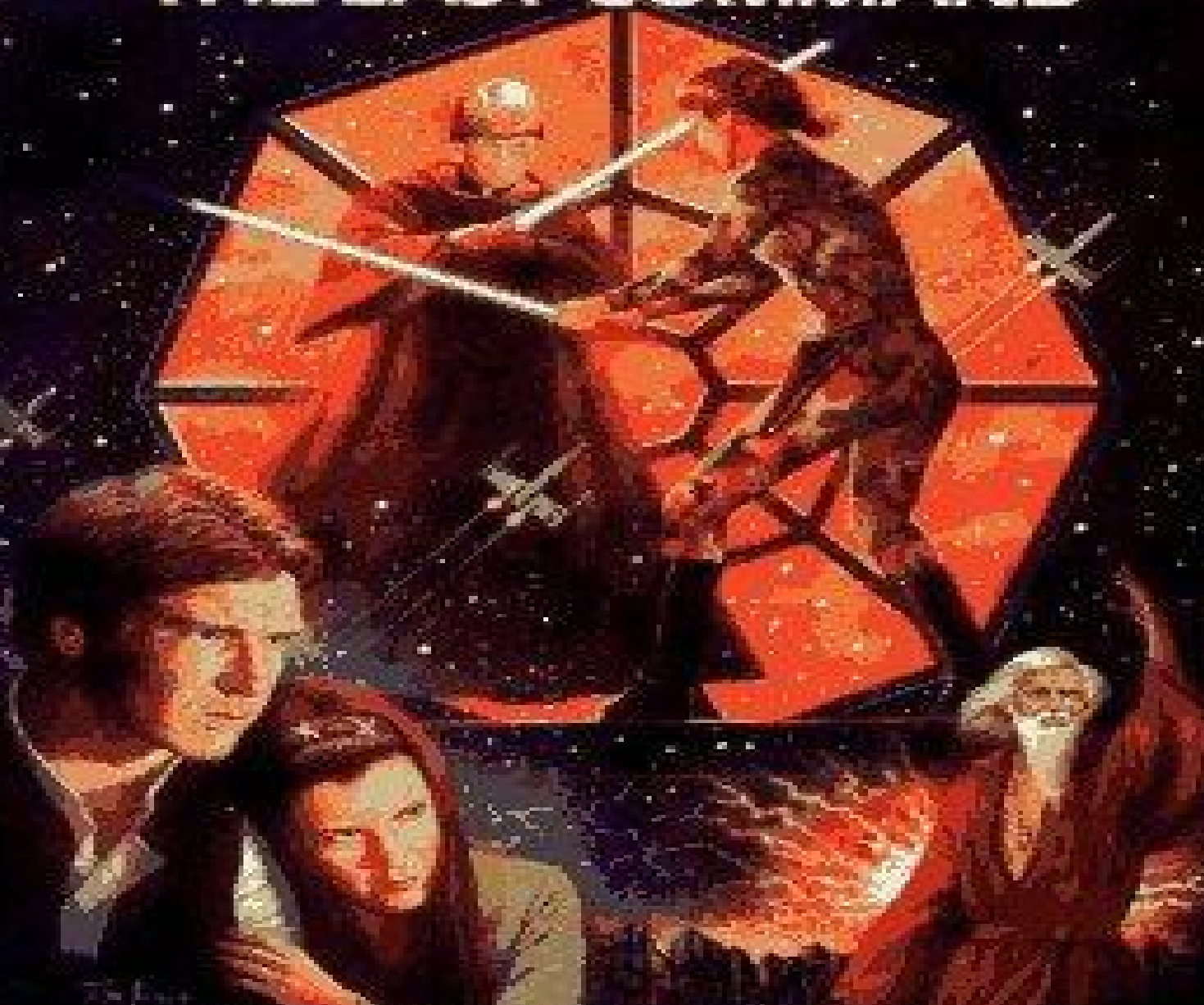


THE GRIPPING CONCLUSION TO THE
#1 BESTSELLING SAGA!

STAR WARS

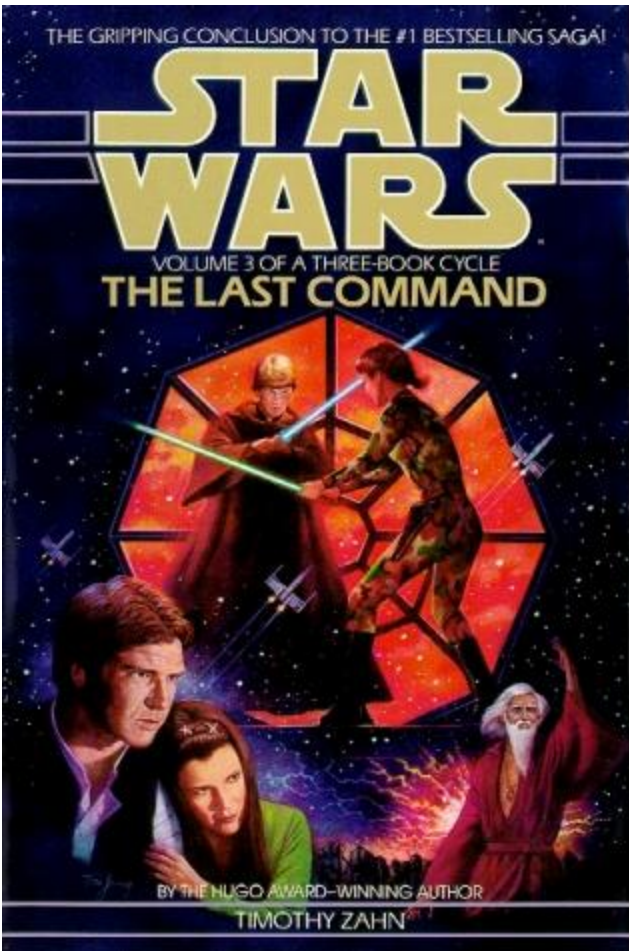
VOLUME 3 OF A THREE-BOOK CYCLE
THE LAST COMMAND

