock level. Below it were many levels of machinery, repair hangars, Empire-era emergency bunkers, spaceport employee facilities, and repair accesses.

If Han was right and Valin was headed that way, even if he was unsuccessful at stealing another spaceworthy vehicle he might escape into

those subterranean regions, making it hard or impossible to find him before he detected his tracking device and destroyed it.

Their speeder emerged from the skytowers and was abruptly out over the flatter region surrounding the spaceport. It was mostly given over to speeder parking, though it had decorative elements, including tree-spotted grassy regions and a small artificial lake.

And sensor stations. Almost immediately, the speeder's comm board began blaring with instructions for them to turn back, to stay away from restricted airspace.

"Tell them who we are." Luke had to raise his voice to a shout to be heard.

"I bet it doesn't work. Who's on the news as a criminal suspect? You are."

"Do it anyway." Luke put the speeder into a holding pattern, keeping close to the ring of skytowers, not approaching the port itself. The authorities might well decide to shoot down a suspicious speeder—piloted by a suspected criminal or not—heading straight toward an invaluable government and civilian transportation resource. Sabotage and terror attacks had taken place as recently as the war, two years earlier.

Ben looked up from the comm board, startled. "We're not the only ones."

"What?" Luke scanned the airspace above the spaceport.

There were a *lot* of small vehicles there now, most of them airspeeders of one size or another. Some were bigger business vehicles, many with lettering and symbols on the sides.

From the utility compartment, Ben pulled out a pair of macro-binoculars and held them to his eyes. "That one's a press vehicle. Turret-mounted holocam on top. That one—hey, that's Jaina. The big green one—oh, kriff."

"Language. What is it?"

"It has an oversized driver's cab and that Skakoan is in it."

Luke frowned. Suddenly everyone knew that Valin was coming here, including press and bounty hunters. That meant open comm channels were being monitored, and people with no business being here were up to date. Daala's people had to be doing this.

Then he saw it, almost at ground level, an X-wing painted in classic First Galactic Civil War grays. Its running lights were off; it was illuminated only by the glows from parking area pole lights—it flew beneath the altitude of the lights themselves.

“Hold on.” Luke pushed his control yoke forward, sending the speeder into a precipitous dive.

Ben’s lips were drawn back in a grimace—perhaps because no teenager wants anyone else to endanger his vehicle recklessly, that being the teenager’s own prerogative—but said, “*Falcon*’s incoming.”

“Good.” Luke put the speeder on an intercept course, or a collision course if anything went wrong, and switched the autopilot on. He unlatched his seat restraints and slid toward Ben. “Take the controls.”

He was gratified to see his son’s eyes open wide, but Ben did as he was told; the boy unbuckled, slid under his father, grabbed the controls, disengaged the autopilot.

Luke stood up in the seat, drawing on the Force to keep him pinned in place despite the rush of wind threatening to tear him free.

He counted on Ben to know what to do, and his son did not let him down. Ben leveled off at the same altitude as the X-wing, completing his maneuver just meters behind the starfighter, and drew alongside that vehicle’s port side.

Luke sprang across the gap separating his seat from the cockpit. The wind threatened to whip him away, but a boost of Force energy carried him to the fuselage just as Valin Horn was realizing he had a pace vehicle. Luke landed astride the nose, facing astern, staring straight down into Valin’s startled features.

Valin yanked up on the X-wing’s armrests. The canopy was suddenly open, snapping backward, and gone, and Valin hurtled into the sky, his pilot’s chair propelled by a crude one-use rocket.

“Stang! He punched out.” Han pounded his steering yoke.

Leia looked as aggravated as Han felt. “Can the cargo tractor beam—”

“Not strong enough. Can’t compensate for a fast-moving target.”

“We have to go after Valin, then.”

Han shook his head. “The ejection won’t have left enough controls for Luke to land the X-wing. He may be able to lift it or push it down with the Force . . . but land it with no controls? No. We have to help him.” He heeled over, diving toward the X-wing.

“He punched out.” Jaina reluctantly turned her attention from Luke, disappearing toward the spaceport on the uncontrolled X-wing, and returned it to Valin, still ascending in his ejection seat. She banked and headed toward the rogue Jedi.

In the passenger seat, Master Kyle Katarn, about Luke’s age, dark-haired and dark-bearded, stretched as if coming out of a nap. “You plan to maneuver underneath and catch him?”

