



## Star Wars: The Last Jedi (Star Wars - Legends)

By Michael Reaves, Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

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KNIGHT OF RECKONING

The Emperor's ruthless Order 66 has all but exterminated the Jedi. The few remaining who still wield the Force for good have been driven into exile or hiding. But not Jax Pavan, who's been steadily striking blows against the Empire—as a lone guerrilla fighter and a valued partner of Whiplash, a secret Coruscant-based resistance group. Now he's taking on his most critical mission: transporting a valued Whiplash leader, targeted for assassination, from Coruscant to safety on a distant world. It's a risky move under any circumstances, but Jax and his trusted crew aboard the *Far Ranger*, including the irrepressible droid I-Five, are prepared to pit their combat skills and their vessel's firepower against all Imperial threats—except the one Jax fears most. Reports have raced across the galaxy that the dark lord of the Sith has fallen in a duel to the death with a Rebel freedom fighter. But Jax discovers the chilling truth when he reaches out with the Force . . . only to touch the dark, unmistakable, and malignantly alive presence that is Darth Vader. And Jax knows that Vader will stop at nothing until the last Jedi has fallen.

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

**Michael Reaves** received an Emmy Award for his work on the Batman television animated series. He has worked for Spielberg's DreamWorks, among other studios, and has written fantasy novels and supernatural thrillers. Reaves is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Star Wars: Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter* and the first two *Star Wars: Coruscant Nights* novels *Jedi Twilight* and *Street of Shadows*. He is also the co-writer (with Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff) of the last two *Star Wars: Coruscant Nights* novels—*Patterns of Force* and *The Last Jedi*—and *Star Wars: Shadow Games*, as well as (with Steve Perry) *Star Wars: Death Star* and the *Star Wars: MedStar* novels *Battle Surgeons* and *Jedi Healer*. He lives in the Los Angeles area.

**Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff** is the co-author (with Michael Reaves) of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, *Star Wars: Shadow Games*, and *Star Wars: Coruscant Nights: Patterns of Force*, as well as the author of the novels *The Meri*, *Taminy*, *The Crystal Rose*, and *The Spirit Gate*. She is also the co-author of *Magic Time: Angelfire*, and has contributed a plenitude of short fiction to such magazines as *Analog*, *Amazing Stories*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Paradox*, and *Interzone*. Her short fiction has been nominated for the Nebula and British Science Fiction awards. She lives in San Jose, California.

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“Sakiyan freighter Far Ranger requesting clearance for departure.”

I-Five's mimicry of Tuden Sal's gruff voice was flawless. No one listening—or, more to the point, no vocal analyzer scanning—would know that, in reality, the Sakiyan merchant was sitting in a safe house somewhere in the twilight warren near the Westport, plotting infamy against the Empire. No one, that was, except for the Far Ranger's crew and her lone passenger.

Jax Pavan, his hands on the Far Ranger's steering yoke, realized he was holding his breath as he waited for the Westport flight dispatcher to approve their departure plan. He let his tension go with a soft rush of air and ignored the urge to reach out with the Force to give the dispatcher a nudge. It was tempting, but best not to take the chance. Even something as minor as that could alert Darth Vader to their movements . . . if Vader was, against all odds, still alive.

Jax believed that he was. Even though he hadn't sensed the Dark Lord's uniquely powerful indentation in the fabric of the Force lately, it was difficult to conceive of such power, such concentrated evil, being gone, being over, being done. And until he gazed upon Vader's corpse with his own eyes, until he could reach out and touch him with the tendrils that constituted his own connection with the living Force and sense no reciprocation . . .

Well, until that came to pass, Jax knew he couldn't be too careful.

And speaking of erring on the side of caution . . . was the silence on the comlink just a little too long? Had someone suspicious of the freighter's relatively new Sakiyan registry connected the ship to Jax Pavan?

Am I overthinking this?

“Far Ranger, your ascent plan is approved. Your departure window is . . .”

There was a pause, and Jax held his breath again. I-Five glanced at him and let two pearls of luminescence migrate, left to right, along the top outside rims of his photoreceptors—the droid’s equivalent of rolling his eyes.

“Ten standard minutes—on my mark.”

“Aye,” said I-Five.

“Mark.”

“Beginning ascent.” I-Five cut the comlink and turned to Jax. “She’s all yours. And not a single battle cruiser on our tail, that I can see.”

Jax ignored the droid’s sarcasm. His left hand eased forward on the thruster control as his right pulled up and back on the steering yoke. The ship, a modified Corellian Action VI transport, lifted from the spaceport docking bay into the night sky, which, even at this elevation, was a blaze of ambient light. Jax felt the vibration of the ship through the yoke, felt it merge with his desire to be away from Coruscant until it seemed to him that Far Ranger itself yearned above all things to leap into hyperspace before even clearing the atmosphere.

The sky changed. It warmed to twilight, to daybreak, to full day, then cycled back again through dusk and twilight as they soared, finally, into the flat black of space. They saw no stars; the glorious blaze of the city-planet’s night side was enough to drown out even the nearby nebulae of the Core completely.

I-Five sent a last message back to Flight Control in Tuden Sal’s gravelly tones: “Far Ranger away.”

“Aye. Clear skies.”

The droid shut down the comlink and Jax navigated above the orbital plane, adjusted course, and set the autopilot to their first jump coordinates. Then he sat back to clear his head.

He felt a touch—in his mind and on his arm. Laranth. He turned his head to look up at her. She was grinning at him—or at least, she was doing something that was as close to grinning as she was likely to get. One whole corner of her mouth had curled upward by at least a millimeter.

