



Choices of One: Star Wars Legends (Star Wars - Legends)

By Timothy Zahn

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From #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Timothy Zahn comes a brand-new *Star Wars* adventure, set in the time between *A New Hope* and *The Empire Strikes Back* and featuring the young Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Princess Leia Organa, and the beloved Mara Jade.

*The fate of the Rebellion rests on Luke Skywalker's next move.
But have the rebels entered a safe harbor or a death trap?*

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Mara Jade, the Emperor's Hand, is also heading for Candoras, along with the five renegade stormtroopers known as the Hand of Judgment. Their mission: to punish Ferrouz's treason and smash the Rebels for good.

But in this treacherous game of betrayals within betrayals, a wild card is waiting to be played.

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Features a bonus section following the novel that includes a primer on the *Star Wars* expanded universe, and over half a dozen excerpts from some of the most popular *Star Wars* books of the last thirty years!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

TIMOTHY ZAHN has been writing science fiction since 1975 and sold his first story to Analog in 1978. Since then Zahn has published nearly seventy short stories and novelettes, numerous novels, and three short fiction collections. Along the way he has won a Hugo Award (for the novella Cascade Point, in 1984) and has been nominated twice more. He is best known for his original five Star Wars novels (Heir to the Empire, Dark Force Rising, The Last Command, Specter of the Past, and Vision of the Future). His most recent publications have been the science-fiction Cobra series and the six-part young adult series Dragonback. He has a B.S. in physics from Michigan State University, and an M.S. in physics from the University of Illinois.

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CHAPTER ONE

The last hyperspace jump had been a tricky one, starting as it did in one minor star system barely on the charts and ending in another even more obscure one. But the ISD Chimaera's officers and crew were the finest in the galaxy, and as Commander Gilad Pellaeon looked over the repeater display he confirmed that they'd made the jump precisely.

He strode down the command walkway, gazing at the Chimaera's long prow, wondering what in space they were doing here. The Chimaera was an Imperial Star Destroyer, a kilometer and a half of heavy armor and awesome weaponry, the very symbol and expression of Imperial power and authority. Even the arrogant anarchists of the Rebellion hesitated before going up against ships like this.

So with that same Rebellion boiling ever more loudly and violently across the Empire, with Lord Vader himself tasked with tracking down and destroying their leadership, what in the name of Imperial Center was the Chimaera doing on passenger transport duty?

"This is insane," Captain Calo Drusan muttered as he came up beside Pellaeon. "What in the galaxy is Command thinking of?"

"It does seem a bit odd," Pellaeon said diplomatically. "But I'm sure they have their reasons."

Drusan snorted. "If you believe that, you're a fool. Imperial Center has gone top-heavy with politicians, professional flatterers, and incompetents. Reason and intelligence went down the garbage chutes a long time ago." He gestured at the starlit sky in front of them. "My guess is that someone's just trying to impress everyone with his ability to move fleet units around."

"Could be, sir," Pellaeon said, a small shiver running up his back. In general, Drusan was right about the way the Imperial court was going, though even a ship's captain shouldn't be discussing such things out loud.

In this case, however, Drusan was wrong? because this particular order hadn't come from some flunky at Imperial Center. That was how it had looked, and how it was clearly intended to look.

Unlike the captain, though, Pellaeon hadn't taken the order at face value, but had taken the time to run a backtrack. While it had indeed come through proper channels from Imperial Center, it hadn't originated

there. It had, in fact, come from an undisclosed location in the Outer Rim.

According to the top-secret dispatches Drusan had shared with his senior officers, that was where Grand Admiral Zaarin was right now, quietly touring the edge of Imperial space aboard the ISD Predominant.

Which strongly implied that the Chimaera's orders had come from the Grand Admiral himself.

"Incoming ship, Captain," the sensor officer called from the starboard crew pit. "Just jumped into the system. Sensors read it as a Kazellis-class light freighter."

Drusan whistled softly. "A Kazellis," he commented. "That's a rare bird--they stopped making those years ago. We have an ID yet?"

"Yes, sir," the comm officer called from the portside crew pit. "Code response confirms it's the Salaban's Hope."

Pellaeon cocked an eyebrow. Not only had their mysterious passenger arrived, but he'd arrived within minutes of the Chimaera's own appearance. Either he had a highly developed sense of timing, or he was remarkably lucky.

"Vector?" Drusan asked.

"Directly starboard," the sensor officer called. "Range, eighty kilometers."

Not only practically on top of the Chimaera in time, but in position, as well. Pellaeon's estimation of the freighter's pilot went up another couple of notches.

Of course, not everyone saw it that way. "Kriffing fool," Drusan grunted. "What's he trying to do, run us down?"

Pellaeon took a few steps forward and peered out the starboard viewport. Sure enough, the glow of a sublight drive was just barely visible out there against the background stars.

Except that the glow shouldn't have been visible. Not at that distance. Not unless the pilot was hauling his sublights for all they were worth, and then some.

And the only reason someone would do that?..?..?

