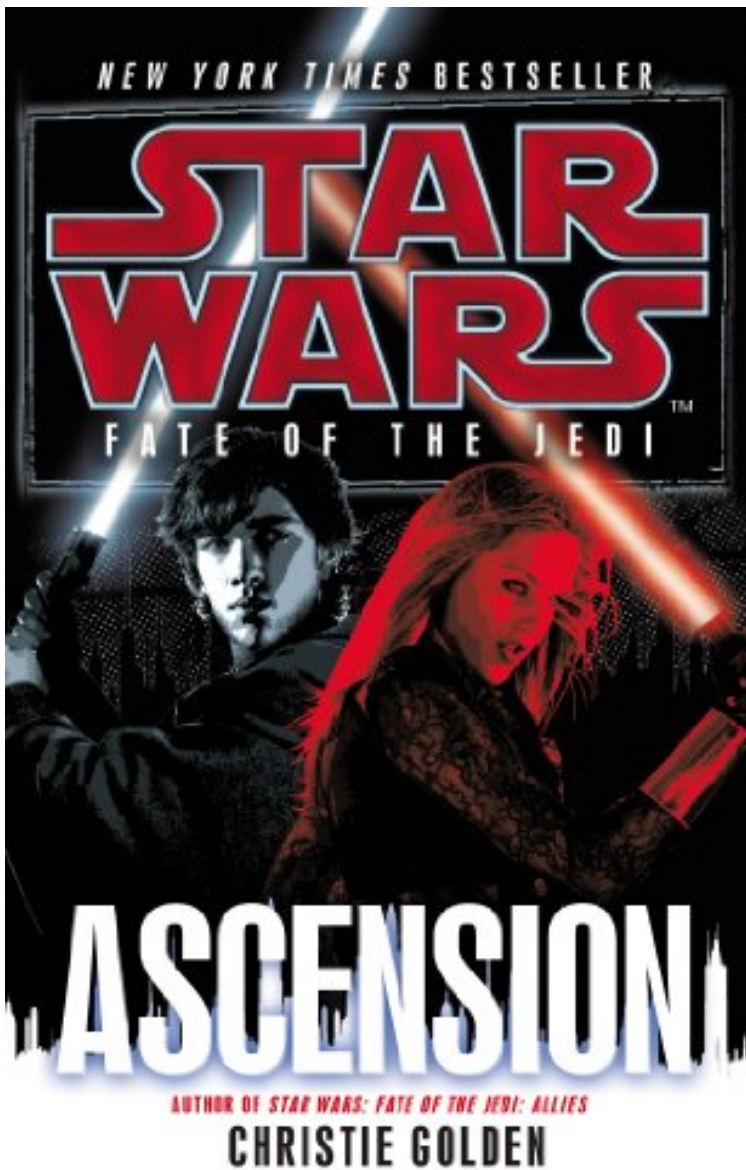


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Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi: Ascension



Par Christie Golden
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn this penultimate novel in the bestselling Fate of the Jedi series, Luke Skywalker, his son Ben, and the Sith girl Vestara are in hot pursuit of the dread power called Abeloth, who has joined forces with the Sith in a bid to take over the galaxy. The leadership of the government is uncertain, torn apart by power struggles and infiltrators, while the Sith have a terrible secret that could shake the Jedi Order to its core...ExtraitChapter OneCouncil Chambers of the Circle,Capital City of Tahv, KESHThe sun beating down upon the stained-glass dome of the Circle Chambers painted the forms of all those assembled in a riot of colors. Yet it was not hot in this large room; regulating the temperature was child's play for such masterful

users of the Force as the Sith assembled here. It was an emergency meeting. Even so, formalities were strictly observed; the Sith were nothing if not meticulous. Grand Lord Darish Vol, the leader of the Lost Tribe, had summoned the meeting less than a standard hour earlier. He now sat upon a dais in the very center of the room, elevated above all others, enthroned on his traditional metal-and-glass seat. While there had been sufficient time to don his colorful formal robes, he had not had time to sit and permit his attendants to paint his gaunt, aged face with the vor'shandi swirls and decorations appropriate to the meeting. Vol shifted slightly in his throne, displeased by that knowledge, displeased with the entire situation that had necessitated the meeting in the first place. His staff of office was stretched over his lap. His ?claw-?like hands closed about it as his aged but still-sharp eyes flitted about the room, noting who was here and who was not, and observing and anticipating the responses of each. Seated on either side of the Grand Lord were the High Lords. Nine members of the traditional thirteen were here today, a mixture of male and female, Keshiri and human. One, High Lord Sarasu Taalon, would never again be among that number. Taalon was dead, and his death was one of the reasons Vol had called the assembly. Seated in a ring around the dais were the Lords, ranked below the High Lords, and standing behind them were the Sabers. Several of their number were missing, too. Many were dead. Some . . . well, their status remained to be seen. Vol could feel the tension in the room; even a non-Force-sensitive could have read the body language. Anger, worry, anticipation, and apprehension were galloping through the Chambers today, even though most present hid it well. Vol drew upon the Force as naturally as breathing in order to regulate his heart rate and the stress-created chemicals that coursed through his body. This was how the mind remained clear, even though the heart was, as ever, open to emotions and passion. If it were closed, or unmoved by such things, it would no longer be the heart of a true Sith. "I tell you, she is a savior!" Lady Sashal was saying. She was petite, her long white hair perfectly coiffed, and her purple skin the most pleasing tone of lavender; her mellifluous voice rang through the room. "Ship obeys her, and was not Ship the-" She stumbled on the choice of words for a moment, then recovered. "-the Sith-created construct who liberated us from the chains of our isolation and ignorance of the galaxy? Ship was the tool we used to further our ? destiny-?to conquer the stars. We are well on our way to doing so!" "Yes, Lady Sashal, we are," countered High Lord Ivaar Workan. "But it is we who shall rule this galaxy, not this stranger." Although the attractive, graying human male had been a Lord for many years, he was new to his rank of High Lord. Taalon's untimely demise