

A CHALLENGE IN NEED

ONE

In the deep dark of space, a large wedge shaped object silently moved through the darkness. From a distance, it looked like a small bit of something that may have fallen off a ship. But if you were to get closer, you would realize it actually is a ship. The wedge shaped object, a mile in length, was the might *Imperial II*-class Star Destroyer *Challenge*, undisputed flagship of the Emperor's Hammer TIE Corps. Few ships in the fleet had accomplished what the *Challenge* and its pilots have done. And it still stood strong.

The Star Destroyer was not, as it might appear, drifting through space. Well, technically speaking it was, with all but the most essential power systems shut down. The ship looked dead.

But inside, the crew was frantically at work. On the bridge, the bridge crew was monitoring their displays. Most of them had gone black when the power generators were shut down, but the critical systems were powered by small emergency generators. They were the focus of the attention. They monitored the space outside the ship. Where somewhere, pirates were lurking, awaiting their chance to strike at their prey. Usually these pirates were attracted by cargo freighters, hardly able to defend themselves, or small convoys escorted by a small fighter group. No match for the well-trained pirate gangs that made traveling through space so dangerous.

And now, here was a Star Destroyer, seemingly dead in space. For several weeks now, the *Challenge*, its fighters and its crew had been hunting a specifically ruthless group of pirates that had been making a nuisance of themselves. But wherever the Star Destroyer went, there were no pirates to be found. They knew they could never defeat an Imperial warship. But now, things were different. The mighty warship was dead in space, unable to defend itself. The hangar bay blast shields were closed. And this is how it had been for nine days now. The ship's Commodore, High Admiral Dempsey, knew what she was asking of the crew. This was stressful and taxing, more even than combat against several Rebel ships and hundreds of their fighters. But that situation, they were trained for. The current situation, sitting in the dark and doing mostly nothing, was not. And it was breaking them.

Still, they had to persevere. Dempsey knew that the pirates would not pass up the opportunity of a lifetime. If this ship of hers appeared to be dead for real, they would be tempted to take it. After all, what was more to fear than pirates with their own Star Destroyer? No one would dare stand against them. And so, the *Challenge* had died. And the *Challenge* waited. Dempsey herself was sure this would not last much longer. The pirates had been spotted. A pirate starfighter had made a flyby of the Star Destroyer a few days ago, and then again a few hours ago. Their sensor logs would indicate nothing had changed in the Star Destroyer's energy output, and that its course through the system followed exactly the one which the laws of physics dictated.

Soon....

TWO

The path of the seemingly dead warship through this star system had not gone unnoticed. In fact, it had attracted the attention of not one, but several curious parties. And none of them were Imperial. High Admiral Anahorn Dempsey had a feeling there were more interested parties out there, hiding behind moons and asteroids, waiting to see what was going to happen. She smiled inside. With any luck, whatever pirate group made the first move would be attacked by the others. After all, the Empire didn't want pirates to have control of a Star Destroyer, but neither would anyone else in the region. They would be unstoppable.

Unless they ran into a TIE Corps Star Destroyer of course.

Dempsey could feel the anxiety building up. Not aboard the *Challenge*, she had tuned out the crew of the ship, but outside. It wouldn't be much longer. Which was a good thing, as she desperately needed to be elsewhere. Her own private little ventures had paid off another lead, and that needed to be investigated. But this was an operation she could not rush. She had to let things play out, because if the *Challenge* suddenly came alive again and left the area, no one would ever fall for the trick again.

She stared through the transparisteel viewport and wondered if she was seeing things. She looked at the Captain of the Star Destroyer. He looked back at her and nodded. He, too, had seen something.

"It would seem the game is afoot, people," she said out loud. "Everyone, do absolutely nothing whatsoever until told to. Expect incoming damage."

Few people on the bridge stirred. This had been part of the briefing before this game of charades had started. Dempsey had fully expected the pirates to start taking a few shots at her ship to see what would happen. The outer corridors of the ship were evacuated to limit the possibility of casualties. After all, she couldn't raise the shields, and so hull damage was to be expected.