"Captain, I recommend we go to full alert," Pellaeon said urgently, turning back to Drusan. "That ship's running from something."

For a moment Drusan didn't reply, his eyes flicking past Pellaeon's shoulder to the approaching freighter. With an effort, Pellaeon forced himself to remain silent, letting his captain work through the logic in his own unhurried, methodical way.

Finally, to his relief, Drusan stirred. "Full alert," the captain called. "And reconfirm that identity code. Just in case he's not running from anyone, but is thinking of ramming us."

Pellaeon turned back to the viewport, hoping he'd been able to keep his bewilderment from showing before

the captain could see it. Did Drusan honestly believe anyone would be stupid enough and suicidal enough to try such an insane stunt? Even the lunatics of the Rebellion knew better than that. Still, as long as Drusan's paranoid assumption got the shields up and the turbolasers charging--

"Incoming!" the sensor officer snapped. "Six unidentified ships jumping in, bearing in sweep-cluster pattern behind the Salaban's Hope."

"Come about," Drusan said, his voice taking on an edge of eagerness. The captain loved it when he had a chance to fire the Chimaera's turbolasers at something. "All turbolasers to full power."

Pellaeon grimaced. As usual, Drusan was following standard combat procedure.

Only in this case, standard procedure wasn't going to work. By the time the Chimaera was ready to fire, the attackers would have caught up with the Salaban's Hope and be swarming it.

But if the Chimaera threw power to its sublight engines and headed straight toward the freighter, they might scare off the attackers, or at least give them a moment of pause. Closing the distance would also mean getting to the turbolasers' effective range a little sooner. "Captain, if I may suggest--"

"No, you may not, Commander," Drusan cut him off calmly. "This is no time for your fancy theories of combat."

"Captain, the Salaban's Hope is hailing us," the comm officer called. "Lord Odo requests your immediate attention."

Pellaeon frowned. Lord Odo was the sort of name that belonged in the Imperial court, not way out here in the Outer Rim. What would a member of the court be doing this far from Imperial Center?

"Put him through," Drusan ordered.

"Yes, sir." There was a click--

"Captain Drusan, this is Lord Odo," a melodious voice said from the bridge speaker. "As you may have noted, I've come under attack."

"I have indeed, Lord Odo," Drusan said. "We're charging the turbolaser batteries now."

"Excellent," Odo said. "In the meantime, may I request you shunt all other available power to the tractor beams and pull--"

"Not a good idea, my lord," Drusan warned. "At this range, a full-power tractor beam could severely damage your hull."

"That you shunt all power to the tractor beams," Odo repeated, a sudden edge to his voice, "and pull the two endmost attackers toward you."

"And if we breach--" Belatedly, Drusan broke off. "Oh. Yes. Yes, I understand. Ensign Caln, tractors on the two endmost raiders--lock up, and reel in."

Pellaeon turned back to the viewport, a lump in his throat. The engine flares of the attacking ships were visible now, blazing against the stars as they drove hard on the Salaban's Hope's stern. Drusan had been right about the dangers of full-power tractor beams at this range. Clearly, that was what Odo was hoping for, that the Chimaera's tractors would be strong enough to crack or even shatter the raiders' hulls.

But if the attackers' ships were stronger than Odo thought, all the maneuver would accomplish would be to pull two of the raiders forward into close-fire range faster and easier than they could manage on their own.

At which point the Salaban's Hope would have enemy lasers behind it and on both flanks, and it was unlikely that it would have enough shield capacity to handle all three. Hissing softly between his teeth, Pellaeon watched.

Abruptly, the two pursuing ships on the ends began corkscrewing violently, their drive trails spinning like children's windsparklers. "Tractors engaged," the tractor officer called. "Attackers locked and coming toward us."

"Any signs of hull fractures?" Drusan asked.

"Nothing registering, sir," the sensor officer reported.

"Acknowledged," Drusan said. "So much for that," he added to Pellaeon.

"Well, at least they can't fire on the Salaban's Hope," Pellaeon pointed out. "Not with that helix yaw."

"Difficult to get a stable targeting lock that way," Drusan agreed reluctantly. "But not impossible."

And then, suddenly, Pellaeon got it. Odo wasn't just hoping the Chimaera's tractors would tear the attacking ships apart. He was letting the Imperials pull the raiders up alongside him, banking on the helix yaw to interfere with their own firing long enough--

He was still working through the logic when the Salaban's Hope's lasers flashed to either side, blasting the two tractored raiders to scrap.

And as the expanding clouds of debris twisted free of the tractors' grip, they naturally and inevitably fell backward past the still-accelerating Salaban's Hope, and directly into the paths of the four raiders still chasing it.

"Captain, turbolasers online," the weapons officer reported.

"Target the remaining attackers," Drusan snorted. "That is, if there's anything there still worth targeting. And alert the hangar bay duty officer that he has a ship coming in."

He looked at Pellaeon. "If this Lord Odo is a member of the Imperial court," he murmured, "at least he's a competent one."

