

Agents of Chaos II: Jedi Eclipse (Star Wars: The New Jedi Order, Book 5)

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A string of smashing victories by the forces of the sinister aliens known as the Yuuzhan Vong has left New Republic resources and morale stretched to the breaking point. Leia Organa Solo, estranged from her husband, Han, oversees the evacuation of refugees on planets in the path of the merciless invaders. Luke Skywalker struggles to hold the fractious Jedi Knights together, even while one of them undertakes a bold but reckless undercover mission.

Manipulating their alliance with the amoral Hutts, the Yuuzhan Vong leave a cunning trail of vital information where New Republic agents are sure to find it--information the desperate defenders cannot afford to ignore: the location of the aliens' next target.

Then Han Solo stumbles into the dark heart of raging battle, thus beginning a furious race against time that will require every skill and trick in his arsenal to win...

James Luceno is the New York Times bestselling author of the Star Wars novels Millennium Falcon, Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader, Cloak of Deception, Labyrinth of Evil, as well as the New Jedi Order novels Agents of Chaos I: Hero's Trial and Agents of Chaos II: Jedi Eclipse, The Unifying Force, and the eBook Darth Maul: Saboteur. He is also the author of the fantasy novel Hunt for the Mayan Looking-Glass, available as an eBook. He lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with his wife and youngest child. "Punch it, Droma!" Han yelled as he veered the Falcon into an abrupt bank.

Muttering nervously to himself, Droma boosted power to the sublight drives and maxed the throttle. "We'll be fine venturing into Hutt space, you said. You used to do a lot of contract work up and down the Sisar Run and Sriluur was like a second home, you said. Nothing to worry about, you--"

"Quit griping and give me an update on those ships!"

Droma swung to the display screen of the ship's friend-or-foe authenticator, which showed seven bevel-shaped icons closing fast on the Falcon's aft. "Yuuzhan Vong, all right."

Han glanced at the display. The scanners limned images of what might have been asteroids save for the distinctive bulges that were cockpits and the pitted noses characteristic of weapons emplacements and dovin basal housings. "Coralskippers."

"Coordinates for the jump to Nar Shaddaa coming in."

"Belay that," Han countered, throwing switches on the console. "There's no shaking those skips. Route power to the rear deflector shields and lock in a course back to Sriluur. I'd rather deal with them in an atmosphere than out here."

Droma quickly applied himself to the task. "At least we won't have as far to fall."

"Thanks for the encouragement."

The Falcon whipped through a half-twisting loop, and the curve of the dun-and-ecru-

colored world ballooned into view. Terrain-following data said they were traveling northward, looking out at a slice of the northern hemisphere just east of the planetary date line.

"Skips don't perform well in gravity," Han assured. "Have to rely on the anti-grav capabilities of the dovin basals."

As if they had heard him, the enemy pilots began firing at extreme range, molten-gold comets streaming from the projectile and plasma launchers in the bows of their small craft. Two of the missiles connected and, even though weakened by distance, were powerful enough to rock the larger ship. The Falcon's sensor suite began screaming.

"Rear shields holding," Droma reported while he activated countermeasures and distortion systems. "For now."

Han took a steadying breath, vised his right hand on the throttle lever, and rammed it home. The light freighter surged into Sriluur's upper atmosphere, trembling as it continued its oblique dive. With arrant scorn for the planet's protective wrapping, the Yuuzhan Vong crafts plunged after.

"See what I told you?" Han exclaimed. "They stick like epoxy!"

The ship's indicators railed in protest as the Falcon plummeted into denser air, rolling and corkscrewing to evade the deadly fire that sought her. All caution forgotten, Han sharpened the angle of descent, sloughing control in exchange for added speed.

"You've got the bridge!" he told Droma.

Droma threw him a panicked glance. "What?"

Unfastening the straps that secured him to the pilot's chair, Han stood, spun on his heel, and started for the main ladderwell. He didn't make it past the cockpit hatch when ship-rattling impacts aft threw him to the desk and forced him to rethink the idea of getting to one of the gun turrets.

