

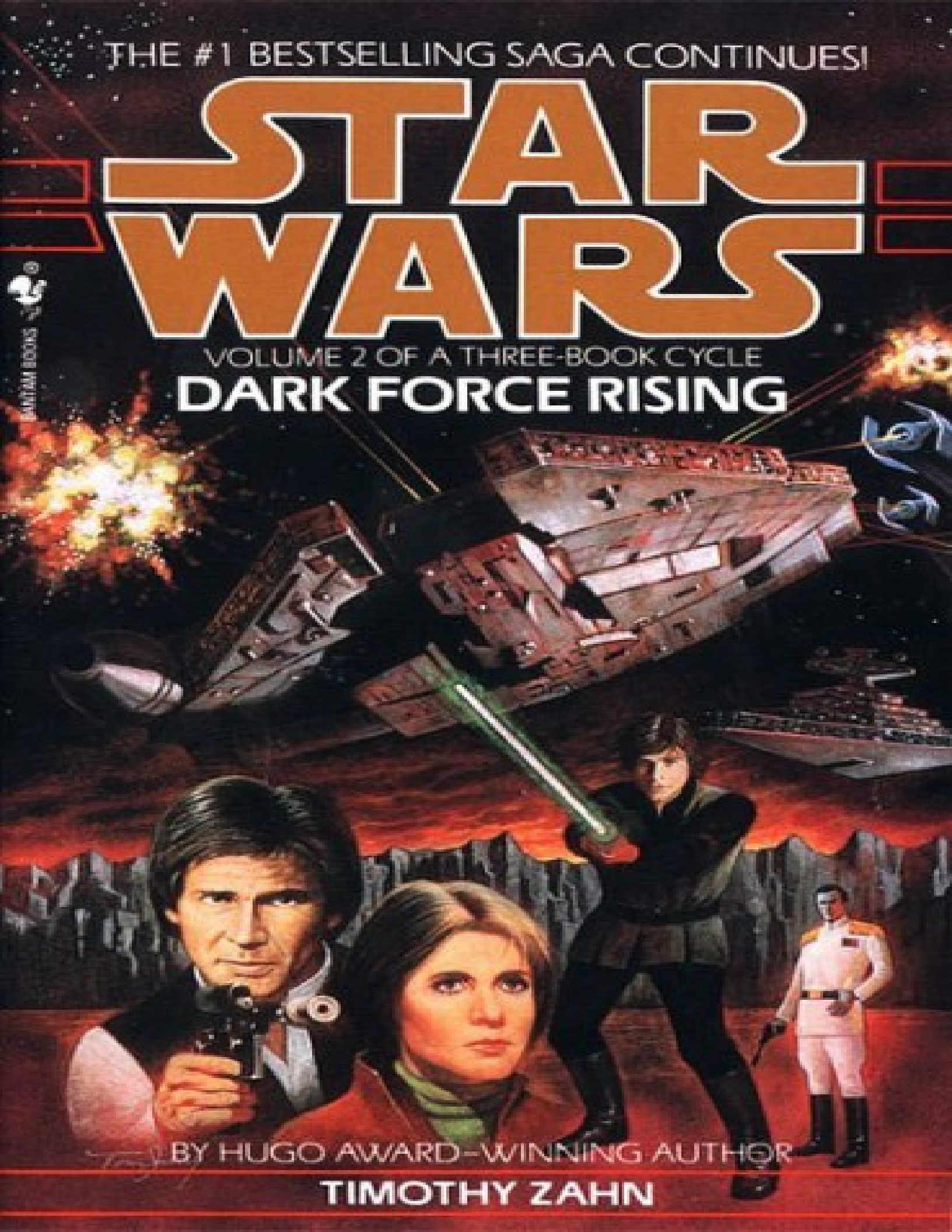
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# STAR WARS

VOLUME 2 OF A THREE-BOOK CYCLE

## DARK FORCE RISING

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BY HUGO AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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# **Dark Force Rising**

**Book 2**

**Written by Timothy Zahn**

## Chapter 1

Directly ahead, the star was a marble-sized yellow orange ball, its intensity moderated by its distance and by the viewports' automatic sunscreens. Surrounding it and the ship itself were the stars, a spattering of blazing white pinpricks in the deep blackness of space. Directly beneath the ship, in the western part of the Great Northern Forest of the planet Myrkr, dawn was approaching.

