



Conviction: Star Wars Legends (Fate of the Jedi) (Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi - Legends)

By Aaron Allston

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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- Sales Rank: #400200 in Books
- Published on: 2012-08-28
- Released on: 2012-08-28
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.90" h x 1.00" w x 4.20" l, .49 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 464 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Aaron Allston is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi* books *Conviction*, *Outcast*, and *Backlash*; the *Star Wars: Legacy of the Force* novels *Betrayal*, *Exile*, and *Fury*; the *Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Enemy Lines* adventures *Rebel Dream* and *Rebel Stand*; novels in the popular *Star Wars X-Wing* series, including *Mercy Kill*; and the Doc Sidhe novels, which combine 1930s-style hero-pulp with Celtic myth. He is also a longtime game designer and in 2006 was inducted into the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts & Design (AAGAD) Hall of Fame. He lives in Central Texas.

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Chapter One

Infirmery Level, Jedi Temple, Coruscant

The medical readout board on the carbonite pod flickered, then went dark, announcing that the young man just being thawed from suspended animation—Valin Horn, Jedi Knight—was dead.

Master Cilghal, preeminent physician of the Jedi Order, felt a jolt of alarm ripple through the Force. It was not her own alarm. The emotion was the natural reaction of all those gathered to see Valin and his sister, Jysella, rescued from an unfair, unwarranted sentence imposed not by a court of justice, but by Galactic Alliance Chief of State Daala herself. Had they come to see these Jedi Knights freed and instead become witness to a tragedy?

But what Cilghal didn't feel in the Force was the winking out of a life. Valin was still there, a diminished but intact presence in the Force.

She waved at the assembly, a calming motion. "Be still." She did not need to exert herself through the Force. Most of those present were Jedi Masters and Jedi Knights who respected her authority. Not one of them was easily panicked, not even the little girl beside Han and Leia.

Standing between Valin's and Jysella's hovergurneys with her assistant Tekli, Cilghal concentrated on the young man lying to her right. His body gleamed with a trace of dark fluid: all that remained of the melted carbonite that had imprisoned him. He was as still as the dead. Cilghal pressed her huge, webbed hand against his throat to check his pulse. She found it, shallow but steady.

The readout board flickered again and the lights came up in all their colors, strong, the pulse monitor flickering with Valin's heartbeat, the encephaloscan beginning to jitter with its measurements of Valin's brain activity.

Tekli, a Chadra-Fan, her diminutive size and glossy fur coat giving her the aspect of a plush toy instead of an experienced Jedi Knight and physician, spun away from Valin's gurney and toward the one beside it. On it lay Jysella Horn, slight of build, also gleaming a bit with unevaporated carbonite residue. Tekli put one palm against Jysella's forehead and pressed the fingers of her other hand across Jysella's wrist.

Cilghal nodded. Computerized monitors might fail, but the Force sense of a trained Jedi would not, at least

not under these conditions.

Tekli glanced back at Cilghal and gave a brisk nod. All was well.

The pulse under Cilghal's hand began to strengthen and quicken. Also good, also normal.

Cilghal moved around the head of the gurney and stood on the far side, a step back from Valin. When he awoke, his vision would be clouded, and perhaps his judgment as well. It would not do for him to wake with a large form standing over him, gripping his throat. Violence might result.

She caught the attention of Corran and Mirax, parents of the two patients. "That was merely an electronic glitch." Cilghal tried to make her tones reassuring, knowing her effort was not likely to succeed—Mon Calamari voices, suited to their larger-than-human frames, were resonant and even gravelly, an evolutionary adaptation that allowed them to be heard at greater distances in their native underwater environments. Unfortunately, they tended to sound harsh and even menacing to human ears. But she had to try. "They are fine."

Corran, wearing green Jedi robes that matched the color of his eyes, heaved a sigh of relief. His wife, Mirax, dressed in a stylish jumpsuit in blacks and blues, smiled uncertainly as she asked, "What caused it?"

