



## Omen (Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi, Bk 2)

By Christie Golden

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The Jedi Order is in crisis. The late Jacen Solo's shocking transformation into murderous Sith Lord Darth Caedus has cast a damning pall over those who wield the Force for good: Two Jedi Knights have succumbed to an inexplicable and dangerous psychosis, criminal charges have driven Luke Skywalker into self-imposed exile, and power-hungry Chief of State Natasi Daala is exploiting anti-Jedi sentiment to undermine the Order's influence within the Galactic Alliance.

Forbidden to intervene in Jedi affairs, Luke is on a desperate mission to uncover the truth behind Jacen's fall to the dark side—and to learn what's turning peaceful Jedi into raving lunatics. But finding answers will mean venturing into the mind-bending space of the Kathol Rift and bargaining with an alien species as likely to destroy outsiders as deal with them. Still, there is no other choice and no time to lose, as the catastrophic events on Coruscant continue to escalate. Stricken by the same violent dementia that infected her brother, Valin, Jedi Knight Jysella Horn faces an equally grim fate after her capture by Natasi Daala's police. And when Han and Leia Solo narrowly foil another deranged Jedi bent on deadly destruction, even acting Jedi Grand Master Kenth Hamner appears willing to bow to Daala's iron will—at the expense of the Jedi Order.

But an even greater threat is looming. Millennia in the past, a Sith starship crashed on an unknown low-tech planet, leaving the survivors stranded. Over the generations, their numbers have grown, the ways of the dark side have been nurtured, and the time is fast approaching when this lost tribe of Sith will once more take to the stars to reclaim their legendary destiny as rulers of the galaxy. Only one thing stands in their way, a name whispered to them through the Force: *Skywalker*.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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### Editorial Review

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Golden, an author new to the multiple Star Wars series, is likely familiar to readers from her long tenure as a Star Trek author. As the second in the projected nine book series, *Omen* is slower paced than the first volume, *Outcast* (2009), and more devoted to developing the series arc. Han and Leia are at home on Coruscant, as more Jedi go crazy, government pressure on the Jedi increases, and the media swarm the Temple. Ben and Luke continue their quest to uncover Jacen's secrets as each of the crazed Jedi was in contact with him and is exhibiting powers previously only displayed by Jacen. They travel deep into the Rift to encounter a mysterious group of beings with a strange relationship with the Force, using it to power their ships and see the future. A new complication is introduced with a secret lost planet full of Sith (who have recently regained space travel), and Jacen's trail appears to be leading Luke and Ben into their midst. Series fans will enjoy this entry and the continued exploration of the huge and mysterious Star Wars galaxy. Demand makes this an essential purchase for all science-fiction collections. --Jessica Moyer

#### About the Author

Christie Golden is the award-winning author of more than thirty novels and several short stories in the fields of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Her media tie-in works include launching the Ravenloft line in 1991 with *Vampire of the Mists*, more than a dozen Star Trek novels, and the Warcraft novel *Lord of the Clans*.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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*Kesh*

*Two Years Earlier*

The ocean sighed as it rushed forward and receded in a rhythm even more ancient than what was unfolding on its lavender- sand shores. While the sun was bright and warm, a breeze came from the sea to cool the heated faces of the two figures standing there.

They faced each other, as still as if they were carved from stone, the only motion around them that of their hair and heavy black robes as the wind toyed with them.

Then, as if by some unheard signal, one of them moved. The soft sound of the ocean was punctuated by a sharp *snap-hiss*. The almost perfectly symmetrical, light purple features of Vestara Khai's adversary were abruptly cast into sickly green relief. Vestara activated her own weapon with a fluid motion, saluted her opponent with it, settled into position, and waited to see who would make the first move. She balanced lightly on the balls of her booted feet, ready to leap left, right, or straight up. Still her opponent did not move.