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The Last Command

Book 3 of the "Thrawn" trilogy

Chapter 1

Gliding through the blackness of deep space, the Imperial Star Destroyer *Chimaera* pointed its mighty

arrowhead shape toward the dim star of its target system, three thousandths of a light-year away. And

prepared itself for war.

"All systems show battle ready, Admiral," the comm officer reported from the portside crew pit. "The

task force is beginning to check in."

"Very good, Lieutenant," Grand Admiral Thrawn nodded. "Inform me when all have done so. Captain

Pellaeon?"

"Sir?" Pellaeon said, searching his superior's face for the stress the Grand Admiral must be feeling. The

stress he himself was certainly feeling. This was not just another tactical strike against the Rebellion, after

all—not a minor shipping raid or even a complex but straightforward hit-and-fade against some

insignificant planetary base. After nearly a month of frenzied preparations, Thrawn's master campaign for

the Empire's final victory was about to be launched.

But if the Grand Admiral was feeling any tension, he was keeping it to himself. "Begin the countdown,"

he told Pellaeon, his voice as calm as if he were ordering dinner.

"Yes, sir," Pellaeon said, turning back to the group of one-quarter-size holographic figures standing

before him in the *Chimaera*'s aft bridge hologram pod. "Gentlemen: launch marks. *Bellicose* : three

minutes."

"Acknowledged, *Chimaera* ," Captain Aban nodded, his proper military demeanor not quite masking his

eagerness to take this war back to the Rebellion. "Good hunting."

The holo image sputtered and vanished as the *Bellicose* raised its deflector shields, cutting off long-range

communications. Pellaeon shifted his attention to the next image in line. "*Relentless*: four point five

minutes."

"Acknowledged," Captain Dorja said, cupping his right fist in his left in an ancient Mirshaf gesture of

victory as he, too, vanished from the hologram pod.

Pellaeon glanced at his data pad. "*J udicator*: six minutes."

"We're ready, *Chimaera* ," Captain Brandei said, his voice soft. Soft, and just a little bit wrong....

Pellaeon frowned at him. Quarter-sized holos didn't show a lot of detail, but even so the expression on

Brandei's face was easy to read. It was the expression of a man out for blood.

"This is war, Captain Brandei," Thrawn said, coming up silently to Pellaeon's side. "Not an opportunity

for personal revenge."

"I understand my duty, Admiral," Brandei said stiffly.

Thrawn's blue-black eyebrows lifted slightly. "Do you, Captain? Do you indeed?"

Slowly, reluctantly, some of the fire faded from Brandei's face. "Yes, sir," he muttered. "My duty is to

the Empire, and to you, and to the ships and crews under my command."

"Very good," Thrawn said. "To the living, in other words. Not to the dead."

Brandei was still glowering, but he gave a dutiful nod. "Yes, sir."

"Never forget that, Captain," Thrawn warned him. "The fortunes of war rise and fall, and you may be

assured that the Rebellion will be repaid in full for their destruction of the *Peremptory* at the *Katana* fleet

skirmish. But that repayment will occur in the context of our overall strategy. Not as an act of private

vengeance." His glowing red eyes narrowed slightly. "Certainly not by any Fleet captain under my

command. I trust I make myself clear."

Brandei's cheek twitched. Pellaeon had never thought of the man as brilliant, but he was smart enough to

recognize a threat when he heard one. "Very clear, Admiral."

"Good." Thrawn eyed him a moment longer, then nodded. "I believe you've been given your launch

mark?"

"Yes, sir. *Judicator* out."

Thrawn looked at Pellaeon. "Continue, Captain," he said, and turned away.

"Yes, sir." Pellaeon looked at his data pad. "*Nemesis*..."

He finished the list without further incident. By the time the last holo image disappeared, the final

check-in from their own task force was complete.

"The timetable appears to be running smoothly," Thrawn said as Pellaeon returned to his command

station. "The *Stormhawk* reports that the guide freighters launched on time with tow cables functioning

properly. And we've just intercepted a general emergency call from the Ando system."

The *Bellicose* and its task force, right on schedule. "Any response, sir?" Pellaeon asked.