The last dawn that some in that forest would ever see.

Standing at one of the side bridge viewports of the Imperial Star Destroyer Chimaera, Captain Pellaeon watched as the fuzzy terminator line crept toward the target zone on the planet below. Ten minutes ago, the ground forces surrounding the target had reported themselves ready; the Chimaera itself had been holding blockade position for nearly an hour. All that was missing now was the order to attack.

Slowly, feeling almost furtive about it, Pellaeon turned his head a couple of centimeters to the side. Behind him and to his right, Grand Admiral Thrawn was seated at his command station, his blue-skinned face expressionless, his glowing red eyes focused on the bank of status readouts wrapped around his chair. He hadn't spoken or moved from that position since the last of the ground forces had reported in, and Pellaeon could tell the bridge crew was beginning to get restless.

For his own part, Pellaeon had long since stopped trying to second-guess Thrawn's actions. The fact that the late Emperor had seen fit to make Thrawn one of his twelve Grand Admirals was evidence of his own confidence in the man—all the more so given Thrawn's not entirely-human heritage and the Emperor's well-known prejudices in such matters. Moreover, in the year since Thrawn had taken command of the Chimaera and had begun the task of rebuilding the Imperial Fleet, Pellaeon had seen the Grand Admiral's military genius demonstrated time and again. Whatever his reason for holding off the attack, Pellaeon knew it was a good one.

As slowly as he'd turned away, he turned back to the viewport. But his movements had apparently not gone unnoticed. "A question, Captain?" Thrawn's smoothly modulated voice cut through the low hum of bridge conversation.

"No, sir," Pellaeon assured him, turning again to face his superior.

For a moment those glowing eyes studied him, and Pellaeon unconsciously braced himself for a reprimand, or worse. But Thrawn, as Pellaeon still had a tendency to forget, did not have the legendary and lethal temper that had been the hallmark of the Lord Darth Vader.

"You're perhaps wondering why we haven't yet attacked?" the Grand Admiral suggested in that same courteous tone.

"Yes, sir, I was," Pellaeon admitted. "All our forces appear to be in position.

"Our military forces are, yes," Thrawn agreed. "But not the observers I sent into Hyllyard City."

Pellaeon blinked. "Hyllyard City?"

"Yes. I find it unlikely that a man of Talon Karrde's cunning would set up a base in the middle of a forest without also setting up security contacts with others outside the immediate area. Hyllyard City is too far from Karrde's base for anyone there to directly witness our attack; hence, any sudden flurries of activity in the city will imply the existence of a more subtle line of communication. From that we'll be able to identify Karrde's contacts and put them under long-term surveillance. Eventually, they'll lead us to him."

"Yes, sir," Pellaeon said, feeling a frown crease his forehead. "Then you're not expecting to take any of Karrde's own people alive."

The Grand Admiral's smile turned brittle. "On the contrary. I fully expect our forces to find an empty and abandoned base."

Pellaeon threw a glance out the viewport at the partly lit planet below. "In that case, sir : why are we attacking it?"

"Three reasons, Captain. First, even men like Talon Karrde occasionally make mistakes. It could well be that in the rush to evacuate his base he left some crucial bit of information behind. Second, as I've already mentioned, an attack on the base may lead us to his contacts in Hyllyard City. And third, it provides our ground forces with some badly needed field experience."

The glowing eyes bored into Pellaeon's face. "Never forget, Captain, that our goal is no longer merely the pitiful rear-guard harassment of the past five years. With Mount Tantiss and our late Emperor's collection of Spaarti Cylinders in our hands, the initiative is once again ours. Very soon now we'll begin the process of taking planets back from the Rebellion; and for that we'll need an army every bit as well trained as the officers and crew of the Fleet."

"Understood, Admiral," Pellaeon said.

"Good." Thrawn lowered his gaze to his displays. "It's time. Signal General Covell that he may begin."

