

# [PDF] Star Wars: Choices Of One

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#### **Description:**

#### **About the Author**

Since 1978 **Timothy Zahn** has written nearly seventy short stories and novelettes, numerous novels, and three short fiction collections, and won the Hugo Award for best novella. Zahn is best known for his *Star Wars* novels: *Heir to the Empire*, *Dark Force Rising*, *The Last Command*, *Specter of the Past*, *Vision of the Future*, *Survivor's Quest*, *Outbound Flight*, and *Allegiance*, and has more than four million copies of his books in print. His most recent publications have been the science fiction Cobra series and the six-part young adult series Dragonback. Zahn has a B.S. in physics from

Michigan State University, and an M.S. in physics from the University of Illinois. He lives with his family on the Oregon coast.

**Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. 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, bl...

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