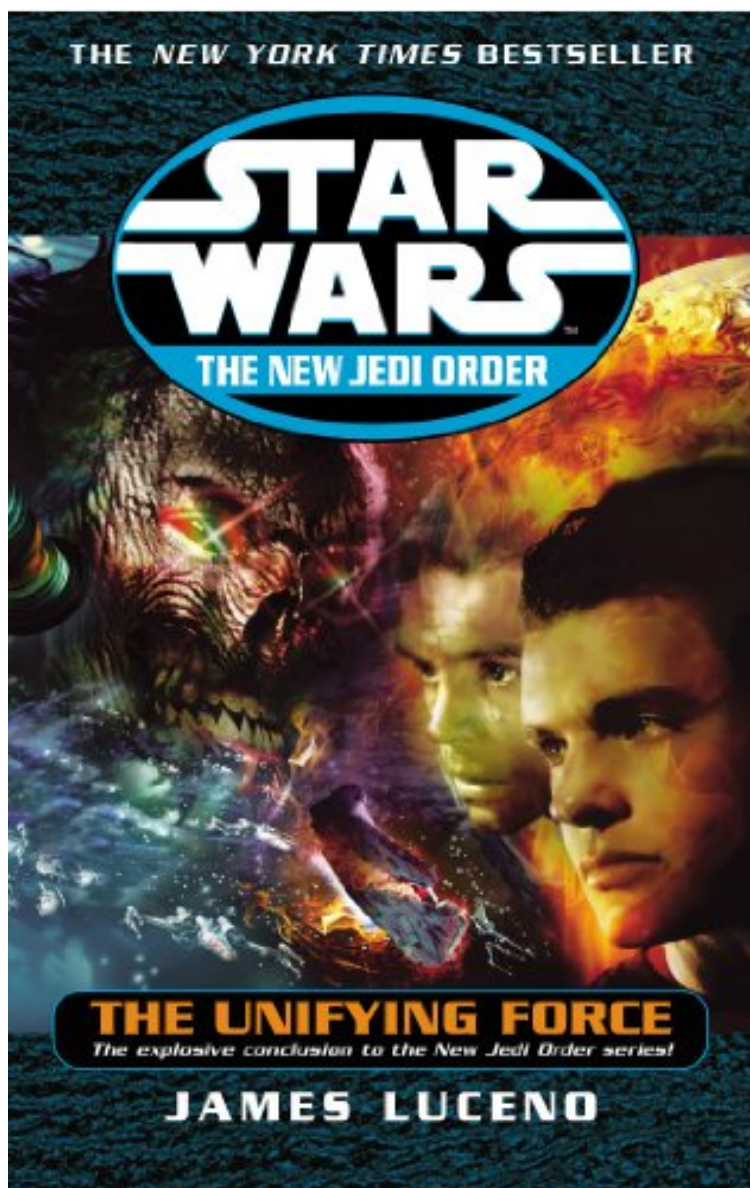


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Star Wars: The New Jedi Order - The Unifying Force



Par James Luceno
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe explosive conclusion of THE NEW JEDI ORDER series sees the New Jedi Order and the newly formed Galactic Federation of Free Alliances coming together to vanquish at last the horrific Yuushan Vong invaders. The key to ending the war lies hidden in the past, and it is up to Luke Skywalker and his nephew Jacen Solo to unravel the mystery and figure out how to use it to bring the war to a peaceful and optimistic end.ExtraitCakhmaims getting to be a pretty good shot, Han said over the sound of the