The sun was at its height and its light was harsh, beating down on them like something physical. Their heavy dark robes were stifling hot, but Vestara would no sooner abandon her robes than she would abandon her weapon or her heritage. The robes were traditional, ancient, a deep and valued part of who she was, and she would endure the encumbrance. The Tribe valued strength as much as it valued beauty; rewarded patience as much as initiative. The wise being was the one who knew when which was called for.

Vestara sprang.

Not at her opponent, but to the left and past him, leaping upward, turning in the air, and slashing outward with the blade. She felt the blade impact and heard its distinctive sizzle. He gasped as she landed, flipped, and crouched back into a defensive position. The sandy surface was treacherous, and her foot slipped. She righted herself almost instantly, but that moment was all he needed to come at her.

He hammered her with blows that were more of strength than grace, his lithe body all lean muscle. She parried each strike, the blades clashing and sizzling, and ducked underneath the final one. Lightness and agility were her allies, and she used them freely.

Her long, light brown hair had come loose from its quickly twisted braid, and the tendrils were a distraction. She blew upward to clear her vision just in time to block another one of the strong blows.

ÓBlast,Ó she muttered, leaping back and switching the blade to her other hand. She was completely ambidextrous. ÓYou're getting good, Ahri.Ó

Ahri Raas, apprentice, member of the native- and conquered- species of Keshiri and Vestara Khai's close friend, offered her a smile. ÓI'd say the same about you, Ves, except for the fact that that sand- jump messes you up every single ti-Ó

She interrupted him with a sudden upward leap, landing on his shoulders, balancing there lightly with the use of the Force, and plunged the lightsaber straight downward, aiming for his back between his shoulder blades. He dived forward, Force- pushing her off, but not before she had touched the tip of the glowing red blade to his robes. Ahri arched, his dive thrown off as his body twisted from the pain; even the training lightsabers inflicted a powerful shock.

Vestara leapt as Ahri dived, using his Force push to her own advantage, turning twice in the air and landing surely, facing him. She smirked in satisfaction as she brushed her renegade locks out of the way. Ahri completed his dive and came to his feet, rolling in the sand. Vestara extended her arm with the grace of a dancer. Ahri's lightsaber was snatched from his hand and flew into hers. She grasped it and dropped into the Jar'Kai stance, ready to come at him with both blades. Ahri looked up and sighed, dropping back into the sand.

ÓAnd you get distracted far too easily. Focus, Ahri, focus,Ó she chided. She gestured casually, just a slight jerk of her chin, and a handful of sand flew toward Ahri's face. Muttering, he lifted his empty hand and used the Force to deflect the grains.

ÓIt's just training, Ves,Ó he muttered, getting to his feet and dusting himself off.

ÓIt's *never* just training,Ó she shot back. She deactivated her training lightsaber, hooked it back on her belt, and tossed Ahri's to him. The Keshiri youth caught it easily, still looking disgruntled. Vestara undid her hair and fluffed it for a minute, letting the air penetrate to the roots to cool her scalp. Her long fingers busily rebraided it, properly this time, as she continued to speak, while Ahri shook grains of purple sand out of his own white, shoulder- length hair.

ÓHow often have I told you that? Say that in the presence of one of the Masters and you'll never make it beyond a Tyro.Ó

Ahri sighed and rose, nodding to acknowledge the truth of what she said. Neither of them had been formally chosen as an apprentice yet, although they had been training in classes under the tutelage of various Masters for years, their strengths and weaknesses in the Force noted and analyzed and pushed.

Vestara knew that, at fourteen, it was still possible, even likely, that she would be chosen by a Master as his or her formal apprentice. But she chafed horribly at the delay. Some Tyros were chosen at much younger ages, and Vestara knew that she was strong in the Force.

She reached out for a flask of now warm water and the canteen resting on the sand floated to her, the lid unfastening as it moved. Vestara gulped down the liquid thirstily. Sparring at the height of the sun was exhausting, and Ahri always muttered about it, but she knew it toughened her. Vestara handed the canteen to Ahri, who also drank.