A moment later, she saw red flashes of light in the corner of her eye. She turned her head just in time to see the turbo laser bolts smash into her ship.

"Hull breach, deck 9," someone shouted. "Repair crews are already underway." Efficient as ever.

"I can't be sure, Admiral, but it looks like three light cruiser heading this way from behind the third moon."

Dempsey nodded. "Let them come, " she said.

Another volley of turbo laser fire smashed into the *Challenge* and Dempsey thought she could feel a slight tremor throughout the ship. Someone said something, but she didn't hear it. A moment later, she could see explosions on the hull of one of the approaching cruisers. She smiled, as she realized she'd been right. The first of the pirates had made its move, and someone else was going to stop them.

"Signal the hangar bay," she said. "Prep Tempest and Firebird for launch on my orders."

THREE

The bridge of the mighty *Imperial-II* class Star Destroyer *Challenge* lit up as the main power was restored to the ship. As the enemy had made their move, there was no more need for deception, and the Star Destroyer slowly came back to life. The familiar hum of the main engines could once again be heard, and Dempsey felt the familiar, almost indistinguishable vibration of the ship's deck as they came back to life.

On the holo projector, Dempsey saw the battle play out before her eyes. Three light cruisers had started to approach the *Challenge*, and on their way they had been ambushed by an old Lorinar Strike Cruiser. One of the light cruisers was slowly moving away from the other two, but it was far too late for them. The other two had started pounding the Strike Cruiser, completely forgetting about their target. And the pips of Tempest's TIE Defenders and Missile boats were making short work of the distance between them and the fighting. Within moments, they would join the fray.

Incoming contact from hyperspace," someone said. Dempsey looked at the man, anticipating more information. It took a moment. "Sithspawn!" the man cursed. "Contact confirmed. It's a Star Destroyer, *Victory* class. And it's not one of ours." Dempsey was actually surprised at this. She had not received any intelligence reports about Star Destroyers in enemy possession in this part of the sector.

"Identification?" she asked. The answer was short, "Unknown IFF signal. They're not Rebels." *Well, at least that's one thing*, Dempsey thought. By that time, the purple pip on the holo-projector had appeared, indication the Vic's position. "That one will be ours," she said aloud. "Full speed ahead, stand by turbo laser batteries and raise the shields." Confirmations could be heard from several stations, and Dempsey felt the shift as the Star Destroyer changed course to intercept the new target.

"Target is launching fighters," someone said. "TIE Bombers, and lots of them. Picking up two full squadrons at 12 clicks." Dempsey did the math before he'd finished speaking. That distance would give her a chance to launch defense fighters to intercept the bombers. The *Challenge's* shields could take a beating, but she never did like taking unnecessary risks. "Launch Eagle to intercept, have Flight III engage the Vic."

A good 20 seconds later, 12 new pips showed up on the holo projection. The enemy TIE Bombers would be in firing range before the X-wings would get to them, but her ship could withstand a volley of torpedoes.

"Get the point defense lasers ready for incoming torpedoes. Ready all missile tubes. And I still want to know where that Vic came from."

Of course, knowing where the enemy starship came from wasn't the first thing on Dempsey's mind. Not at all. She was more worried about what friends he would be bringing along.

FOUR

The battle had unleashed in earnest now. The easy victory against a scattered few pirate forces had turned into full scale carnage. As far as Dempsey could tell, there were now three different pirate factions in the immediate area, and they were shooting at everyone. After the unexpected appearance of a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, two more heavy cruisers had entered the area and were spewing fighters from their hangar bays. Reluctantly, she had to order the launch of all her fighter squadrons as well, and the *Challenge*'s gunners were earning their overtime pay. A never-ending flurry of green turbo laser fire and missiles were sent into the fray. The pirate forces were being decimated at this, but the three enemy heavy cruisers were getting closer. The bombers did their job and were pounding away at the enemy shields, but enemy bombers were doing the same to her ship. She'd already realized that should the enemy cruisers get within firing range, the *Challenge* would have a hard time withstanding the onslaught and surviving.