“That’s right.”

Katarn pointed toward another speeder, a large, flatbed cargo hauler with figures standing in the cargo bed. This vehicle rose toward Valin’s position from a much nearer position. “So do they.”

Valin’s seat reached its maximum altitude and began dropping. Immediately the short-term repulsor within the seat activated, slowing his descent.

He felt as though he’d taken a tremendous blow to the top of his head, doing no damage to it but compressing the spine beneath. Ejections were always like that—bad, but better than the alternative.

And he’d always relish the look on Not-Luke’s face when he’d ejected. It had been priceless.

A cargo hauler maneuvered itself toward his descent path. Grumbling, he got his lightsaber into one hand, grabbing his seat restraint buckle with the other.

As the hauler came underneath, instead of waiting for the seat to touch down, Valin unbuckled the restraints and flipped forward, landing on his feet moments before the seat landed.

In the cargo bed, three individuals waited—a Quarren with a vastly oversized weapon, a shining droid whose construction bore a slight resemblance to a human skeleton, and a tall blond woman whose black

bantha-hide jacket was decorated with a vast number of claws and teeth in different sizes and colors, sewn in place; she carried a Wookiee bowcaster.

Valin smiled at them, but not in a friendly way. “Two maladjusted want-to-be bounty hunters and their dressed-up protocol droid.”

“Surrender,” the Quarren said. “It will hurt less.” He raised his preposterous weapon to his shoulder.

“Jump into a fire.” Valin all but ignored the two organic beings. He kept his attention on the droid—a YVH 1 combat droid, one of the most dangerous machines to be found anywhere.

Now even machines were giving him a bad feeling. And he could detect a life-form heading toward him from straight above—

He glanced upward to see a speeder car passing by overhead, and boot heels, flapping Jedi robes, and an illuminated lightsaber descending toward him at a normal falling rate.

In his lower peripheral vision, he saw the three bounty hunters glance up to spot the descending Jedi. Valin took the opportunity to act: he grabbed his abandoned ejection seat and leapt with it off the rear end of the cargo hauler.

Jaina landed in a crouch just where Valin had been standing. He was gone. She rose to glower at the bounty hunters. “Don’t bother.”

“We’re not here to harm you,” the YVH droid said, its tones utterly and confidently human.

Jaina stared at the thing, nonplussed. “Just what have you been programmed for?”

She felt a tickle in the Force, warning of imminent attack, and saw the Quarren’s finger tighten on the trigger. She jumped to one side as he fired.

It did her no good. The missile that emerged from the weapon immediately flared out into a haze that wrapped around her, clinging everywhere—it took her a fraction of a second to recognize it as a metal-mesh net trailing some sort of cylindrical package.

Then the first jolt of electrical pain hit her. Startled, suddenly separated from her Force powers, she sailed over the edge of the cargo hauler and dropped into empty space beyond.

* * *

Valin clung to the ejection seat and rode it down another twenty meters. The next vehicle to approach him held no ersatz Jedi, no imposters that he could see—it was a boxy blue speeder, the Galaxy 9 News logo painted on its side in yellow. It drew alongside, its pilot skillfully keeping pace with Valin’s rate of descent.

A dark-skinned woman leaned out the passenger-side window. “Jedi Horn! Is it true you’re on a destructive rampage?”

Valin leapt from his seat, slamming into the side of the speeder, holding on to the woman’s door to keep from falling. She drew back, startled, but he gave her a friendly smile. “Get me out of here, away from these people, and I’ll give you the greatest scoop you’ve ever had.”

The woman’s eyes widened. She turned to issue a brief command to her pilot, then turned back, all smiles. “Let me help you in . . .”

“I’ll hang on here, thanks.” The news speeder banked, sluggish, and headed toward the business district. “How did you know I was Valin Horn?”

“An arrest bulletin issued a little while ago by the office of the Chief of State . . .”

The Quarren watched, startled, as Jaina Solo vanished over the lip.

The woman in the black jacket clapped him on the back. “Nice move, fish-head. She’s not—”

Her words were cut off as an airspeeder, painted in a stylish silver-gray, dived past the cargo hauler’s cab, missing it by less than a meter.

The hauler’s pilot reacted instinctively, veering to starboard and down. The sudden maneuver sharply tilted the cargo bed.