had paved the way for Workan's promotion. Vol had enjoyed watching Workan step into the role as if he had been born to it. While Sith truly trusted no one but themselves and the Force, Vol nonetheless regarded Workan among those who fell on the side of less likely to betray him. "She is very strong with the dark side," High Lord Takaris Yur offered. "Stronger than anyone we have ever heard of." That was quite a statement, coming from the Master of the Sith Temple. Few on Kesh had as extensive a knowledge of the Sith's past-and now their present as they expanded across the stars-as this deceptively mild, ?dark-? skinned, middle-aged human. Yur had ambition, but, oddly for a Sith, it was largely not personal. His ambitions were for his students. He was content to teach them as best he could, then set them loose on an unsuspecting world, turning his attention to the next generation of Tyros. Yur spoke seldom, but when he did, all listened, if they were wise. "Stronger than I?" said Vol mildly, his face pleasant, as if he were engaged in idle chitchat on a lovely summer's day. Yur was unruffled as he turned ?toward the Grand Lord, bowing as he replied. "She is an ancient being," he said. "It seems to me foolish not to learn what we can from her." Vol smiled a little; Yur had not actually answered the question. "One may learn much about a rukaro by standing in its path," Vol continued. "But one might not survive to benefit from that knowledge." "True," Yur agreed. "Nonetheless, she is useful. Let us suck her dry before discarding the husk. Reports indicate that she still has much knowledge and skill in manipulating the Force to teach us and future generations of the Lost Tribe." "She is not Sith," said Workan. The scorn in his melodious voice indicated that that single, damning observation should be the end of the debate. "She is!" Sashal protested. "Not the way we are Sith," Workan continued. "And our ?way-?our culture, our values, our heritage-must be the only way if our destiny is to remain pure and unsullied. We risk dooming ourselves by becoming overly reliant on someone not of the ?Tribe-?no matter how powerful she might be." "Sith take what we want," said Sashal, stepping ?toward Workan. Vol watched both of them closely, idly wondering if Sashal was issuing a challenge to her superior. It would be foolish. She was nowhere near as powerful as Workan. But sometimes ambition and wisdom did not go hand in hand. Her full diminutive height was drawn up, and she projected great confidence in the Force. "We will take her, and use her, and discard her when we are done. But for love of the dark side, let us take her first! Listen to High Lord Yur! Think what we can learn! From all that we have heard, she has powers we cannot imagine!" "From all that we have heard, she is

unpredictable and dangerous," countered Workan. "Only a fool rides the uvak he cannot control. I've no desire to continue to sacrifice Sith Sabers and Lords on the altar of aiding Abeloth and furthering her agenda- whatever it might be. Or have you failed to realize that we don't even truly know what that is?" Vol detected a slight sense of worry and urgency from the figure currently approaching the Circle Chambers. It was Saber Yasvan, her attractive features drawn in a frown of concern. "Only a fool throws away a weapon that still has use," countered Yur. "Something so ancient-we should string her along and unlock her secrets." "Our numbers are finite, Lord Yur," Workan said. "At the rate Sith are dying interacting with her, we won't be around to learn very much." Vol listened as Yasvan whispered in his ear, then nodded and, with a ? liver-spotted hand, dismissed the Saber. "Entertaining as this debate has been," he said, "it is time for it to conclude. I have just learned that Ship has made contact with our planetary defenses. Abeloth and the Sith I have sent to accompany her will not be far