She regarded him for a moment. He was a nearly perfect physical specimen of a species whose physical strength, agility, and harmony of features and form had become an ideal for her own people. He could easily pass for a member of her own species— he would make a striking human, but a human nonetheless— were it not for the pale purple cast to his skin. His eyes, too, were slightly larger than a human’s; large and expressive. His shoulders were broad, his hips narrow, and there was not an ounce of superfluous fat on his frame. His face, though, was flushed a darker purple than usual because he was overheated, and his hair had far too much sand in it.

ÓThat’s two for two,Ó she said. ÓYou up for another round?Ó She gave him a wicked grin, which was exaggerated by the small scar at the corner of her mouth.

The scar that the Tribe saw as a flaw. It was plain on her face, right out in the open—there was very little she could do to disguise it. Attempts had been made to heal it and to correct it with cosmetic surgery. Those attempts had been mostly successful and now, to be sure, it was not all that noticeable. But this was a world where any flaw, any scar or deformity, was a strike against one’s potential for advancement.

The scar added insult to injury, as far as Vestara was concerned— because of its location, the thin line almost always made her look like she was smiling, even when she wasn’t. She had hated that about it until Lady Rhea, one of the most respected of the Sith Lords, had told her that deception was actually a very useful thing indeed.

ÓIt mars your beauty,Ó Lady Rhea had said bluntly, pausing as she strolled down the line of potential apprentices after a formal ceremony. ÓA pity.Ó She, whose beauty was only slightly diminished by the cruel ravages of time, reached out a long finger and touched the scar. ÓBut this little scar— it can aid you. Make others think you are *something you are not*.Ó She tapped the scar lightly with each of the last four words, emphasizing her point.

That had made Vestara feel a bit better. All of a sudden, looking like she was smiling all the time, even when she wasn’t, seemed like a good thing to her.

ÓI think I’ve sweated off at least two liters already,Ó Ahri replied. ÓCan’t we continue in the training courtyard at least? It’s cooler in the mountain shadows.Ó

At least he wasn’t refusing the offer of another round. Vestara dragged a black- draped arm across her own forehead. She had to admit, fighting in the cool shadows of the proud columns, beautiful statuary, and sheer mountain stone in which the Temple courtyard was nestled had a definite appeal right at the

moment. While they were not yet formally apprenticed to any of the Sabers or the Masters, as Tyros they would be permitted to spar in the courtyard. That was as far as they were allowed to go, however. Neither of them had seen inside the Temple or, even more significant, inside the Ship of Destiny yet. The ship's name was *Omen*, but the name "Ship of Destiny" had fallen into common usage. For such it was. Such an ancient, precious part of the Tribe's heritage, with all its secrets and mysteries, was not just for any eyes.

"Well," Vestara said, "we can go back and finish there. But only because you're too fragile to—"

Her teasing insult died in her throat as something passed over the sun.

It was not an uvak, one of the deceptively delicate winged reptiles that were used for aerial transportation. Vestara's dark brown eyes widened in shock.

"Yes," Ahri said in a faint voice, "that's . . . is that a *ship*?"

The hairs on her arms and the back of her neck stood on end despite the heat as she watched, lifting a hand to shade her eyes. She still couldn't speak, but nodded. She was pretty sure that was exactly what the thing in the sky was.

Yet it looked nothing like the Ship of Destiny, or any other vessels she had seen depicted or heard described. Rather than being long and rectangular, or V-shaped, it was a symmetrical sphere. With . . . with wings like an uvak. It moved swiftly and silently, and she now saw that its color was a dark orange-red. Closer and closer it came, until for a wild moment Vestara thought it was going to land right on the beach beside them.

It was coming in for a landing, certainly, but not quite so close as that. It was heading for the sharp, ridged mountains that seemed to spring up from the ocean itself. That was where the Ship of Destiny had crashed so long ago, and for a moment Vestara was alarmed that this vessel would suffer the same fate. Sudden worry suffused her. It couldn't! She had to know who was inside, what sort of beings they were. Perhaps they were a species she had never before encountered. The thought was thrilling.

