

## The Fate of The *Challenger of the Seas*

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Thick sheets of rain lashed at the windows of the bridge, driving against the glass in an attempt to penetrate the oasis of warmth and light within. Captain Ford stared out at the roiling waves, framed by a flash of lightning and accompanied by a crash of thunder, which was barely audible in contrast to the howling wind outside. His grey beard was brushed to perfection and his black suit was impeccable. Ford had been married for thirty years, and his two children were grown with kids of their own. He thought of his wife, who would be waiting for him at Port Marrton, with his favourite dish: a hot apple pie.

The wave soared up into the dim night sky, before crashing down and smashing itself into foam. The water churned before forming another wave. A huge, iron bow appeared at the crest of the wave, rising vertical before losing to gravity and pitching down the face of the wave. The large white letters marking the bow, which read: CHALLENGER OF THE SEAS, glinted in the bright floodlights that adorned the bow. The iron plating of the *Challenger* rattled in protest as the water shunted it this way and that. The long deck, adorned with rows of thick steel pipes, gantry ways, and catwalks nosed down at an alarming angle, crashing into the seething mass of water as the stern and its mammoth single propeller rose out of the foam, screaming through the air before burying itself down into the waves again.

The *Challenger* was a raw oil tanker: 979 metres long and 92.8 metres wide at its tri-float point. The crew had to shut down the hydrogen reactor after discovering there was a breach in the pipes that was leaking in a key area. With a temporary spare in place, the reactor was only operating at a maximum of sixty-seven percent. Its contract from the Farr-rock oil rig was delayed, and only five hours after filling up to its maximum capacity of 2,000,000 metric tons, it was caught in a freak storm cell en-route to India.

The hull below Captain Ford screamed and groaned in protest against the water that pounded the ship. Lights flickered, dials spun, and computer screens wavered as the stern rose out of the water; the mammoth reactor changed its pitch from a low growl to a mighty roar as the propeller was lifted into the air, dropping back into the sea with a dull *boom*.

‘Sir? We should throttle down when the prop lifts out of the water like that? It could overload—’

The chief engineer, who had been employed two months prior, was cut short by Captain Ford’s furious response, which was a change from his normal rational attitude. ‘No!

Our contract is almost at its deadline. It will cost Shahaan oil over a million dollars in penalty fees. We are already in trouble, and I'm willing to take any risk possible to get this done, no matter the cost.'

The rest of the crew were seated around various stations, sitting in harnessed chairs at computers, displays or sleeping in some cots, despite the unrelenting din of the squall. Now, a man cried out from one of the displays.

'Captain, we have huge storm activity off the port. Could be a formation of the three sisters—' The meteorologist choked on his last sentence as the crew stiffened. Would they make it home alive to their loved ones?

'Are you sure, Lieutenant?' Ford asked, looking at the radar.

'It's possible, but it is rare, sir,' the lieutenant replied, pointing to three converging lines on the screen. The lines told Captain Ford nothing about the size of the rogue waves, but he'd seen them as high as twenty metres; it was a sight that brought terror to the hearts of even the most toughened captains.

'Hard to port, thirty-five degrees now. Activate manoeuvring thrusters and get us to hit bow-first. And activate the tri-floats when we are in the immediate proximity,' Ford ordered.

The bridge became a hive of activity. The *Challenger* groaned, heeling over to starboard as the rudder swung to port. The bow shuddered as small thrusters kicked in and forced it over. As the ship turned, a flash of lightning illuminated a terrifying sight on the horizon: a massive wall of water, barrelling towards the supertanker, which was grappling to rotate and face its adversary. Everyone on the bridge was silent as the huge wave bore down on the prow of the *Challenger*. The wave was almost upon the ship, looming above it at an impossible height.

'Tri-floats activating Captain,' said the second mate.

A booming thud came from below decks as the bulge in the centre of the ship widened. Machinery whined, grinders creaked, and pistons hissed as two separate hulls extended from the *Challenger*, turning the ship into an incomplete trimaran. With the tri-floats extended, the ship gained stability and seemed to tease the wave with the power of modern technology. The bow of the tanker ascended, rising along the face of the wave. Light wavered in Captain Ford's calm blue eyes as the ship climbed. The oil in each of its separate compartments shifting back, the pitch of the reactor wavered, its din growing louder every second.

‘Reactor operating at seventy-eight percent, sir. Current speed twelve knots and decreasing fast,’ an engineer shouted over the crescendo.

‘Increase throttle to eighty percent, semi-flank speed and perform a core-only lockdown procedure,’ Ford said as the bow continued its never-ending climb.

‘Sir, that means a high risk of reactor failure. We’ve got to make it over two other waves. We’ll be sitting ducks if we have an overload,’ the engineer replied.

‘Do as I say,’ Ford replied.

Without warning, the lights on the bridge suddenly shut off, along with heaters, displays, and backlights. There was a sigh as the generator powered down and cut electricity.

‘Core-only lockdown successful, sir. Reactor operating at eighty percent, and our speed is nine knots and increasing.’

A cheer sounded from the assembled men as the bow pitched down again. The entire ship fell and g-forces lifting the crew’s stomachs to their mouths. After an eternity, the hull exploded down into the water, nosing down twenty metres underwater. The crew sighed in relief as the ship levelled out again. One down, two to go. The *Challenger* began the climb once again.

Halfway up the face of the second wave, sirens blared.

‘Captain! Reactor overload. Operating at one hundred and seventy-seven percent with a pipe failure. We need to shut down now.’

‘Do it,’ Ford replied.

The muffled scream transformed into an abrupt screech at the peak of the wave and, as the bow fell once again, the reactor overloaded. All the air seemed to be sucked out of existence as the engine exploded in a ball of white-hot fire, enveloping the turbine with a bright flash. Black smoke belched from the funnel as the ship listed heavily, stopping only when the deck of the starboard float was almost underwater. The ship moaned as the stern slammed into the water.

The *Challenger* levelled out for the final time, burning and defeated, as the third wave triumphantly began to tear down upon them. Ford grimly saluted the rest of the crew for the last time and they saluted back.

When the mountain of water struck the stricken ship, it sucked the tanker below the water, wrenching it in half like a chocolate bar, oil spewing out through ruptured pipes and tanks. The hull of the *Challenger* screamed in agony as water blasted through its compartments, filling them and dragging the remaining wreckage to the bottom of the ocean,

where it would lie until it was rediscovered three months later, destroying all hope that the crew may have escaped the fury of the storm.

Captain Ford would never eat that warm apple pie his wife had prepared for him.