reciprocating quad laser cannon. Remind me to up his payor at least promote him. Leia glanced at him from the copilots chair. From bodyguard to what butler? Han pictured the Noghri in formal attire, setting meals in front of Han and Leia in the Falcons forward cabin. His upper lip curled in delight, and he laughed shortly. Maybe we should see how he does with the rest of these skips. The YT-1300 was just coming out of her long turn, with Selvaris double suns off to starboard and an active volcano dominating the forward view. Below, green-capped, sheer-sided islands reached up into the planets deep blue sky, and the aquamarine sea seemed to go on forever. Two coralskippers were still glued to the Falcons tail, chopping at it and holding position through all the insane turns and evasions, but so far the deflector shields were holding. His large hands gripped on the control yoke, Han glanced at the consoles locator display, where only one bezel was pulsing. Where'd the other swoop go? We lost it, Leia said. Han leaned toward the viewport to survey the undulating sea. How could we lose? No, I mean it's gone. One of the coralskippers took it out. Han's eyes blazed. Why, that which one of em? Before Leia could answer, two plasma missiles streaked past the cockpit, bright as meteors and barely missing the starboard mandible. Does it matter? Han shook his head. Where's the other swoop? Leia studied the locator display, then called up a map from the terrain sensor, which showed everything from the mouth of the estuary clear to the volcano. Her left forefinger tapped the screen. Far side of that island. Any skips after it? A loud explosion buffeted the Falcon from behind. We seem to be the popular target, Leia said. Just the way you like it. Han narrowed his eyes. You bet I do. Determined to lure their pair of pursuers away from the swoop, he threw the freighter into a sudden ascent. When they had climbed halfway to the stars, he dropped the ship into a stomach-churning corkscrew. Pulling out sharply, he twisted the ship through a looping rollover, emerging from the combo headed in the opposite direction, with the two coralskippers in front of him. He grinned at Leia. Now who's in charge? She blew out her breath. Was there ever any doubt? Han focused his attention on the two enemy craft. Over the long years, Yuuzhan Vong pilots faced with impossible odds had surrendered some of the suicidal resolve they had displayed during the early days of the war. Maybe word had come down from Supreme Overlord Shimrra or someone that discretion really was the better part of valor. Whatever the case, the pilots of the two skips Han was stalking apparently saw some advantage to fleeing rather than reengaging the ship; their plasma missiles had failed to bring them down. But Han wasn't content to send them home with their tails tucked between their legs especially not after they had killed an unarmed swoop pilot he had come halfway across the galaxy to rescue. Cakhmaim, listen up, he said into his headset mike. Ill fire the belly gun from here. Well put em in the Money Lane and be done with them. Money Lane was Han's term for the area where the quad lasers firing fields overlapped. In emergency situations, both cannons could be fired from the cockpit, but the present situation didn't call for that. What's more, Han wanted to give Cakhmaim the chance to hone his firing technique. All Han and Leia had to do was help line up the shots. From the way the coralskippers reacted to the Falcons sudden turnabout, Han could almost believe that the enemy pilots had been eavesdropping on his communication with the Noghri. The first skip the more battered of the pair, showing charred blotches and deep pockmarks, poured on all speed, separating from his wingmate at a sharp angle. Smaller and faster, and seemingly helmed by a better pilot, the second skip shed velocity in an attempt to trick the Falcon into coming across his vector. That was the skip that had taken out the swoop, Han decided, sentencing the pilot to be the first to feel the Falcons wrath. Leia guessed as much, and immediately plotted an intercept course. Exposed, the skip pilot went evasive, moving into the gunsights and out again, but with mounting panic as the Falcon settled calmly into kill position. The dorsal laser cannon was programmed to fire three-beam bursts that, all these years later, still had the ability to outwit the dovin basals of the older, perhaps more dim-witted coralskippers. While the enemy craft was quick to deploy a gravitic anomaly that engulfed the first and second beams, the third got through, blowing a huge chunk of yorik coral from the vessels fantail. Han tweaked the yoke to place the skip in the Money Lane, and his lefthand tightened on the trigger of the belly guns remote firing mechanism. Sustained bursts from the twin cannons whittled the skip to half its size; then it blew, throwing pieces of coral wreckage in every direction. That's for the swoop pilot, Han said soberly. He turned his attention to the second skip, which, desperate to avoid a similar fate, was jinking and juking all over the sky. Zipping through the showering remains of the first kill, the Falcon quickened up and pounced on the wildly maneuvering skip from above. The targeting reticle went red, and a target-lock tone filled the cockpit. Again the quad lasers rallied, catching the vessel with a burst after burst until it disappeared in a nimbus of coral dust and white-hot gas. Han and Leia hooted. Nice shooting, Cakhmaim! he said into the headset. Score two more for the good guys. Leia watched him for a moment. Happy now? Instead of replying, Han pushed the yoke away from him, dropping the Falcon to within meters