The Quarren staggered to his left and stumbled clean off the edge of the cargo hauler. The blond woman staggered, too, but dropped, rolled with an acrobat’s skill, and fetched up safely against the low rail at the side of the cargo bed.

The YVH droid didn’t budge.

* * *

Luke flipped into the cockpit and did an involuntary dance for a moment until both feet found nonsuperheated areas on the floor of the still-smoking compartment.

He glanced at the controls and grimaced. Every screen was out of commission. Experimentally, he waggled the yoke and found it unresponsive. This would be tricky, if not downright impossible.

Unless—

He turned. There, in the circular slot behind the cockpit, rested a gray and red R2 astromech.

“Hey, there. Can you pilot this thing?”

The R2 tweetled, ending on a sorrowful note.

“Forget steering. Can you kill the thrusters but leave the repulsors running?”

The R2 offered a series of notes that sounded quizzical. Luke heard starfighter systems dip and rise in power, fluctuations that lasted a fraction of a second each, then the R2 tweetled an affirmative.

“Do so. Execute. Problem solved.” Luke turned to port. Ben was still there, a few meters away, pacing him with considerable skill.

Luke leapt back across, settling into the passenger seat. “Did you keep track of Valin?”

“Up thirty degrees, port twenty, three hundred meters.”

“Strap in and take us there.”

Leia shook her head as she watched Luke abandon the X-wing. “I’m not sure how, but he thinks he has it solved.”

“Probably drafted the astromech. Took me a second to think of that myself.” Han did not look away from the silver-gray speeder, which had, moments earlier, matched the netted Jaina’s precipitous fall; then the pilot had gestured, drawing Jaina into the seat beside him with an exertion through the Force, and pulled out of his dive. Han glanced at his wife, who, watching Luke, hadn’t seen any of it.

He shook his head. Jaina must not even have been alarmed, since Leia had not even detected her brief emergency. He put the *Falcon* into a tight curve, aiming it toward the news speeder that now bore Valin away and the lumbering cargo hauler chasing it. “That YVH droid could be bad news. Want to take the belly lasers?”

"I do." Leia was unstrapped and up in an instant, headed aft toward the laser turret access shaft.

Jaina, helpless, spasmed again as another electrical shock coursed through her. "Get this thing off me."

"I'm driving here, and that's *Get this thing off me, please, Master Katarn.*"

She offered a very Han Solo-ish growl in response.

Dropping almost to parked-speeder level, Kyle set his vessel in pursuit of Valin's conveyance and the cargo hauler. The hauler now seemed to be towing something at the end of a cable. It took him a moment to recognize the Quarren. A cable stretched between his weapon and the tail of the hauler, and the Quarren held on to his weapon with both arms as if to save his life. As the hauler picked up speed, the Quarren was towed along behind at a more shallow angle.

Absently, barely looking, Kyle took his lightsaber from his belt, lit it, and lashed out against the metal cylinder attached to Jaina's net where it lay bouncing on the back of the speeder. His blow sheared through the object without scarring the speeder's paint beneath. "Better?"

"Actually, yes." Jaina lay there a few more moments, then began struggling with the net. It had relaxed, no longer constricting or clinging to itself, and she was able to unwrap it within moments. "Electrical shocks."

"Interfering with your control over the Force. Which turns you from a Jedi into a rather weak gymnast with a spasming problem."

"That's one way to put it."

The Galaxy 9 News speeder reached the edge of the business district before any of the vehicles pursuing it caught up. It shot through the cleft between skytowers that constituted the end of the spaceport zone and dropped toward lower traffic lanes.

The bounty hunter cargo hauler followed, descending at an angle not recommended for such a big, ungainly vehicle, still trailing the Quarren, who looked increasingly frantic. Then came Jaina and Kyle

in their speeder, the *Falcon*, Luke and Ben, and finally a stream of speeders with Jedi, spaceport security, press, and more bounty hunters intermixed.

“Whoa.” Kyle put the speeder into a side-to-side evasive maneuver an instant before the YVH droid in the cargo hauler opened fire. Streams of blasterfire flashed beside his door, then just above Jaina’s head, then immediately under the fuselage.

A pulse of laserfire, four brilliant red streams converging so closely that they seemed to be one, crossed from above and behind the speeder to hit the YVH droid dead center in the chest. The droid was catapulted off its feet and smashed through the rear of the hauler’s control cab, disappearing completely.