"Ma'am, we're starting to run out of missiles," a voice came from across the bridge. Well, that was to be expected given the number of missiles that had been fired over the course of the last half hour.

"Any idea where we stand," she asked. She knew the answer. Though losses amongst her pilots were small, there were losses nonetheless.

"We've lost 12 fighters so far if I'm not mistaken," the same voice responded. "We have damage to the outer hull on 6 decks, shields are down to 60 percent, and we've received casualty reports from several of the medbays. Engineering reports the main reactor is starting to overheat."

Dempsey pondered their position. It was obvious this was not a fight they could win. She wondered what had gone wrong. Or rather, why their intel about the pirates in this region of space was so flawed. Still, those were questions for another day.

"Pull us back," she said. "We need to put some distance between us and those cruisers."
A few moments later, she felt the *Challenge's* shift as the Star Destroyer changed course. This was going to be a long day...

FIVE

The battle was raging on outside the mighty *Imperial-II* class Star Destroyer *Challenge*. From the cockpit of her TIE Advanced starfighter, LC Denys Elara watched as the grey hulk changed course and slowly moved away from the battle. She didn't like the sight of a retreating Star Destroyer, but she knew the Commodore liked it even less. And as such, there was most likely a good reason for the maneuver.

With no enemy fighters in her immediate vicinity, Elara took a few moments to consider the situation. She cycled through the targets and watch the display of the system. It didn't take her long to figure out what was going on. On her screen, she could see the enemy *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, along with one of the heavy cruisers, slowly move in on the *Challenge*. She flipped a switch and changed the channel on her comm system to that of Firebird.

"Firebird, new orders," she spoke. There was no hint of agitation in her voice, despite how she felt. She knew that at a time like this, only those who were calm and decisive would prevail. There was no room for anything else. "Flight III is to engage the enemy Vic, Flight II flies cover for them. Flight I is with me, we're going to pick off that squadron of Supas going for the *Challenge*."

Less than a second later, Stryker's voice confirmed their new orders, and she listened as he dispatched them to his pilots. Almost as one, the X-wings, scattered among the enemy fighters, swooped off their targets and converged on a course towards the Star Destroyer's attackers. Elara flicked through the enemy fighters near them, and picked one that was starting its attack run on the X-wings. She selected her missile launchers, hit the acceleration on the twin ion engines, and felt herself pushed back in her seat as the fighter lunged forward. A beep from the targeting computer indicated a solid lock, and she fired two concussion missiles in quick succession. Expecting the warheads to do their job, she flipped through the targets and selected her next victim. She frowned. For some reason, the nearest enemy fighter was an old Z-95 Headhunter. She flipped back to her quad laser cannons, not wanting to waste any missiles on that one. She watched as the distance indicator crept towards 1 click, and when she had a solid visual contact with the fighter, she pushed her thumb down on the firing button. The lasers, set to single fire mode, spewed green laserbolts one after the other. She watched as they struck the Headhunter, the first few splashing off its shields, but the remainder tearing through the starfighter as if through

paper. The fighter exploded, but Elara didn't even see it, as she had already changed course to intercept another enemy fighter.

"Firebird Nine, entering firing range," she heard over her comm. "Firing torpedoes now." In the next few moments, a number of yellow dots appeared on her screen. She doubted the torpedoes would do much direct damage to the enemy Star Destroyer, but it would take their attention away from the *Challenge*. And right now, that was the best they could do.

SIX

The small transport slowly lifted off the hangar deck of mighty *Imperial-II* class Star Destroyer *Challenge*. The repulsor lifts slowly lifted it a few centimeters off the deck, and then the engines came to life, propelling the craft forward. Seconds later, the passed through the force field keeping the atmosphere in the main hangar bay, and the pilot activated the main engines. The transport accelerated to its maximum velocity, and slowly it banked left, away from the warship. The pilot didn't see, but he knew several other transports were making the same move. He also knew the odds of his survival today were slim. And that was the best case scenario. But he also knew that everyone left aboard the Star Destroyer would have a better chance at survival because of his actions today. And that almost made up for it.

