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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A QUESTION OF COURAGE \*\*\*

# A Question Of Courage

By J. F. BONE

Illustrated by FINLAY

***I smelled the trouble the moment I stepped on  
the lift and took the long ride up the side of  
the "Lachesis." There was something wrong. I  
couldn't put my finger on it but***

five years in the Navy gives a man a feeling for these things. From the outside the ship was beautiful, a gleaming shaft of duralloy, polished until she shone. Her paint and brightwork glistened. The antiradiation shields on the gun turrets and launchers were folded back exactly according to regulations. The shore uniform of the liftman was spotless and he stood at his station precisely as he should. As the lift moved slowly up past no-man's country to the life section, I noted a work party hanging precariously from a scaffolding smoothing out meteorite pits in the gleaming hull, while on the catwalk of the gantry standing beside the main cargo hatch a steady stream of supplies disappeared into the ship's belly.

I returned the crisp salutes of the white-gloved sideboys, saluted the colors, and shook hands with an immaculate ensign with an O.D. badge on his tunic.

"Glad to have you aboard, sir," the ensign said.

"I'm Marsden," I said. "Lieutenant Thomas Marsden. I have orders posting me to this ship as Executive."

"Yes, sir. We have been expecting you. I'm Ensign Halloran."

"Glad to meet you, Halloran."

"Skipper's orders, sir. You are to report to him as soon as you come aboard."

Then I got it. Everything was SOP. The ship wasn't taut, she was tight! And she wasn't happy. There was none of the devil-may-care spirit that marks crews in the Scouting Force and separates them from the stodgy mass of the Line. Every face I saw on my trip to the skipper's cabin was blank, hard-eyed, and unsmiling. There was none of the human noise that normally echoes through a ship, no laughter, no clatter of equipment, no deviations from the order and precision so dear to admirals' hearts. This crew was G.I. right down to the last seam tab on their uniforms. Whoever the skipper was, he was either bucking for another cluster or a cold-feeling automaton to whom the Navy Code was father, mother, and Bible.



The O.D. stopped before the closed door, executed a mechanical right face, knocked the prescribed three times and opened the door smartly on the heels of the word "Come" that erupted from the inside. I stepped in followed by the O.D.

"Commander Chase," the O.D. said. "Lieutenant Marsden."

Chase! Not Cautious Charley Chase! I could hardly look at the man behind the command desk. But look I did—and my heart did a ninety degree dive straight to the thick soles of my space boots. No wonder this ship was sour. What else could happen with Lieutenant Commander Charles Augustus Chase in command! He was three classes up on me, but even though he was a First Classman at the time I crawled out of Beast Barracks, I knew him well. Every Midshipman in the Academy knew him—Rule-Book Charley—By-The-Numbers Chase—his nicknames were legion and not one of them was friendly. "Lieutenant Thomas Marsden reporting for duty," I said.

He looked at the O.D. "That'll be all, Mr. Halloran," he said.

"Aye, sir," Halloran said woodenly. He stepped backward, saluted, executed a precise about face and closed the hatch softly behind him.

"Sit down, Marsden," Chase said. "Have a cigarette."

He didn't say, "Glad to have you aboard." But other than that he was Navy right down to the last parenthesis. His voice was the same dry schoolmaster's voice I remembered from the Academy. And his face was the same dry gray with the same fishy blue eyes and rat trap jaw. His hair was thinner, but other than that he hadn't changed. Neither the war nor the responsibilities of command appeared to have left their mark upon him. He was still the same lean, undersized square-shouldered blob of nastiness.

I took the cigarette, sat down, puffed it into a glow, and looked around the drab 6 x 8 foot cubicle called the Captain's cabin by ship designers who must have laughed as they laid out the plans. It had about the room of a good-sized coffin. A copy of the Navy Code was lying on the desk. Chase had obviously been reading his bible.

"You are three minutes late, Marsden," Chase said. "Your orders direct you to report at 0900. Do you have any explanation?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Don't let it happen again. On this ship we are prompt."

"Aye, sir," I muttered.

He smiled, a thin quirk of thin lips. "Now let me outline your duties, Marsden. You are posted to my ship as Executive Officer. An Executive Officer is the Captain's right hand."

"So I have heard," I said drily.

"Belay that, Mr. Marsden. I do not appreciate humor during duty hours."

You wouldn't, I thought.

"As I was saying, Marsden, Executive Officer, you will be responsible for—" He went on and on, covering the Code—chapter, book and verse on the duties of an Executive Officer. It made no difference that I had been Exec under Andy Royce, the skipper of the "Clotho," the ship with the biggest confirmed kill in the entire Fleet Scouting Force. I was still a new Exec, and the book said

I must be briefed on my duties. So "briefed" I was—for a solid hour.