behind." They had all known to expect her; it was, indeed, the reason the meeting had been called. All eyes turned to him expectantly. What would their Grand Lord decide? He let them stew. He was old, and few things amused him these days, so he permitted himself to enjoy the moment. At last, he said, "I have heard the arguments for continuing to work closely with her, and the arguments to sever ties. While I confess I am not overly fond of the former, and have made little secret of my opinion, neither do I think it is time for the latter. The best way to win is to cover all angles of the situation. And so Kesh and the Circle of Lords will invite Abeloth to our world. We shall give her a grand welcome, with feasting, and arts, and displays of our proud and powerful culture. And," he added, eyeing them all intently, "we will watch, and learn, and listen. And then we will make our decision as to what is best for the Lost Tribe of Kesh." Sith Saber Gavar Khai sat in the captain's chair on the bridge of the Black Wave, the ChaseMaster frigate that had once belonged to Sarasu Taalon. Filling the viewscreen was the spherical shape of his homeworld-green and brown and blue and lavender. Khai regarded the lush planet with heavy-lidded eyes. For so many years, Kesh had been isolated from the events of the galaxy, and Khai found he had decidedly mixed feelings about returning. Part of him was glad to be home. As was the case with every member of the Lost Tribe, he had spent his entire life here until a scant two years ago. Deeply embedded in him were love for its beautiful glass sculptures and purple sands, its music and culture, its casual brutality and its orderliness. For more than five thousand standard years, the Tribe had dwelled here, and with no other option, had-as was the Sith way-made the best of it. The ancient vessel Omen had crash-landed, and the survivors had set about not merely to exist in this world, but to dominate it. And so they had. They had managed to both embrace the Keshiri, the beautiful native beings of Kesh, and subjugate them. Those who were deserving-strong in the Force and able to adapt to the Sith way of thinking and being-could, with enough will, carve out a place for themselves in this society. Those who were not Force-users had no such opportunities. They were at the mercy of the ones who ruled. And sometimes, as was the case with Gavar Khai and his wife, there was mercy. Even love. But most often, there was neither. Too, those who gambled to increase their standing and power and lost seldom lived long enough to make a second attempt. It was a very controlled society, with precise roles. Everyone knew what was expected of him or her, and knew that in order to change their lot, they would need to be bold, clever, and lucky. Gavar Khai had been all of those things. His life on Kesh had been good. While, of course, he had his eye on eventually becoming a Lord-perhaps even a High Lord, if opportunities presented themselves or could be manipulated-?he was not discontent with where he was. His wife, though not a Force-user, supported him utterly. She had been faithful and devoted and raised their tremendously promising daughter, Vestara, very well. And Vestara had been the most precious of all the things that had belonged to Gavar Khai. Discipline was something every Sith child tasted almost upon emerging from the womb. It was the duty of the parents to mold their children well, otherwise they would be unprepared to claim their proper roles in society. Beatings were the norm, but they were seldom motivated by anger. They were part of the way that Sith parents guided and taught their children. Khai had not looked forward to such aspects of discipline, preferring to explore other methods such as meditation, sparring till exhaustion, and withholding approval. He had found, to his pleasure, that he had never needed to lay a hand on Vestara in