"The Rebel base at Ord Pardron acknowledged," Thrawn said. "It should be interesting to see how

much help they send."

Pellaeon nodded. The Rebels had seen enough of Thrawn's tactics by now to expect Ando to be a feint,

and to respond accordingly. But on the other hand, an attack force consisting of an Imperial Star

Destroyer and eight *Katana* fleet Dreadnaughts was hardly something they could afford to dismiss out of

hand, either.

Not that it really mattered. They would send a few ships to Ando to fight the *Bellicose* , and a few more

to Filve to fight the *Judicator* , and a few more to Crondre to fight the *Nemesis* , and so on and so on. By

the time the *Death's Head* hit the base itself, Ord Pardron would be down to a skeleton defense and

screaming itself for all the reinforcements the Rebellion could scramble.

And that was where those reinforcements would go. Leaving the Empire's true target ripe for the

picking.

Pellaeon looked out the forward viewport at the star of the Ukio system dead ahead, his throat

tightening as he contemplated again the enormous conceit of this whole plan. With planetary shields able

to hold off all but the most massive turbolaser and proton torpedo bombardment, conventional wisdom

held that the only way to subdue a modern world was to put a fast-moving ground force down at the

edges and send them overland to destroy the shield generators. Between the fire laid down by the ground

force and the subsequent orbital assault, the target world was always badly damaged by the time it was

finally taken. The alternative, landing hundreds of thousands of troops in a major ground campaign that

could stretch into months or years, was no better. To capture a planet relatively undamaged but with

shield generators still intact was considered an impossibility.

That bit of military wisdom would fall today. Along with Ukio itself.

"Intercepted distress signal from Filve, Admiral," the comm officer reported. "Ord Pardron again

responding."

"Good." Thrawn consulted his chrono. "Seven minutes, I think, and we'll be able to move." His lips

compressed, just noticeably. "I suppose we'd better confirm that our exalted Jedi Master is ready to do

his part."

Pellaeon hid a grimace. Joruss C'baoth, insane clone of the long-dead Jedi Master Jorus C'baoth, who a

month ago had proclaimed himself the true heir to the Empire. He didn't like talking to the man any more

than Thrawn did; but he might as well volunteer. If he didn't, it would simply become an order. "I'll go,

sir," he said, standing up.

"Thank you, Captain," Thrawn said. As if Pellaeon would have had a choice.

He felt the mental summons the moment he stepped beyond the Force-protection of the ysalamiri

scattered about the bridge on their nutrient frames. Master C'baoth, clearly, was impatient for the

operation to begin. Preparing himself as best he could, fighting against C'baoth's casual mental pressure

to hurry, Pellaeon made his way down to Thrawn's command room.

The chamber was brightly lit, in marked contrast to the subdued lighting the Grand Admiral usually

preferred. "Captain Pellaeon," C'baoth called, beckoning to him from the double display ring in the center

of the room. "Come in. I've been waiting for you."

"The rest of the operation has taken my full attention," Pellaeon told him stiffly, trying to hide his distaste

for the man. Knowing full well how futile such attempts were.

"Of course," C'baoth smiled, a smile that showed more effectively than any words his amusement with

Pellaeon's discomfort. "No matter. I take it Grand Admiral Thrawn is finally ready?"

"Almost," Pellaeon said. "We want to clear out Ord Pardron as much as possible before we move."

C'baoth snorted. "You continue to assume theNewRepublic will dance to the Grand Admiral's tune."

"They will," Pellaeon said. "The Grand Admiral has studied the enemy thoroughly."

"He's studied their artwork," C'baoth countered with another snort. "That will be useful if the time ever

comes when theNewRepublic has nothing but artists left to throw against us."

A signal from the display ring saved Pellaeon from the need to reply. "We're moving," he told C'baoth,

starting a mental countdown of the seventy-six seconds it would take to reach the Ukio system from their

position and trying not to let C'baoth's words get under his skin. He didn't understand himself how

Thrawn could so accurately learn the innermost secrets of a species from its artwork. But he'd seen that

knowledge proved often enough to trust the Grand Admiral's instincts on such things. C'baoth hadn't.

But then, C'baoth wasn't really interested in an honest debate on the subject. For the past month, ever

since declaring himself to be the true heir to the Emperor, C'baoth had been pressing this quiet war

against Thrawn's credibility, implying that true insight came only through the Force. And, therefore, only

through him.

Pellaeon himself didn't buy that argument. The Emperor had been deep into this Force thing, too, and he

hadn't even been able to predict his own death at Endor. But the seeds of uncertainty C'baoth was trying

to sow were nevertheless starting to take hold, particularly among the less experienced of Thrawn's

officers.

Which was, for Pellaeon, just one more reason why this attack had to succeed. The outcome hinged as

much on Thrawn's reading of the Ukian cultural ethos as it did on straight military tactics. On Thrawn's

conviction that, at a basic psychological level, the Ukians were terrified of the impossible.

"He will not always be right," C'baoth said into Pellaeon's musings.

Pellaeon bit down hard on the inside of his cheek, the skin of his back crawling at having had his