Cilghal offered a human-like shrug. "I'll put the monitors in for evaluation once your children are checked out as stable. I suspect these monitors haven't been tested or serviced since Valin and Jysella were frozen." There, that was a well-delivered lie, dismissing the monitor's odd behavior as irrelevant.

Valin stirred. Cilghal glanced down at him. The Jedi Knight's eyes fluttered open and tried to fix on her, but seemed to have difficulty focusing.

Cilghal looked down at him. "Valin? Can you hear me?"

"I . . . I . . ." Valin's voice was weak, watery.

"Don't speak. Just nod."

He did.

"You've been—"

She was interrupted by a stage-whispered notification from Tekli: "Jysella is awake."

Cilghal adjusted her angle so she could address both siblings. "You've been in carbonite suspension for some time. You feel cold, shaky, and disoriented. This is all normal. You are among friends. Do you understand me?"

Valin nodded again. Jysella's "yes" was faint, but stronger and more controlled than Cilghal had expected.

"Your parents are here. I'll allow them to speak to you in a moment. The Solos are here, as well." And little Amelia and her pet Anji, both of whom smell like they've been rolling in seafood shells left rotting for a week. Cilghal had to blink over that fact. The child should have received a thorough disinfecting before being allowed in this chamber. Come to think of it, Barv also reeked. Where could a youngling and even a

Jedi Knight go in the clean, austere Temple and end up smelling like that?

She set the question aside. “Bazel Warv is here, and Yaqeel Saav’etu, your friends. They can answer many questions about an ailment that afflicted the two of you just prior to your freezing.”

Jysella looked around, barely raising her head, her attention sliding across the faces of friends and loved ones, and then she looked at Valin. He must have felt her attention; he looked back. A thought, the sort of instant communication that only siblings can understand, passed between them. Then the two of them relaxed.

Jysella looked again at her parents. “Mom?”

At Cilghal’s nod, Mirax and Corran came forward, crowding into the gap between the hovergurneys. Tekli moved out of their way, circling the head of Valin’s bed to rejoin Cilghal. She craned her neck to look up at the Mon Cal. “All signs good.”

Cilghal nodded. She turned to the others in the room. “All but the immediate family, please withdraw to the waiting area.”

And they did, exiting with words of encouragement and welcome.

In moments, only the Horns and the medics remained with Valin and Jysella. Cilghal took a few steps to the nurses’ station and its bank of monitoring screens, giving its more elaborate readouts a look . . . or pretending to. Tekli found a mist dispenser and sprayed its clean-smelling contents around the chamber, driving away reminders of Amelia’s, Anji’s, and Barv’s recent presence. Then she rejoined her superior.

If Cilghal’s predictions were correct, Valin and Jysella would be reaching full cognizance right about now, if they hadn’t already. And if the madness that had caused them to be subjected to carbonite freezing was still in effect, their voices would be raised in moments with accusations: What have you done with my real mother, my real father?

That was the insanity that had visited them, the manifestation of the dark-side effect of their connection with the monster known as Abeloth. But recently, Abeloth’s power over the “mad Jedi” had been broken. They had all returned to normal—all but these young Horns, their recovery delayed by their suspended state.

Valin’s voice was raised in a complaint, but it was not an accusation of treachery and deceit. “I can’t stop shaking.”

“It’s normal.” His father sounded confident. “Han went through it years ago. He said it took him quite a while to warm up. This gurney is radiating a lot of heat, though. You’ll be warm enough before you know it.” He frowned. “He also said his eyesight was gone right after he woke. How is it that you’re seeing so well?”

“We’re not.” That was Jysella, raising her arms above her to stretch, an experiment that caused her to wince with muscle pangs. “I’m seeing mostly with the Force.”

Valin nodded. “Me, too.”

Cilghal and Tekli exchanged a glance. That was a relief. The conversation was idle chat, and would soon

turn to minute discussions of who had been up to what while Valin and Jysella slept. All was well.

Unless . . . Cilghal still had one more test to run.