"Yes, sir," Pellaeon said. "Shall I take over here while you go down to welcome him?"

Drusan made a face. "Fortunately, I'm too busy cleaning up this mess to bother with visitors," he said. "You go. Get him aboard, get him settled--you know the routine. Tell him I'll be down to greet him as soon as

we've made the jump to lightspeed."

"Yes, sir," Pellaeon said. "Maybe I can get him to tell us where exactly that encrypted course setting we were sent is taking us."

"Don't count on it, Commander," Drusan said. "The Imperial court loves its secrets as much as anyone else." He waved a hand. "Dismissed."

Pellaeon had never before had the dubious honor of welcoming an actual member of the Imperial court aboard his ship. But he'd heard all the stories about the nobles' arrogance, their love of all things rare and expensive, and their colorful and sycophantic entourages.

Lord Odo proved to be a surprise. The first person to emerge into the hangar bay from the docking tunnel was an old, frail-looking human dressed not in lush and expensive colors but in plain, drab pilot's garb. The second was another human--Pellaeon assumed he was human, anyway--dressed in a gray-and-burgundy hooded robe, black gloves, boots, and cloak, and the black metal full-face mask of a pantomime-mute actor.

There was no third person. If Odo had an entourage, he'd apparently left it behind.

Pellaeon waited, just to be sure, until the pilot signaled for the boarding hatch to be sealed. As it closed with a thump, he stepped forward. "Lord Odo," he said, bowing at the waist and hoping fervently that the visitor would forgive any unintentional lapses in proper court etiquette. "I'm Commander Gilad Pellaeon, third bridge officer of the Imperial Star Destroyer Chimaera. Captain Drusan asked me to greet you, and to inform you that he'll pay his own respects as soon as his duties on the bridge permit."

"Thank you, Commander," Odo said in the same melodious voice Pellaeon had heard on the bridge, now muffled slightly by the mask. There was no mouth opening, Pellaeon noted, nor were there even any eye slits. Either Odo could somehow see right through the metal, or else there was a compact heads-up display built into the inside. "Are we on our way?"

"Yes, sir," Pellaeon said, glancing at the nearest readout panel just to make sure. "I believe the encrypted course data that arrived with your boarding authorization said it would be a ten-standard-hour journey."

"Correct," Odo confirmed. "I trust you'll forgive my appearance. My reason for this visit must remain private and my identity unrevealed."

"No explanation necessary, sir," Pellaeon hastened to assure him. "I understand how things are done in the Imperial court."

"Do you, now," Odo said. "Excellent. Perhaps later you can instruct me on its more subtle aspects."

Pellaeon felt a frown crease his forehead. Was Odo merely having a joke at a lowly fleet officer's expense? Or did he really not know the nuances of Imperial court procedure and behavior?

In which case, he was obviously not a member of the court. So who was he?

"I trust you have quarters prepared for us," Odo continued. "The journey was long and fraught with danger."

The masked and hooded head inclined slightly. “Speaking of which, may I also thank you for your assistance against those raiders.”

“Our pleasure, my lord,” Pellaeon said, wondering for a split second if he should point out that the main tactical thrust of the engagement had in fact been Odo’s.

Probably not. It wouldn’t do for the Imperial fleet to admit that a visiting civilian had come up with a better combat plan than they had. “And yes, quarters have been arranged just off the hangar bay for you and your pilot.” He looked at the pilot and raised his eyebrows. “Your name?”

The pilot looked at Odo, as if seeking permission to speak. Odo made no move, and after a moment the pilot looked back at Pellaeon. “Call me Sorro,” he said. His voice was as old and tired as the rest of him.

“Honored to meet you,” Pellaeon said, turning back to Odo. “If you’ll follow me, my lord, I’ll escort you to your quarters.”

Exactly nine and three-quarter standard hours later, even though it wasn’t his watch, Pellaeon made sure to be on the Chimaera’s bridge.

It was a waste of effort. The Star Destroyer emerged on the dark side of a completely unremarkable world, with an unremarkable yellow sun peeking over the planet’s horizon and an unremarkable starscape all around them.

“And we aren’t likely to see anything else, either,” Drusan growled. “We have orders to hold position right here until Lord Odo returns.”

“There he goes,” Pellaeon said, pointing at the glow of the Salaban’s Hope’s drive as the freighter emerged from beneath the Chimaera’s long prow. The freighter headed toward the planetary horizon ahead, its image fogging briefly as it circled past the edge of atmosphere, and then vanished.

“What do you think about that mask of his?”

With an effort, Pellaeon dragged his mind away from the mystery of where they were to the mystery of who Odo was. “He definitely doesn’t want anyone knowing who he is,” he said.

“Who or what,” Drusan said. “I had Environmental Services do a scan of the air outflow from his quarters. I thought--”

“You what?” Pellaeon interrupted, aghast. “Sir, the orders made it clear we weren’t to question, interfere, or intrude upon Lord Odo’s activities.”

“Which I haven’t,” Drusan said. “Keeping tabs on my ship’s systems is part of my job.”

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