Smoke poured out of the cab, and the hauler began to nose forward into a shallow dive.

Jaina craned her neck back to see the *Falcon*, pacing the speeder at a higher altitude. She waved at her mother, clearly visible in the underside turret. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Most mothers just pack a lunch.” Kyle put on a burst of speed, accelerating toward the news speeder. “You want to try another jump?”

“I guess.” Jaina checked her lightsaber, then clipped it to her belt.

Another speeder, black with arrow-tipped white stripes on the sides, open-topped, raced past Kyle’s. It was no civilian vehicle; the roar from its engines was similar to that of a Podracer. It was a two-seater, and the pilot was the bounty hunter who dressed as a Jedi. Beside her was a man Jaina had barely glimpsed at Luke’s arrest, a Rodian holding an unusually long blaster rifle, scoped, in his hands. As they roared past, the woman gave Kyle and Jaina a wave.

The striped racer dipped low and passed the news speeder moments later. Jaina saw the passenger turn, raise his weapon, and fire at the news vehicle.

It was not a destructive shot—it was surgical. Smoke began issuing from the news speeder. It wobbled, probably from a fright reflex on the part of the pilot. Moments later, viewports all over the vehicle opened, allowing smoke to pour out everywhere.

* * *

Luke took a moment to assess the vista before him. The news speeder was clearly doomed, so Valin would be abandoning it as soon as possible. “Take me over it, just to one side.”

Ben nodded and put on more speed. Crowding the edge of the traffic lane, he passed below the *Falcon*, then above Master Katarn and Jaina. Drawing near the news speeder, he maintained his higher altitude but sideslipped to port, putting Luke directly above the speeder’s roof.

Once again Luke looked down into the face of Valin Horn. He flipped over the side and landed at the rear of the speeder’s roof, stabilizing himself through the Force.

Valin flipped up to the roof. “Wish you’d taken longer with that X-wing.”

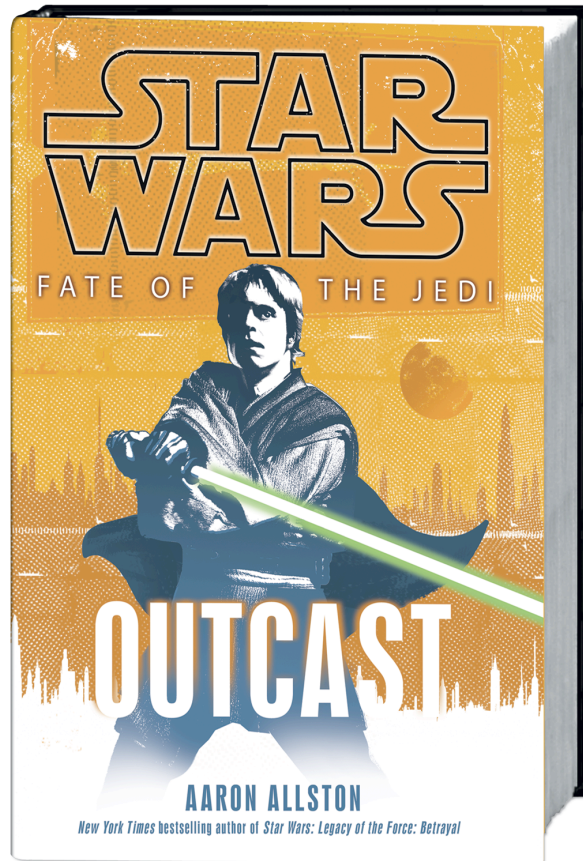
Luke gestured at the lightsaber Valin carried—not Valin’s own, it was a very simple cylinder of shining steel. “Did that belong to your nurse?”

“Yes.” Valin switched it on. “It’s not very stylish, but—”

“That’s enough.” Luke advanced, activating his own lightsaber. Valin raised his in a preliminary block. Luke struck, twitching his blade out of the most obvious line of attack, and the blade sheared the hilt of Valin’s weapon in two, not harming him.

Valin’s blade switched off as the weapon’s lower half dropped into the darkened urban chasm below. Valin took a step back, the last step he could afford before dropping off the front of the speeder, but Luke’s advance was near instantaneous. The Grand Master slammed the butt of his own weapon into Valin’s temple.

Valin Horn dropped like a slaughterhouse bantha. Luke caught his topcoat lapel, keeping him from following the lightsaber wreckage into the depths.



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