reprimand. She was seemingly born to excel, and had her own drive and ambition such that she did not need his to "encourage" her. Khai, of course, had goals and ambitions for himself. He had greater ones for his daughter. Or at least, he'd had. His reverie was broken by the sound of the comm beeping, indicating a message from the surface. "Message from Grand Lord Vol, Saber Khai," said his second in command, Tola Annax, adding quietly under her breath, "Very prompt, very prompt indeed." "I expected as much, once he received my message," Khai said. "I will speak with him." A hologram of the wizened Grand Lord appeared. It had been some time since Khai had seen the leader of the

Lost Tribe. Had Vol always seemed so fragile, so . . . old? Age was to be respected, for to live to an old age meant a Sith had done something very right indeed. But there was such a thing as too old, and those who were too old needed to be put down. Idly, keeping his thoughts well shielded, Khai wondered if the renowned Grand Lord was getting to that point. He saw his white-haired Keshiri second in command staring openly at the hologram; doubtless Annax, with her near obsession for determining weakness, was thinking the same thing. "Saber Gavar Khai," said Vol, and his voice certainly sounded strong. "I had expected to speak to Abeloth herself." "She is on Ship at the moment. Do not worry, you will see her when she arrives on Kesh," Khai said smoothly. "She is anxious to create a good first impression." "I take it that since you are the one speaking to me, she has selected you to replace the late High Lord Taaalon in our . . . interactions with her." "It has not been said specifically, no, but yes, Abeloth has turned to me since Lord Taaalon's death." "Good, good. Please then assure Abeloth that as she is anxious to create a good first impression, after our people have worked so closely and sacrificed so much for her, we are also desirous that our first meeting go well. To that end, we will need time to prepare for such an august visitor. Say, three days. A parade, showcasing the glory that is the Lost Tribe, and then a masquerade." Khai knew a trap when he saw one. As did Annax—who quickly busied herself with her controls so as not to look too obvious as she listened in—and the rest of his crew. As traps went, this was blatant. Vol was testing Khai's loyalties. To force Abeloth to wait three full days before being received was to tell her her place. To keep her waiting, as one might a Tyro summoned for interrogation about his studies. Yet Vol would deny such, simply saying that he wanted to make sure everything was just right for their esteemed guest. And with the Sith's love of ceremony and showcasing, the statement had the dubious merit of perhaps even being true. Vol was waiting for Khai's reaction. He was trying to figure out where the Saber's loyalties lay. And Khai himself suddenly realized, with a sickly jolt, that he himself ?didn't know. Abeloth had doubtless sensed the conversation and was monitoring Khai's presence in the Force. For all he knew about Ship, she also had the ability to monitor the conversation itself. He addressed himself calmly to the man who ostensibly ruled the Lost Tribe of the Sith. "Abeloth will be disappointed to hear that preparations will take so long," he said, keeping his voice modulated. "She might even see it as an insult." Out of Vol's line of sight, Annax was nodding. From the Hardcover edition. Presentation de l'diteur In this penultimate novel in the bestselling Fate of the Jedi series, Luke Skywalker, his son Ben, and the Sith girl Vestara are in hot pursuit of the dread power called Abeloth, who has joined forces with the Sith in a bid to take over the galaxy. The leadership of the government is uncertain, torn apart by power struggles and infiltrators, while the Sith have a terrible secret that could shake the Jedi Order to its core...