Lantor Grell touched his comm set. "Zulu two, three and four, you're with me," he said. "Our target is the Vic. Get within firing range and launch. Don't stick around, head back for a reload as briefed. Five and six, you know your targets." A few moments later, the five other transports acknowledged the plan. Of course they did, they had been briefed on the attack before they'd climbed aboard their craft. Grell had not needed to tell them anything, they knew what was expected of them. In the distance, Grell saw the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer. Occasionally, a splash of light could be seen as yet another torpedo exploded harmlessly off its shields. This was the bit where these transports could prove their worth. Capable of carrying warheads far more powerful than the proton torpedoes the *Challenge's* fighters could carry, they were the real threat to the enemy. Grell smiled. He looked at his read-outs. The Vic was now 10 clicks away, which meant another 3 minutes before he'd be in firing range. The enemy fighters were busy fending off the *Challenge's* superior fighter force, but Grell knew that he was far from safe. Only one of them would have to notice them, and the enemy would be on the like flies.

Time passed slowly, as Grell wished his transport could move faster. But it couldn't, and so he had to wait. But eventually, he got close enough. He smiled as the targeting computer started bleeping as it was acquiring a target lock on the Vic.

"I have an enemy on my six," came the voice of one of the other techs. Grell knew the voice. He blocked it out, he could not be distracted now. A scream echoed in his ears, as Zulu three exploded not too far behind him. Only moments later, Grell realized he would probably be next as dull thuds indicated enemy fighters were taking shots at him. He focused on his target, allowing the computer to control the turbo laser turrets on the outside hull of his ship. As soon as the computer gave a solid bleep, Grell punched the firing button. A yellow engine exhaust appeared before him, as the first of the high-yield rockets left his launch tubes and sped towards the Vic. Grell managed to launch 4 more, before his transport took a hit that fried his systems. His cockpit went dark, the hum of the engines died away, and inertia was all that he had left. He heard no more laser impacts on his hull. The enemy fighter must have abandoned the attack, realizing Grell was out of the fight. Abandoned the attack on him, in order to go after one of his friends, no doubt. Who knows, Grell thought. I might just survive this after all.

Then a torpedo impacted his now unshielded craft, tore through the hull and smacked its tip into the back of Grell's head, knocking him unconscious before it detonated.

SEVEN

The *Victory*-class Star Destroyer was casting a shadow over the tiny fighters buzzing about it like flies around a cake. The turbo laser fire was spewed in all directions, but the large tube lasers batteries weren't designed for point defense against the agile starfighters. That's why a Star Destroyer was equipped with starfighters. Occasionally one of the gunners got lucky and one of the laser bolts fired would strike an enemy starfighter. Fortunately for the pilot of that starfighter, the X-wings and TIE Defenders were all equipped with energy shields of their own, so most of the impact energy would be dissipated.

"I'm hit! I'm hit!" LT Araske's voice screamed over the comm system. "Systems compromised, shields down, engine failure in 2 and 3."

At least you're still alive after that hit, COL Blackheart thought as he adjusted his comm set.

"Get your ass out of here," he yelled over the chatter. "Get back to the hangar now!" He glanced over at the X-wing in the distance, trailing smoke coming from several places on the battered fighter. It swerved around, and limped back to the *Challenge*. This would not end well. Blackheart pulled on his flight stick and raced towards his squadron member, just as he noticed an enemy TIE Interceptor doing the same. It would appear the pilot had spotted himself an easy kill. "Not today you don't," Blackheart muttered to himself as he linked up his laser cannons. He shifted power from shields and weapons systems to his engines, knowing his shields would last until he reached Araske, and he could quickly boost his weapons with them as well. Seconds crept by as the distance decreased, and Blackheart realized the Interceptor was slightly faster than he was. Not really wanting to waste torpedoes as they were needed against the big ships, he cursed and switched his weapons over to the torpedoes. He had a few left, so one could be wasted. It took his targeting computer a few moments to lock on to the Interceptor, and he fired two torpedoes at it, knowing the odds of them actually hitting their target were negligible. Still, that wasn't the objective. The TIE would have to actually evade the torpedoes or they would hit and destroy the unshielded craft. And evading the torpedoes would require some quick maneuvering on the pilot's side. Nothing he wouldn't be able to handle, but it would distract his focus from Araske's damaged fighter, not to mention end the attack run.