“Nervous, are we?” she asked. “I could feel you angsting all the way up in the weaponry bay.”

“What were you doing up there?”

“Getting the feel of the new triggering mechanism.”

“Nervous, are we?” Jax mimicked, smiling.

“Being proactive.” She gave his arm a squeeze and glanced out the viewport. “I’ll be glad to be out of this gravity well. Too much traffic here by half. Any one of those ships—” She nodded toward their closest

companions in flight: a Toydarian grain transport, another Corellian freighter, a private yacht. “—could be targeting us right now.”

“You’re being paranoid,” Jax assured her. “If Vader were watching us, I’d know. We’d know.”

“Vader watching us—now, there’s a cheery thought.” Den Dhur stepped onto the bridge and slid into the jump seat behind Jax. “I’m hoping he’s watching us from beyond the crematorium.”

“Paranoia,” I-Five said. “Another human emotion I just don’t get. The list of things both animate and inanimate in this galaxy that are capable of utterly annihilating you is longer than a superstring . . . yet real danger evidently isn’t enough: you organics aren’t happy without making up a bevy of bogeymen to scare you even more.”

Jax said nothing. In the months since their last confrontation with the Dark Lord—a confrontation in which one of their Whiplash team had betrayed them and another self-immolated trying to assassinate Vader—they had heard not even a whisper about either his whereabouts or his condition. There had been no reports on the HoloNet, no rumors from highly placed officials, no speculation or stories by various life-forms in places like the Blackpit Slums or the Southern Underground. It was as if the very concept of Vader had vanished along with his corporeal form.

And yet Jax still couldn’t believe that his nemesis was dead, as much as he wanted to. The entire scenario had been too perfect. In the thrall of a potent drug that enhanced Force abilities in unpredictable ways, Vader had lashed out wildly, trying to fend off his would-be assassin. The release of energy had been enough to vaporize the unfortunate Haninum Tyk Rhinann, who’d pushed Vader over the edge—in more ways than one. Both of them had fallen a great distance. Rhinann had died.

Vader had vanished.

If Darth Vader had been a normal human being—or even a normal Jedi—Jax could assume he was dead, as well. But he was neither of those things. He was at once less and more than human. At once less and more than a Jedi. He was a powerful merger of the human and the inhuman. He was a Sith . . . who had once called Jax friend. For Jax suspected—no, more than suspected, knew—that Darth Vader had somehow once been Anakin Skywalker. He had sensed it through the Force, and in their last encounter Vader had confirmed it with a slip of the tongue that might well have been intentional.

The man who wouldn’t die.

“You going to share that load with us, Jax?” Den was looking at him with eyes that only seemed lazy. “Have you sensed anything about Vader since . . .” The Sullustan made a boom gesture with both stubby-fingered hands.

Jax shook his head. “Nothing. But Den, if he’d died, I think I’d know that. There would have been a huge shift in the Force if a being of that much focused power was destroyed.”

“I saw the flaming backwash from ground zero,” Den objected. “That wasn’t a shift?”

“No, that was a light show. Mostly flash, with a little substance. It was enough to kill Rhinann. But I don’t think it killed Vader.”

The Sullustan looked to Laranth. “No joy from you, either?”

“Sorry, Den. I’m of the same opinion. He might be severely injured and in a bacta tank somewhere, but he’s not dead. The most we can hope for is that he’ll be out of commission long enough for us to get Yimmon to safety.”

“You just came from Yimmon, didn’t you?” Jax asked Den, and at the Sullustan’s nod, he added, “How does he seem?”

Den shrugged. “About like you’d expect a guy to seem who’s been nearly dead four times in the last three weeks.”

Jax took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Those near-hits were why they were removing Thi Xon Yimmon from Coruscant. The leader of the anti-Imperial resistance cell known locally as Whiplash had been targeted a number of times in the past weeks by Imperial forces. In two cases, only the fact that Jax and his team had a friend on the police force—a Zabrak prefect named Pol Haus—had tipped them to the threat in time to avoid it.

In a twisted way, the Imperial attention to Whiplash—and Yimmon in particular—was flattering. It meant they had risen from mere annoyances to serious threats. Perhaps the Empire had even made the connection between the local resistance on Imperial Center and the broader movement that was springing up on a growing number of far-flung worlds. In practical terms, this meant that—over the last several months—the Imperial orders had gone from “shoot ’em if they get in the way” to “ferret them out, track them down, and destroy them.”

The Emperor had also changed tactics. Absent from these recent attempts at annihilation were the Force-sniffing, raptorlike Inquisitors. Now the attacks came from Force-insensitive bounty hunters and battle droids. It was as if, having failed to turn the gifts of the Force against Yimmon and his cohort, the Emperor was simply throwing every mundane weapon in his arsenal at them.

Jax wanted to believe that these were the acts of a desperate tyrant who had just lost his most potent weapon. He wanted to believe it as much as he wanted to believe that Vader was gone. But . . .

The man who wouldn’t die.

He shook himself, realizing he had come to think of Darth Vader as inevitable . . . and immortal.

Whatever hideous truth lay behind that feeling, Jax could not let it distract him from the hard reality that the Empire wanted Whiplash dead and buried. The Empire, being the hierarchical beast that it was, figured this was best done by destroying the brains of the organization. But Yimmon—with his dual cortex and a personal cell of operatives that included a Jedi, a Gray Paladin, and a sentient droid—was a hard man to kill or capture. Still, the last attempt had come close. Too close. Way too close. It had taken out several storefronts and more than a dozen innocent citizens who happened to be too near a tavern that the Whiplash had used to pass messages.

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