of the surging waves. Where's the sloop? he asked finally. Leia was ready with the answer. Come around sixty degrees, and it should be right in front of us. Han adjusted course, and the sloop came into view, streaking over the surface, bearing two seriously dissimilar riders. In pursuit, and just visible beneath the surface, moved an enormous olive-drab triangle, trailing what appeared to be a lengthy tail. Han's jaw dropped. What is that thing? Leia said. Threepio, get in here! Han yelled, without taking his eyes from the creature. C-3PO staggered into the cockpit, clamping his hands on the high-backed navigator's chair to keep from being thrown off balance, as had too often happened. Han raised his right hand to the viewport and pointed. What is that? he asked, enunciating every word. Oh, my, the droid began. I believe that what we're looking at is a kind of boat creature. The Yuuzhan Vong term for it is vangaak, which derives from the verb to submerge. Although in this case the verb has been modified to suggest skip the language lesson and just tell me how to kill it! Well, I would suggest targeting the flat dome, clearly visible on its dorsal surface. A head shot. Precisely. A head shot. Han, Leia interrupted. Four more coral skippers headed our way. Han manipulated levers on the console, and the Falcon accelerated. We gotta work fast. Threepio, tell Meewalh to activate the manual release for the landing ramp. I'll be there in a flash. Leia watched him undo the clasps of the crash webbing. I take it you're not planning to land. He kissed her on the cheek as he stood up. Not if I can help it. The sloop fought to maintain an altitude of eight meters, but that was enough to keep it from the snapping jaws of the Yuuzhan Vong vangaak that had almost snagged it on surfacing. Thorsh might have opted to head inland if the Yuuzhan Vong search parties and their snarling beasts hadn't reached the marshy shore. Worse, four specks in the northern sky were almost certainly coral skippers, soaring in to reinforce the pair the YT-1300 was chasing. Instead, the Jenet had the sloop aimed for deeper water, out toward the volcano, where the waves mounded to a height of ten meters. Thorsh and his rider could feel the sting of the saline spray on their scratched and bruised faces and hands. Behind them, the vangaak was rapidly closing the gap, but if it had weapons other than tor-pedo analogs it wasn't bringing them to bear. An unsettling vociferation from the Bith broke Thorsh's concentration. The vangaak's gone! It submerged! Thorsh didn't know whether to worry or celebrate. The vangaak put a quick end to his indecision. Breaching the surface in front of the sloop, the dull olive triangle spiked straight up out of the waves, venting seawater from blowholes on its dorsal side, and opening its tooth-filled mouth. Thorsh demanded all he could from the sloop, climbing at maximum boost, but there was no escaping the reach of the creature. He heard a surprised scream, then felt his flight jacket rip away. Lightened, the sloop ascended at greater speed, only to stall. Thorsh threw a distraught glance over his shoulder. The Bith was pinned between the vangaak's teeth, mouth wide in a silent scream, black eyes dull, Thorsh's jacket still clutched in his dexterous hands. But there wasn't time for despair or anger. The repulsorlift came back to life, and Thorsh veered away, even as he was falling. A roar battered his eardrums, and suddenly the YT-1300 was practically alongside him, skimming the waves not fifty meters away. The quartet of coral skippers began firing from extreme range, their plasma projectiles cutting scalding trails through the white-capped crests. The old freighter's landing ramp was lowered from the starboard docking arm. It was clear what the ship's pilots had in mind. They were expecting him to come alongside and hurl himself onto the narrow incline. But Thorsh faltered. He knew the limitations of the sloop, and more importantly his own. With the coral skippers approaching and the vangaak submerged who-knew-where beneath the waves, it was unlikely that he could even reach the freighter in time. Additionally and despite what were obviously military-grade de-flector shields the freighter was being forced to make slight vertical and horizontal adjustments, which only decreased Thorsh's chances of clambering aboard. His grimace disappeared, and in its place came a look of sharp attentiveness. As sole bearer of the secret intelligence contained in the holo-wafer, he had to give it his best try. Tightening his grip, he banked for the sanctuary of the matte-black ship. Crouched at the top of the extended ramp, Han peered down at the rushing water not twenty meters below. Wind and salt spray howled through the opening, blowing his hair every which way and making it difficult for him to keep his eyes open. Captain Solo, C-3PO said from the ring corridor. Princess Leia wishes you to know that the sloop is approaching. Apparently the pilot feels confident that he can complete the transfer to Millennium Falcon without suffering too much internal damage or . . . perishing in the attempt. Han threw the droid a wide-eyed look. Perishing? Certainly the odds are against him. If he were piloting a speeder bike, perhaps. But swoops are notorious for going out of control at the slightest provocation! Han nodded grimly. A former sloop racer, he knew that C-3PO was right. Taking in the situation now, he wondered if even he could make the jump. I'm going to the bottom! he shouted. C-3PO canted his golden head. Sir? Han made a downward motion. The bottom of the ramp. Sir, I have a bad feeling . . . The wind drowned out the rest of the droid's words. Han crabbed down to the base of the ramp, where he could hear the Falcon's