As it passed over, its shadow fell across her for an instant. A sensation of coldness, much more than the expected sudden coolness of something blocking direct sunlight, brushed Vestara. She gasped slightly as the feeling tingled through her.

It was cold, yes, forbidding . . . but also challenging. Curious. Intrigued.

By *her*.

She no longer was afraid for the vessel's safety. Its pilot knew exactly what it was doing. It was heading directly and quite deliberately for the ruins of the Ship of Destiny, and the Temple, almost as old, that had been constructed around it.

Any fear or trepidation she had experienced a moment before evaporated like water on a hot rock. Vestara reached out in the Force and summoned Tikk, her uvak. Tikk had been basking in the sunlight, craving the heat as all reptiles did, his sharp beak and brilliant green eyes closed. Now he lifted his bright gold head, stretched out his long neck, and spread his red-and-black ruff in the uvak equivalent of an awakening stretch. With an answering croak, he spread his wings, leapt upward, and flew the few meters toward Vestara and Ahri.

She barely paid attention to Tikk, keeping her eyes glued to the strange vessel as it grew smaller and finally vanished from her sight. When she could see it no longer, Vestara took a deep, steady breath, then gathered up the long hem of her robes, turned to where Tikk patiently awaited her, and began to run as fast as her long legs would carry her in the cumbersome sand, using the Force to stabilize her feet and push her along.

ÓCome on,Ó she called over her shoulder.

ÓWhere are we going?Ó asked Ahri, hastening to catch up.

Vestara Force-leapt upward, landing gracefully on the broad back of the uvak. Ahri followed suit, his arms slipping around her waist as he sat behind her.

ÓTo follow the ship,Ó Vestara said. ÓCouldn't you feel it? It was for us, Ahri.Ó

Tikk gathered himself, shifting his weight from one clawed foot to the other, then sprang upward.

ÓFor us?Ó Ahri shouted over the beat of the membranous, veined wings—wings so very like those of the vessel that had brushed Vestara's thoughts only a few heartbeats earlier.

ÓFor us,Ó Vestara repeated firmly. She didn't know how she knew, only that she did.

The vessel had come for them. For younglings. For apprentices.

It had come for Sith.

It was not a very great distance as an uvak flew to the Sith Temple. Accessible only from the air or by a perilous climb, the Temple had been created to protect and watch over the Ship of Destiny and house the survivors of the crash. Vestara had visited here many times before, ever since she had become a Tyro. But she was more excited now than she had been even on her first trip so long ago.

Tikk's leathery wings beat steadily, and the Temple came into view. It had been hewn from the very rock that had been the destruction of the Ship of Destiny—the *Omen*. It was very much like the Sith, Vestara thought, to take that which had been responsible for their greatest hardship and make it serve them. She knew the history of its creation; how the original Sith crew, equipped only with lightsabers and a few hand held energy weapons, had cut into the mountain's heart and shaped the spires, walls, and windows of the massive central Temple. Other wings were added as the centuries crawled past.

Most of the initial work had been done by the Sith, who could move huge chunks of rock with the power of the Force. Later, here and many kilometers away in the capital city of Tahv, the Keshiri—Ahri's people, the native humanoid species of this world—were put to work, with the Sith in charge. Tahv bore the stamp of a place that had been expanded by a people who had the luxury to appreciate art and beauty; the Temple, while beautiful in its own right, as the first home of the Sith was more functional than decorative. The statuary, of early Sith leaders, including Captain Yaru Korsin, the first commander of the *Omen*, had been brought in much later, and the lovely carvings were an almost delicate counterpoint to the hard beauty of the Temple architecture.