As expected, the TIE Interceptor started frantically moving about as both torpedoes were homing in, and the distance between the crippled X-wing and its pursuer quickly grew. At the same time, the distance between the TIE and Blackheart's X-wing was getting smaller by the heartbeat, and it didn't take long before the TIE was in firing range. Blackheart patiently waited for his target to stop playing around with his torpedoes, and as one after the other the torpedoes ran out of fuel and started drifting, the TIE pilot refocused his attention on his target.

"Situational awareness," Blackheart whispered to himself. "Either you have it and live..." He punched the firing button on his flight stick, and red energy bolts erupted from the wingtip mounted laser cannons on his X-wing. As one, the four bolts converged on the TIE, and as one they shattered the left solar panel and pierced the ball cockpit, frying the pilot inside and killing him long before the TIE exploded. "... or forget about it and die." Blackheart finished his murmuring. "You're clear, Araske," he said. "move it!"

Before an answer reached him, he turned his X-wing around and headed back for the Vic in the distance. He switched back to his warhead launchers, and didn't bother waiting for a target lock. The target was large enough that he could dumb-fire them at it, even from this distance, with only a minimal chance of them missing their target. His warheads expended, he switched back to lasers and cycled through the enormous list of enemy targets in the area. He settled on a flight group of TIE Bombers that had left the Vic's hangar and were slowly making their way for the *Challenge*. He accelerated to the X-wing's maximum velocity. He'd reach the Bombers long before they could launch their ordnance. He smiled. He had one kill today, but he had his mind set on a nice even dozen. One down, eleven to go.

EIGHT

Silently and effortlessly, the TIE Phantoms traversed the battlefield. Unseen by their enemies, they had free reign to do whatever they want. Despite the situation, Major Shadowclaw was not entirely happy. He wanted to communicate with his pilots, coordinate the attack on the enemy frigate that was fast closing on the *Challenge*. He couldn't. The radio traffic would alert the enemy and give away their position. All he could do was hope that his pilots would stick to the briefing. And stick to it exactly. He glanced at the timer in his cockpit. It was going down fast. Another forty seconds. Through the transparisteel, he saw the enemy frigate grow larger and larger. He slowed down, taking up his assigned position. He switched his weapons systems to his proton torpedo launchers, making sure not to engage the targeting computer. That, too, would alert the enemy to his position. Then again, this close to his target, he could just fire them without a target lock, and not even the dumbest TIE pilot in Imperial history would be able to miss. For a moment, he stared at the frigate's bridge. He could see movement, and for a second he thought he was staring right into the eyes of the ship's Captain.

As the countdown rolled to zero, he punched the firing button. The very next moment he hit the accelerator on his twin ion engines and banked away from his target. Mere moments later, turbo laser fire shot through space and converged on the exact spot he was only seconds ago. The trickiest part of the whole plan.... getting out alive. This close to the enemy warship, any hit from its laser batteries would be fatal. Shadowclaw glanced over his shoulder, and saw the gaping hole where the frigate's main bridge had been. Both his torpedoes, unencumbered by the enemy's energy shields, had slammed through the transparisteel viewports and detonated. As he looked around, he saw other TIEs dart away from the frigate. On his left, he saw one of his pilots be marginally too slow, and the TIE Phantom exploded as it was hit by turbolaser fire. Then it fell silent as most of the turbo laser batteries on this side of the frigate ceased to exist as they, too, were struck by proton torpedoes from the Phantoms. Mission accomplished... Thunder had effectively silenced the frigate by destroying the turbolaser batteries facing the *Challenge*. The frigate would need to come about to be able to fire on the Star Destroyer. But with the command crew on the bridge taken out, that wasn't about to happen anytime soon. Were the frigate under Imperial command, it would have taken a minute or two before a new command structure had settled in place, but with these unorganized pirates, that was unlikely to happen.