bellyturret slicing through the agitated peaks of the waves. A distinctivethrobbing sound captured his attention. The swoop was beginning toangle for the ramp. The pilota Jenet, of all speciestook his righthand off the handgrips just long enough to signal Han with a wave.Considering that even that slight movement sent the swoop into awobble, there was simply no way the Jenet would be able to let go completelyespecially not with the Falcon adding to the turbulenceof the sea itself.Han reconsidered, then swung around to C-3PO.Threepio, tell Leia were going with Plan B!The droid raised his hands to his head in distress. Captain Solo,just the sound of that makes me worry!Han raised his forefinger. Just tell Leia, Threepio. Shellunderstand.Plan B?That was precisely my reaction, C-3PO said in an agitatedvoice. But does anyone ever listen to my concerns?Dont worry, Threepio, Im sure Han knows what hes doing.That is hardly a comforting thought, Princess.Leia swung back to the console and allowed her eyes to roam overthe instruments. Plan B, she mused. What can Han have in mind? Sheplaced him squarely in her thoughts, then smiled in sudden revelation.Of course . . .Her hands slid switches while she studied the displays. Then shesat away from the console in contemplation. Yes, she decided at last,she supposed it could be donethough it would mean relying largelyon the attitude and braking thrusters, and hoping that they didnt stallor fail.She looked over her shoulder at C-3PO, who had evidently followedher every move and manipulation.Tell Han Ive got everything worked out.Oh, dear, the droid said, turning and exiting the cockpit. Oh,dear.The four coralskippers were closing fast, lobbing plasma missilesinto the blustery stretch of water between the swoop and the freighter.Thorsh dipped his head instinctively as one fireball plunged into thewaves not ten meters away. The ferocity of the impact geysered superheatedwater high into the air, and sent the swoop into a sustainedwobble.The freighter held to its course regardless, its top gunner keepingthe coralskippers at bay with bursts of laserfire. A human male wascrouched at the base of the landing ramp, his left arm wrapped aroundone of the telescoping hydraulic struts, and the fingers of his righthand making a gesture that on some worlds implied craziness on thepart of its recipient. Just now, the twirling gesture meant somethingelse entirelythough craziness was still a large part of it.Thorsh swallowed hard, just thinking about what the pilots wereabout to attempt.The human waved and scurried back up the ramp.Decelerating slightly, Thorsh fell in behind the freighter, giving itwide berth. Above the strained throbbing of the swoops repulsorlift,he heard the sudden reverberation of the YT-1300s retro- and attitude thrusters.Then, scarcely surrendering momentum, the freighter began to rotate ninety degrees to starboard, bringing the boarding ramp almostdirectly in front of the tottering swoop.Take the jump! Han said, mostly to himself. Now!He was back in the pilots chair, his hands tight on the controlyoke, while Leia feathered the thrusters, cheating the Falcon throughits quarter turn. Flying sideways, Han could see the coralskippers that had a second earlier been behind the ship, as well as the swoop,which was flying just off the blunt tip of the starboard docking arm.Hoping to minimize the chances of the pilots overshooting his markand smashing headlong into the bulkhead at the top of the ramp, Hanadjusted the Falcons forward speed to match that of the swoop.Hes accelerating! Leia said.Threepio! Meewalh! Han yelled over his right shoulder. Ourguests coming aboard!

Glancing out the right side of the viewport,he saw the Jenet leap the swoop toward the rampthe Falconsnarrow but open mouth.Now! he told Leia.Deftly she fed power to the attitude thrusters, allowing the ship tocomplete a full clockwise rotation, even as a series of crashing soundswere echoing their way into the cockpit from the ring corridor.Han winced and scrunched his shoulders with each clang! andcrash!, mentally assessing the damage, but keeping his fingers crossedthat the Jenet pilot was faring better than the interior of the dockingarm.No sooner did the ramp telltale on the console flash redindicating that docking arm had sealed tightthan Han yanked backon the control yoke, and the Falcon clawed its way into Selvariss opensky, dodging volleys of molten fire from pursuing coralskippers. Thequad laser replied with packets of cohesive light, brilliant green evenagainst the backdrop of the heaving sea.Captain Solo, hes alive! C-3PO called with dramatic relief.Were all alive!Exhaling slowly, Han sank back into the seat, but without liftinghis hands from the yoke. The coralskippers were already lagging behindwhen the Falcon rocketed over the summit of the volcano, straight through dense clouds of gritty smoke, climbing rapidly on a column of blue energy. The ship was halfway to starlight when theshaken Jenet appeared at the cockpit hatchway, one bare arm drapedover Meewalhs shoulders, the other around C-3POs.You must have a hard head, Han said.Grinning faintly, Leia looked at her husband. Hes not the onlyone.Han glanced at her in false chagrin, then nodded his chin to thefemale Noghri. Take our guest to the forward cabin and provide himwith whatever he needs.Ill get the medpac, Leia said, leaving her chair. She set herheadset on the console and looked at Han again. Well, you did it.We, Han amended. Casually, he stretched out his arms. Youknow, youre never too old for this sort of thing.You havent outgrown it, thats for sure.He studied her. What, you have?She placed her right hand on

his cheek. You're a danger to yourself and everyone around you. But I do love you, Han. He smiled broadly as Leia hurried from the cockpit. From the Hardcover edition. Presentation de l'auteur The explosive conclusion of THE NEW JEDI ORDER series sees the New Jedi Order and the newly formed Galactic Federation of Free Alliances coming together to vanquish at last the horrific Yuushan Vong invaders. The key to ending the war lies hidden in the past, and it is up to Luke Skywalker and his nephew Jacen Solo to unravel the mystery and figure out how to use it to bring the war to a peaceful and optimistic end.