Not visible from the air, but housed protectively within a special, highly secured section of the Temple, was said to be the *Omen* itself. Some muttered that the vessel was nothing more than bits and pieces of

twisted metal, preserved only for sentimental reasons. Others believed that much of what it had once been still remained, its knowledge hoarded and shared with only the select few who ascended to the lofty ranks of the Sith Lords or the Masters.

But Vestara was not interested in admiring the black spires and functional, simple terraces of the Temple, or the beautiful figurines of its courtyard. And for once, her thoughts did not drift toward wondering what secrets the *Omen* contained. This time, her eyes were on the sphere of livid orange-red that sat in the middle of the courtyard of the Sith Temple.

Vestara's breath caught in her throat again, and she stared, not even wanting to blink. Suddenly she felt as if all her life had simply been spent waiting until the moment when the spherical vessel had soared over her and caressed her with the cool brush of darkness, calling her to follow it.

The . . . Ship . . . was a perfect circle, its wings now folded in on itself, its surface rough and hard looking. Dark-side energy seemed to flow from it. Dozens of Sith were milling about in the courtyard already, and Vestara saw that more were approaching on uvak-back.

She wanted to land, to leap off, to rush up to the Ship and caress its knobbed, pebbly surface. A soft sob escaped her; embarrassed, she tried to turn it into a cough. But Ahri knew her too well. He tightened his arms around her waist.

ÓVes, you all right?Ó

ÓYes, of course I am. I just . . . this is an unusual situation, don't you think?Ó

She knew that Ahri was fond of her, and while she found him attractive—he was a Keshiri male, of course he was gorgeous—she had no desire to start a romance. For one thing, despite the fact that the Sith were firm believers in merit over birth, there was still a stigma attached to being Keshiri. No doors were closed to them by their unfortunate birth—indeed, one of the current High Lords was Keshiri—but there were never marriages between them and the Sith, and they had a narrower window of opportunity to prove themselves.

Some Sith did take Keshiri lovers, of course, although the species were sufficiently different that no children could be conceived. The physical beauty of the Keshiri was difficult to resist, but Vestara knew she would not be one of those who succumbed to it. She was utterly devoted to the Force, to her studies, to practicing and training and honing her skills until her body quivered with weariness, until she was drenched in sweat, until she crawled into bed and slept the dreamless sleep of the exhausted.

And now this Ship had come, and she did not care about anything else.

Again she felt the cold perusal, and shivered. Ahri's arms tightened about her, mistaking the gesture for a physical chill.

*You sensed me.*

*I—I did,* she sent back through the Force.

She was being . . . examined. Appraised.

*You seek to become a Sith Master. To harness the power of the dark side.*

*I . . . I . . .*

Vestara straightened to her full tall height atop Tikk's back and deliberately banished her childish hesitancy. Never mind that she had never before beheld a spacefaring vessel— never even seen the diagrams and schematics that were purported to rest inside the forbidden hull of the crashed *Omen*. She was of the Tribe, the daughter of a Sith Saber. She was exceptionally strong in the Force and knew it.

And the ship— Ship itself, not its pilot, she realized now it had no pilot, not yet— was testing her. She would not shrink before its probity.

*I do. I shall. I am Vestara Khai, daughter of a proud heritage. I have what is necessary to command the dark side and bend it to my will. To use it for the good of the Tribe, and the People.*

*For the good of all Sith,* Ship suggested.

She nodded automatically, though even as she did so she realized the vessel couldn't see her.

Except somehow it *could*. Or rather, she realized, it could sense her agreement in the Force. She felt it approve and then withdraw. Without the coldness of its presence in her mind, she somehow felt bereft, but she refrained from seeking it out again.

At that moment, as her gaze wandered from Ship to the throng of Sith crowding around it, in that sea of dark robes she saw a pale blond head turn in her direction. It was Lady Rhea, one of the members of the Sith Circle of Lords, and her blue eyes were fixed upon Vestara. Even from this height, Vestara could see that Lady Rhea's eyes were narrowed, as if she was considering something.

Slowly, Vestara smiled.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## Users Review

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