"Thunder to Tempest, frigate crippled. Finish it off," he said into his comm system. "Thunder, form up and go for that Vic!" He watched as the surviving members of his squadron took up position on his six. He pushed the flight control and his Phantom leapt forward. He arced his fighter towards the Vic and pulled it up on his targeting computer. The Vic appeared to be taking a pounding, but at the end of the day, it was still a Star Destroyer. Vic or not, they were built to last. Shadowclaw did some quick math in his mind. Vic shields were down to 60 percent, at best his squad could launch another 20 torpedoes into the Star Destroyer. Not good enough to take it down. But it would help. He smiled. He flicked up the targeting computer, and locked onto the enemy warship. As the computer's beeping indicated a solid lock, he pulled the trigger and watched the torpedoes fly off.

Well, not so much the torpedoes, as they were too small to actually be seen, but the trails of exhaust fumes were clearly visible. He noticed many more trails shoot past him as his wingmen followed suit. "That's all we can do, folks," he said. "Start picking off enemy fighters. Squadron Donkey buys the drinks tonight!"

NINE

On the bridge of her Star Destroyer, High Admiral Dempsey was looking back and forth between the holographic projection of the battle, and the actual battle outside. Contrary to the usual cacophony of alarms blaring on the bridge, there was relative silence after she'd order the alarms to be silenced. She didn't need them to know her ship was in dire straits. Fortunately, the enemy Vic's advance on the *Challenge* had been slowed by the valiant efforts of her pilots. She didn't really want to hear how many of them wouldn't be returning to the hangar when this was over. One of the enemy light cruisers was clearly out of the fight, it was trying to limp away while its atmosphere was venting into space. Unfortunately, she had noticed the turbolaser batteries on the starboard side had fallen silent.

"Come about, 40 degrees," she ordered. Boost the shields on the portside." She felt the tremor as the massive ship changed its position. But Dempsey realized it wouldn't help much. The enemy forces were getting slaughtered, but as her own fighter's numbers slowly decreased, the enemy's supply appeared to be without limit.

"New contact," someone said. "Two ships, medium sized, exiting hyperspace on vector gamma six niner." Dempsey sighed. More enemies to deal with, what else could... She paused. Gamma Six Niner. Her head turned towards the holographic display. Two new lights flashed in. A small smile appeared as she turned back towards the transparisteel viewports. She squeezed her eyes and she thought she could see the new arrivals.

Outside, LC Shadowclaw had a better view of the new developments. In the corner of his eye he glanced a ship exiting hyperspace. He turned his head to see what just popped out of hyperspace and saw a large bulk freighter coming straight at him. A blind pull on his yoke turned his fighter out of the freighter's path just in time. As he tried to regain control of his fighter's barrel roll, he tried to follow the path of the freighter. He yelled in enthusiasm as he saw the freighter crash into one of the pirate cruisers. A moment later a giant fireball erupted as the freighter exploded. Not an ordinary freighter, he thought.

Aboard the *Challenge*, Dempsey as well could see the explosion. In the distance, a second massive explosion ripped through the enemy Vic as the second freighter crashed into it. Finally, the tables were turning. Another moment later, two gunships jumped out of hyperspace near the enemy Vic. As their turbo laser batteries opened fire upon the crippled Vic. The gunships were small, but they really packed a punch.

"Enemy Vic is withdrawing!" came the sound over the comm system. Dempsey checked the displays. Slowly but surely, the Vic was changing course. "Enemy fighters are pulling back as well." Dempsey smiled. It would seem the battle was won. She just wondered what the cost would be.