"Enable autotracking for the quad lasers," he said in a rush as he was scrambling to his feet. Buckling back into the chair, he donned a headset and began to call up targeting data on the weapons control display screen. "Let's see if we can't even up the odds."

Droma reached for the joystick that controlled the Falcon's belly gun while Han took hold of the controls for the dorsal gun. Data began scrolling across the respective screens. Han bracketed a coralskipper in the targeting reticle and squeezed the trigger on the control grip.

The enemy craft swallowed the bolt whole.

He pounded his fist on the console. "We've gotta give them more to worry about than laserfire!"

Abruptly he rolled the Falcon onto its back while Droma was still firing the belly guy. In an effort to keep up, the lead coralskipper drew deeply on the capabilities of its dovin basal and accelerated.

Again, Han brought the reticle over his target, but the coralskipper sped out of his sights in a flash.

He left the firing to Droma momentarily and peeled the ship away in a swooping descending bank. Projectiles slammed against the rear shields, and plasma streaked between the ship's mandibles. Han rerouted power to the forward deflector and again increased the angle of their descent.

They ripped through a filmy blanket of high-altitude clouds and went spiraling downward. Far below them, ocean and desert lay side by side. Storm systems shrouded Sriluur's western horizon, and to the north an expansive brown haze smudged the terrain.

Droma glanced at the meteorological sensors. "That's a sandstorm!"

"How about that," Han said. "Some wishes do come true."

The words had barely left his mouth when the lead coralskipper dropped with mind-boggling velocity and was suddenly beneath the Falcon and firing up at her, plasma geysering from its gun emplacements.

Han pulled out of the spiral, yanked the throttle, and threw the ship up and over the coralskipper directly on his tail. A molten bolt from the craft below caught its squadron mate full on. The coralskipper shuddered as hunks of yorik coral flew in all directions. Then an interior explosion burst from the crystalline cockpit, and the crippled ship went into a helpless free fall, condemned to death by gravity.

The destroyed coralskipper's wingmate veered and glued himself to the Falcon's tail, battering it with projectiles and refusing to be unseated, despite a slew of daring turns and evasions Han took them through.

Han went for a pushover, but not in time. Something hit the Falcon like a hard clap on the back. Fighting with the controls, he succeeded in righting her, only to emerge from an end-over-end roll to find three more coralskippers attached to the ship as she entered the sandstorm.

The bristles on Droma's back stood up. "Another hit like that and you may as well plow us into the sand and let the Falcon be our gravestone!"

Projectiles raced past the outrigger cockpit. With the Falcon's Quadex power core roaring,

Han pushed the ship to its limits, jinking and juking as the coralskippers continued to rake fire at them. He dropped the Falcon away in a power dive, leaving Droma struggling to adjust thrust bias and avert disaster as enemy missiles ranged closer.

All at once a mountain loomed before them. Han torqued the ship to starboard so forcefully that both he and Droma nearly sailed from their seats. The lead coralskipper pilot pursued them ferociously, obviously unable to hold the Falcon in his sights but firing anyway, perhaps in the hope of shaking Han's concentration.

Without warning, a plasma bolt sizzled through the overtaxed rear shields. A muffled explosion sounded from aft, followed by the sibilant hiss of the ship's fire-suppression system. An acrid smell drifted forward on exhaust fan currents.

Han sniffed and shot Droma a wide-eyed glance. "What was that?"

Droma's eyes roamed over the console telltales. "Power converter."

Han winced. "Of all the rotten luck!"

He utilized more of the ship's amazing speed to improve their lead and leapt deeper into the swirling haze. The three coralskippers decreased velocity, waiting for the Falcon to come across their vector, but instead Han poured on all power, climbed, looped, and came around behind the trio.

