

Star Wars: New Jedi Order: Balance Point

by Kathy Tyers

Excerpt from Chapter One

Barely aware of fuzzy shapes clustering around him, and a Ryn voice hooting for a medical droid, Jacen felt as if he were shrinking ... falling backward into vacuum. He tried focusing deep inside and outside himself, to grab onto the Force and punch out ... or slip into a healing trance. Could he take Jaina with him, if he did? Uncle Luke had taught him a dozen focusing techniques, back at the Academy, and since then...

Jacen.

A voice seemed to echo in his mind, but it wasn't Jaina's. It was deep, male ... vaguely like his uncle's.

Making an effort, Jacen imagined his uncle's face, trying to focus on that echo. An enormous white vortex seemed to spin around him. It pulled at him, drawing him toward its dazzling center.

What was going on?

Then he saw his uncle, robed in pure white, half turned away. Luke Skywalker held his shimmering lightsaber in a diagonal stance, hands at hip level, point high.

Jaina! Jacen shouted the words in his mind. *Uncle Luke, Jaina's been hurt!*

Then he saw what held his uncle's attention. In the dim distance, but clearly in focus, a second form straightened and darkened. Tall, humanoid, powerfully built, it had a face and chest covered with sinuous scars and tattoos above the waist. Its hips and legs were encased in rust-brown armor. Claws protruded from its heels and knuckles, and an ebony cloak flowed from its shoulders. The alien held a coal-black, snake-headed amphistaff across its body, mirroring the angle of Luke's lightsaber, pitting poisonous darkness against verdant light.

Utterly confused, Jacen stretched out through the Force. First he sensed the figure in white as a respected uncle—then abruptly as a powerful depth, blazing in the Force like a star gone nova. But across this slowly spinning disk, where Jacen's inner vision presented

a Yuuzhan Vong warrior, his Force sense picked up nothing at all. Through the Force, all Yuuzhan Vong did seem utterly lifeless, like the technology they vilified.

The alien swung its amphistaff. The Jedi Master's lightsaber blazed, swept down, and blocked the swing, brightening until it washed out almost everything else in this vision. The Vong's staff seemed darker than any absence of light, a darkness that seemed alive but promised death.

The broad, spinning disk on which they both stood finally slowed. It focused into billions of stars. Jacen picked out the familiar map of known space.

Luke dropped into a fighting stance, poised near the galaxy's center, the deep core. He raised his saber and held it high, near his right shoulder, pointing inward. From three points of darkness, beyond the rim, tattooed assailants advanced.

More of them? Jacen realized this was a vision, not a battle unfolding in front of him, with little to do with his twin sister.

Or maybe everything to do with her! Did these new invaders symbolize other invasion forces, more world-ships—besides the ones that were already beating back everything the Republic could throw at them? Reaching out to Jaina, maybe he had tapped the unifying Force itself ... or maybe it broke through to him.

The galaxy seemed to teeter, poised between light and darkness. Luke stood close to the center, counterweighing the dark invaders.

But as their numbers increased, the balance tipped.

Uncle Luke, Jacen shouted. *What should I do?*

Luke turned away from the advancing Vong. Looking to Jacen with somber intensity, he tossed his lightsaber. It flew in a low, humming arc, trailing pale green sparks onto the galactic plane.

Eyeing the advancing horde, Jacen felt another enemy try to seize him: anger, from deep in his heart. Fear and fury focused his strength. If he could, he would utterly destroy the Yuuzhan Vong and all they stood for! He opened a hand, stretched out his arm ...

And missed.

The Jedi weapon sailed past him. As anger released him, fear took a tighter hold. Jacen flailed, leaped, tried stretching out with the Force. Luke's saber sailed on, shrinking and dimming with distance.

Now the galaxy tipped more quickly. A dark, deadly tempest gathered around the Vong warriors. Disarmed, Luke stretched out both hands. First he, then his enemies, swelled to impossible sizes. Instead of human and alien figures, now Jacen saw light and darkness as entirely separate forces. Even the light terrified him in its grandeur and majesty. The galaxy seemed poised to plunge toward evil, but Jacen couldn't help staring at the fearful light, spellbound, burning his retinas.

A Jedi knows no fear ... He'd heard that a thousand times, but this sensation was no cowardly urge to run. This was awe, it was reverence—a passionate longing to draw nearer. To serve the Light and transmit its grandeur.

But compared to the forces battling around him, he was only a tiny point. Helpless and unarmed, besides ... because of one moment's dark anger. Had that misstep doomed him? Not just him, but the galaxy?

A voice like Luke's, but deeper, shook the heavens. Jacen, it boomed. *Stand firm.*

The horizon tilted farther. Jacen lunged forward, determined to lend his small weight to Luke's side, to the light.

He mis-stepped. He flailed for Luke's hand, but missed again. And again, his weight fell slightly—by centimeters—toward the dark enemies.

Luke seized his hand and held tightly. *Hang on, Jacen!* The slope steepened under their feet. Stars extinguished. The Yuuzhan Vong warriors scrambled forward. Whole star clusters winked out, a dark cascade under clawed enemy feet.

Plainly, the strength of a hundred-odd Jedi couldn't keep the galaxy from falling to this menace. One misstep—at one critical moment, by one pivotal person—could doom everyone they'd sworn to protect. No military force could stop this invasion, because it was a spiritual battle. And if one pivotal person fell to the dark side—or even used the ravishing, terrifying power of light in a wrong way—then this time, everything they knew might slide into stifling darkness.

Is that it? he cried toward the infinite distance.

Again, Jacen perceived the words in a voice that was utterly familiar but too deep to be Luke's. *Stand firm, Jacen.*

One of the Yuuzhan Vong leaped toward him. Jacen gasped and flung out both arms—