"Yes, sir," Pellaeon said, leaving the viewport and returning to his station. He gave the readouts a quick check and tapped his comm switch, peripherally aware as he did so that Thrawn had likewise activated his own comm. Some private message to his spies in Hyllyard City? "This is the Chimaera," Pellaeon said. "Launch the attack."

"Acknowledged, Chimaera," General Covell said into his helmet comlink, careful to keep the quiet scorn in his gut from getting through to his voice. It was typical-and disgustingly predictable. You scrambled around like mad hellions, got your troops and vehicles on the ground and set up and then you stood around waiting for those strutting Fleet people in their spotless uniforms and nice clean ships to finish sipping their tea and finally get around to letting you loose.

Well, get yourselves on the table, he thought sardonically in the direction of the Star Destroyer overhead. Because whether Grand Admiral Thrawn was interested in real results or just a good rousing show, he was going to get his money's worth. Reaching to the board in front of him, he keyed for local

command frequency. "General Covell to all units: we've got the light. Let's go."

The acknowledgments came in; and with a shiver from the steel deck beneath him, the huge AT-AT walker was off lumbering its deceptively awkward-looking way through the forest toward the encampment a kilometer away. Ahead of the AT-AT, occasionally visible through the armored transparisteel viewport, a pair of AT-ST scout walkers ran in twin-point formation, tracking along the AT-AT's path and watching for enemy positions or booby traps.

Not that such futile gestures would do Karrde any good. Covell had directed literally hundreds of assault campaigns in his years of Imperial service, and he knew full well the awesome capabilities of the fighting machines under his command.

Beneath the viewport, the holographic tactical display was lit up like a decorative disk, the winking red, white, and green lights showing the positions of Covell's circle of AT-ATs, AT-STs, and hoverscout attack vehicles, all closing on Karrde's encampment in good order.

Good, but not perfect. The north-flank AT-AT and its support vehicles were lagging noticeably behind the rest of the armored noose. "Unit Two, bring it up," he said into his comlink.

"Trying, sir," the voice came back, tinny and distant through the strange dampening effects of Myrkr's metalrich flora. "We're encountering some thick vine clusters that are slowing down our scout walkers."

"Is it bothering your AT-AT any?"

"No, sir, but I wanted to keep the flank together-"

"Pattern coherence is a fine goal during academy maneuvers, Major," Covell cut him off. "But not at the expense of an overall battle plan. If the AT-STs can't keep up, leave them behind."

"Yes, sir."

Covell broke the connection with a snort. The Grand Admiral was right about one thing, at least: his troops were going to need a lot more battle seasoning before they would be up to real Imperial standards. Still, the raw material was there. Even as he watched, the north flank reformed itself, with the hoverscouts spreading forward to take up the AT-STs' former point positions while the lagging AT-STs themselves fell back into rear-guard deployment.

The energy sensor beeped a proximity warning: they were coming up on the encampment. "Status?" he asked his crew.

"All weapons charged and ready," the gunner reported, his eyes on the targeting displays.

"No indications of resistance, active or passive," the driver added.

"Stay alert," Covell ordered keying for command frequency again. "All units: move in."

And with a final crash of mangled vegetation, the AT-AT broke through into the clearing.

It was an impressive sight. From all four sides of the open area, in nearly perfect parade-ground unison, the other three AT-ATs appeared from the forest cover in the predawn gloom, the AT-STs and hoverscouts clustered around their feet quickly fanning out on all sides to encircle the darkened buildings.

Covell gave the sensors a quick but complete check. Two energy sources were still functioning, one in the central building, the other in one of the outer barracks-style structures. There was no evidence of operating sensors, or of weapons or energy fields. The life-form analyzer ran through its complicated algorithms and concluded that the outer buildings were devoid of life.

The large main building, on the other hand -

"I'm getting approximately twenty life-form readings from the main building, General," the number four AT-AT commander reported. "All in the central section."

"They don't register as human, though," Covell's driver murmured.

"Maybe they're being shielded," Covell grunted, looking out the viewport. Still no movement from the encampment. "Let's find out. Assault squads: go."