She raised her voice to catch the attention of all the Horns. “Excuse me. I must interrupt. We have to let the monitors get several minutes of uninterrupted data, and all this talking is interfering. I must ask you two to withdraw for a while.”

Mirax gave her an exasperated look. “After all the time we’ve waited—”

Tekli held up a hand to forestall her. “After all that time, you can afford to indulge in a few minutes of quiet relief with your husband.” She made a shooing motion with her hands. “Out.”

Grudgingly, the older Horns withdrew. They’d be joining the others in the waiting area.

From a cabinet, Cilghal took a pair of self-heating blankets. She approached the gurneys and spread one blanket over each patient. “Tekli and I need to make some log entries about your recovery. Josat will be here in a moment—ah.” As if on cue, and it was indeed on cue, a teenage Jedi apprentice, cheerful and maddeningly energetic, entered the chamber. Red-haired, lean with a teen’s overactive metabolism, he offered Cilghal and Tekli a minimally acceptable respectful nod and immediately moved over to the nurses’ station monitor to familiarize himself with his two charges.

Cilghal finished adjusting Jysella’s blanket. “If you need anything, Josat can provide it, and if he is not here, say ‘Nurse’ and the comm router will put you in contact with the floor nurse.”

Jysella glanced over at her brother. “I have just been tucked in by a large fish.”

He smiled, and when he spoke, there was amusement in his voice. “Maybe you’re hallucinating.”

The waiting room was a long chamber decorated with plants from a dozen worlds and a wall-side fountain shaped to simulate a waterfall on the planet Alderaan, destroyed so long ago. The air here was fresher than that in the infirmary chambers, smelling of oxygen from the plants, mist from the waterfall—

Fresher in most ways, fouler in others. Leia turned to Allana and crossed her arms. “Sweetie . . .”

“I know, I know.” The child did not sound at all child-like, but she hugged her pet nexu to her with what looked like a need for reassurance. “We smell bad.”

“What did you get into?”

Allana’s shrug was uncommunicative. “I don’t know.”

Leia glanced at Barv, but the Ramoan Jedi Knight, big and green with ferocious tusks, avoided her eye.

Well, of course he didn’t want to explain. He’d been entrusted with watching over Allana, and he’d failed to keep her out of mischief. This was the sort of humbling experience young Jedi needed to have from time to time.

Han leaned into the conversation, but his attention was on his wife, not his granddaughter. “Garbage Compactor 3263827.”

Leia scowled at him. “Oh, shut up.”

Han grinned, and there was a bit of mockery in the expression. He switched his attention to Allana. “Sweetie, I can remember when your grandma smelled just like that. And unlike you, she was rude and ungrateful, too.”

“Han—”

“Go get cleaned up, and sanisteam Anji if you can, while your grandma and I discuss the impossibility of keeping children—or teenage princesses—clean.”

“Yes, Grandpa.” Allana scurried while the scurrying was good. She didn’t have to look back to detect the glare Leia was visiting on Han.

Cilghal and Tekli walked toward an office at the far end of the hall from the Horns’ chamber, just short of the waiting room.

Cilghal had Josat’s script timed and running in her head. He would now be moving around the Horns’ chamber, humming to himself, cautioning Valin and Jysella not to move or talk—the monitors needed stillness to do this evaluation—but he could talk, fortunately, for it was impossible for him to keep quiet, or so his family said . . .

Tekli interrupted the holodrama in Cilghal’s head. “So what did cause the pod monitor to fail?”

“Maybe what I said. And maybe it was a spike of the ability Valin manifested when he went mad.”

“The one that blanked out the encephaloscan?”

“Yes. He was probably using the technique when he was frozen. The monitor failure would have been the last bit of that usage.”

“Hmm.” Tekli didn’t comment. She didn’t need to: Cilghal knew what she was thinking. Retention of that scanner-blanking ability was not an indication that Valin retained the madness, as well, but neither physician liked mysteries.

When the two of them entered their office, the main monitor on the wall was already tuned to a hidden holocam view of the Horns’ chamber. They could see Josat indeed bustling among the cabinets, assembling a tray full of beverages, receptacles for medicines, blood samples, swabs.