Droma fired instinctively with the belly gun. With the dovin basal of the trailing ship too stressed to handle defense as well as guidance, the laser bolts sneaked through. The widespread burst caught the craft right on the nose, blowing it to nuggets.

Han hooted triumphantly as he sheered off and settled calmly into kill position behind the second craft. The coralskipper pilot, realizing the position he was suddenly in, climbed slightly, unintentionally placing himself in the overlapping field of fire between the Falcon's upper and lower batteries.

"Money Lane!" Han shouted. "One hundred credits to whomever nails him!"

"You're on!" Droma said.

Simultaneously, the two of them tightened their fingers on the trigger. The quad lasers loosed storms of red darts that peppered the rear of the enemy craft and perforated the cockpit, disintegrating the ship.

Han and Droma howled their joy as Han steered through a corkscrewing dive, zipping through the far-flung remains of the exploded ship. Swooping past the lead craft, Han inverted the Falcon and took her back into the storm.

Where it could be glimpsed at all, the land was dark red and studded with monolithic rock

towers that were the sandblasted and wind-eroded remains of volcanic upthrusts. And yet despite their size, the swirling sand made the towers almost impossible to see.

Eyes on the terrain-following display and making the most of the Falcon's maneuverability, Han aimed deliberately for the closest obelisk. Faking a climb, he stood the ship on its side and swerved to starboard while Droma triggered bursts from the belly gun. Unsecured items throughout the ship flew from their perches, crashed into bulkheads, or were sent rolling along the deck plates of the ring corridor. But two well-placed laser bolts caught the coralskipper at the cockpit seam, splitting it in two, as if struck by a chisel in the hands of a master stonemason.

Still, the three remaining coralskippers clung doggedly, chomping at the Falcon's tail. Map of the ground, Han weaved through a forest of storm-obscured spires and wind-sculpted stelae. The engines moaned and the ship vibrated as if on the verge of flying apart. Hiking power to the rear shields, he snap-rolled, then stood the Falcon on its side once more to narrow her profile as plasma streaked past them to both sides.

Droma lashed his tail around the seat to keep from being strangled by the seat harness. "At least warn me where you're going to do that!"

Han leveled out and maneuvered through a ludicrously tight turn, feathering the engines until the Falcon was at a near stall, then shunting power to the thrusters and throwing the ship into a vertical reversal. Swerving to evade Droma's fire, the trailing coralskipper flipped out of control and careened straight into an outcropping, shattering to bits.

The Falcon's thrusters flaring, Han pulled sharply, climbing out of the storm at high boost. Neither of the surviving pair of fighters followed them back up the well. They collapsed into their chairs as the stars lost their twinkle and swarmed around them as pinpoints of light.

"Nice shooting," Han said after checking in with the threat assessor one final time.

Droma returned the grin. "Nice driving."

The Falcon buckled. Indicators flashed and the console came alive with warning tones. Han and Droma fell silent once more and turned to the painful chore of assessing just how much damage the ship had sustained.

"The hyperdrive is viable but responding erratically," Droma said a long moment later.

Han nodded glumly. "Must have suffered collateral damage when the power converter got hit."

Droma tugged at one end of his drooping mustache. "We might be able to make Nar Shaddaa. It's difficult to tell."

"No." Han said. "We can't chance it."

"Do we return to Sriluur?"

Han shook his head. "I doubt we'll find the replacement parts we need. Besides, I don't want to risk running into those coralskippers again."

Droma called up star charts. "Kashyyyk, then. Two quick jumps and we're there."

Han ran his hand over his mouth. "Not a good idea." When Droma didn't respond, he said, "It's not what you're thinking. I can handle the memories. It's just that Chewbacca's family still consider themselves responsible for my well-being, and I can't face that right now."

"So where to?"

Han studied the displayed star charts and grinned, more to himself. "A little out-of-the-way place I know, where they'll have everything we need."

"Everything Han Solo needs," Droma thought to point out.

"Maybe you're right," Han said. He turned slightly to regard Droma. "Think you can handle playing captain for a while?"

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