The hoverscouts popped their aft hatchways, and from each came a squad of eight soldiers, laser rifles held tautly across battle-armored chests as they dropped to the ground. Half of each squad took up backstop position, their rifles trained on the encampment from the partial cover of their hoverscout, while the other half sprinted across the open ground to the outer line of buildings and sheds. There, they assumed covering positions, allowing their comrades in the rear to similarly advance. It was a centuries-old military tactic, executed with the kind of squeamish determination that Covell would have expected of green troops. Still, the raw material was definitely there.

The soldiers continued their leap-frog approach to the main building, with small groups breaking off the main encirclement to check out each of the outer structures as they passed. The point men reached the central building—a brilliant flash lit up the forest as they blasted down the door—a slightly confused scramble as the rest of the troops piled through.

And then, silence.

For a handful of minutes the silence continued, punctuated only by occasional short commands from the troop commanders. Covell listened, watching the sensors : and finally the report came through. "General Covell, this is Lieutenant Barse. We've secured the target zone, sir. There's no one here."

Covell nodded. "Very good, Lieutenant. How does it look?"

"Like they pulled out in a hurry, sir," the other said. "They left a fair amount of stuff behind, but it all looks pretty much like junk."

"That'll be for the scanning crew to decide," Covell told him.

"Any indication of booby traps or other unpleasant surprises?"

"None at all, sir. Oh-and those life-forms we picked up are nothing but these long furry animals living on the tree growing up through the center of the roof."

Covell nodded again. Ysalamiri, he believed they were called. Thrawn had been making a big deal about the stupid creatures for a couple of months now, though what use they could possibly be to the war effort he couldn't guess. Eventually, he supposed, the Fleet people would get around to letting him in on the big secret. "Set up a defensive honeycomb," he ordered the lieutenant. "Signal the scanning crew when you're ready. And get comfortable. The Grand Admiral wants this place taken apart, and that's exactly what we're going to do."

"Very good, General," the voice said, almost too faint to hear despite the heavy amplification and computer scrubbing. "Proceed with the dismantling."

Seated at the Wild Karrde's helm, Mara Jade half turned to face the man standing behind her. "I suppose that's it, then," she said.

For a moment Talon Karrde didn't seem to hear her. He just stood there, gazing through the viewport at the distant planet, a tiny bluish-white crescent shape visible around the jagged edge of the sun-skimmer asteroid the Wild Karr was snuggled up against. Mara was just about to repeat the comment when he stirred. "Yes," he said, that calm voice showing no hint of the emotion he was obviously feeling. "I suppose it is."

Mara exchanged glances with Aves, at the copilot station, then looked back up at Karrde. "Shouldn't we be going, then?" she prompted.

Karrde took a deep breath : and as she watched him, Mara caught in his expression a glimmer of what the Myrkr base had meant to him. More than just a base, it had been his home.

With an effort, she suppressed the thought. So Karrde had lost his home. Big deal. She'd lost far more than that in her lifetime and had survived Just fine. He'd get over it.

"I asked if we should get going."

"I heard you," Karrde said, the flicker of emotion vanishing again into that slightly sardonic facade of his. "I think perhaps we ought to wait a little longer. See if we left anything behind that might point in the direction of our Rishi base."

Mara looked at Aves again. "We were pretty thorough," Aves said. "I don't think there was any mention of Rishi anywhere except the main computer, and that left with the first group out."

"I agree," Karrde said. "Are you willing to stake your life on that assessment?"

Aves's lip twitched. "Not really."

"Nor am I. So we wait."

"What if they spot us?" Mara persisted. "Skulking behind asteroids is the oldest trick on the list."

"They won't spot us." Karrde was quietly positive. "Actually, I doubt the possibility will even occur to them. The average man running from the likes of Grand Admiral Thrawn is unlikely to stop running until he's a good deal farther away than this."

Are you willing to stake your life on that assessment? Mara thought sourly. But she kept the retort to herself. He was probably right; and anyway, if the Chimaera or any of its TIE fighters started toward Wild Karrde, they would have no trouble punching the engines up to power and going to lightspeed well ahead of the attack.

The logic and tactics seemed clean. But still, Mara could feel something nagging at the back of her mind. Something that didn't feel good about all