Tekli heaved a sigh. “So far, so good.”

Cilghal offered a noncommittal rumble. “Time will tell.”

Josat moved to Valin and then Jysella, offering drinks. His voice was crisp over the monitor speakers. “We gave you the farthest room from the turbolifts and offices and waiting room. Much quieter here. If there’s an emergency, though, it’s safer to head to the stairs instead of the turbolifts. Right next door, take a left when you leave this chamber, it’s the door straight ahead, you can find it in pitch darkness. That can be important. I never used to pay attention to things like that, but since I started studying nursing, I have to know these things. Jedi Tekli will make me run laps if I ever don’t know where the emergency exits are from any of my stations. Were your Masters always assigning you exercise when you messed up? Don’t answer, the monitors need quiet.”

Cilghal blinked, pleased. “He worked that in very well.”

“About the punishment?”

“About the stairs.”

“I know.”

Cilghal sighed. “Mammalian humor. Deliberate misinterpretation.”

“Tends to drive a Master crazy, doesn’t it?”

Josat now stood beside Valin’s gurney, his lightsaber swaying on his belt within Valin’s easy reach. The apprentice eyed one of the wall monitors. “Slow progress on your evaluation. No matter. Nobody will come back to bother you until it’s run its course. Half an hour at least, I’m guessing.”

Cilghal nodded. “The last of the bait. He is not a bad actor.” Under ideal circumstances, Valin or Jysella might feel a trace of deceit from him through the Force, but now, still suffering a little from the aftereffects of carbonite freezing, they were unlikely to.

They were, however, likely to add up four important details. First, they were in a room at the end of the corridor, away from most visitors and medical personnel. Second, they were next to stairs that would allow them to reach any level of the Temple while bypassing well-traveled turbolifts. Third, they had half an hour before their absence would be noticed. And fourth, they had ready access to a lightsaber.

If they were still mad, and merely concealing the fact, could they resist the bait?

But neither Horn made a grab for the lightsaber.

If they had done so—well, it wouldn’t have been too damaging. The lightsaber would not have ignited. Switching it on, or having Cilghal or Tekli press a button on the comlinks they carried, would cause the false lightsaber to emit a powerful stunning gas. The Horns would have been felled without violence, never having even reached the corridor. Josat would have been felled as well, but it would have been easier on him than being thrashed by two experienced Jedi Knights.

But clearly, escape was not a priority for them. Which meant that they, too, were sane. Cured.

Valin had felt nothing but warmth and relief from his parents—

From the man and woman masquerading as his parents.

As he lay listening to Josat's endless, maddening blather, Valin forced himself to remain calm. Any distress might send a signal through the Force to his captors, a signal that their deception had been detected.

And perhaps, perhaps, the man and woman who wore the faces of Corran and Mirax Horn didn't even know that they were imposters.

What a horrible thought. Perhaps they were clones, implanted with memories that caused them to believe, in their heart of hearts, that they were the real Corran and Mirax. What would happen to them when the truth was revealed? Would they be killed by their secret masters? Were they even now implanted with strategically placed explosives that would end their lives when they were no longer useful?

Valin clamped down on that thought, suppressing it.

Again Josat came near, chattering about his studies, about politics, about the best mopping techniques for apprentices assigned to clean Temple corridors. Again his lightsaber swung invitingly just within Valin's reach.

But, no. He and Jysella needed to know much more than they did now if they were to stage a successful escape. They needed to be rested, informed, and somewhere other than deep in the enemy-occupied Jedi Temple before they struck out on their own.

So he looked at his sister and offered her a smile full of reassurance. That emotion, at least, was real. In all the universe, the one person he knew to be true was Jysella. He'd known it from the moment they had reached for each other in the Force. Dazed, barely conscious, dreading what they would find, they had still connected, and they knew they were not alone.

She smiled back at him, an expression he felt more than saw.

They had each other, and for now, that was enough.

From the Hardcover edition.

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