Feeling angry and tired, I finally managed to get away from Rule Book Charley and find my quarters which I shared with the Engineer. I knew him casually, a glum reservist named Allyn. I had wondered why he always seemed to have a chip on his shoulder. Now I knew.

He was lying in his shock-couch as I came in. "Welcome, sucker," he greeted me. "Glad to have you aboard."

"The feeling's not mutual," I snapped.

"What's the matter? Has the Lieutenant Commander been rolling you out on the red carpet?"

"You could call it that," I said. "I've just been told the duties of an Exec. Funny—no?"

He shook his head. "Not funny. I feel for you. He told me how to be an engineer six months ago." Allyn's thin face looked glummer than usual.

"Did I ever tell you about our skip—captain?" Allyn went on. "Or do I have to tell you? I see you're wearing an Academy ring."

"You can't tell me much I haven't already heard," I said coldly. I don't like wardroom gossips as a matter of policy. A few disgruntled men on a ship can shoot morale to hell, and on a ship this size the Exec is the morale officer. But I was torn between two desires. I wanted Allyn to go on, but I didn't want to hear what Allyn had to say. I was like the proverbial hungry mule standing halfway between two haystacks of equal size and attractiveness. And like the mule I would stand there turning my head one way and the other until I starved to death.

But Allyn solved my problem for me. "You haven't heard *this*," he said bitterly. "The whole crew applied for transfer when we came back to base after our last cruise. Of course, they didn't get it, but you get the idea. Us reservists and draftees get about the same consideration as the Admiral's dog—No! dammit!—Less than the dog. They wouldn't let a mangy cur ship out with Gutless Gus."

Gutless Gus! that was a new one. I wondered how Chase had managed to acquire that sobriquet.

"It was on our last patrol," Allyn went on, answering my question before I asked it. "We were out at maximum radius when the detectors showed a disturbance in normal space. Chase ordered us down from Cth for a quick look—and so help me, God, we broke out right in the middle of a Rebel supply convoy—big, fat, sitting ducks all around us. We got off about twenty Mark VII torpedoes before Chase passed the word to change over. We scooted back into Cth so fast we hardly knew we were gone. And then he raises hell with Detector section for not identifying every class of ship in that convoy!"

"And when Bancroft, that's the Exec whom you've relieved, asked for a quick check to confirm our kills, Chase sat on him like a ton of brick. 'I'm not interested in how many poor devils we blew apart back there,' our Captain says. 'Our mission is to scout, to obtain information about enemy movements and get that information back to Base. We cannot transmit information from a vaporized ship, and that convoy had a naval escort. Our mission cannot be jeopardized merely to satisfy morbid curiosity. Request denied. And, Mr. Bancroft, have Communications contact Fleet. This information should be in as soon as possible.' And then he turned away leaving Bancroft biting his fingernails. He wouldn't even push out a probe—scooted right back into the blue where we'd be safe!"

"You know, we haven't had one confirmed kill posted on the list since we've been in space. It's getting so we don't want to come in any more. Like the time—the 'Atropos' came in just after we touched down. She was battered—looked like she'd been through a meat grinder, but she had ten confirmed and six probable, and four of them were escorts! Hell! Our boys couldn't hold their heads up. The 'Lachesis' didn't have a mark on her and all we had was a few possible hits. You know how it goes—someone asks where you're from. You say the 'Lachesis' and they say 'Oh, yes, the cruise ship.' And that's that. It's so true you don't even feel like resenting it."

I didn't like the bitter note in Allyn's voice. He was a reservist, which made it all the worse. Reservists have ten times the outside contacts we regulars do. In general when a regular and reservist tangle, the Academy men close ranks like musk-oxen and meet the challenge with an unbroken ring of horns. But somehow I didn't feel like ringing up.

I kept hoping there was another side to the story. I'd check around and find out as soon as I got settled. And if there was another side, I was going to take Allyn apart as a malicious trouble-maker. I felt sick to my stomach.

We spent the next three days taking on stores and munitions, and I was too busy supervising the stowage and checking manifests to bother about running down Allyn's story. I met the other officers—Lt. Pollard the gunnery officer, Ensign Esterhazy the astrogator, and Ensign Blakiston. Nice enough guys, but all wearing that cowed, frustrated look that seemed to be a "Lachesis" trademark. Chase, meanwhile, was up in Flag Officer's Country picking up the dope on our next mission. I hoped that Allyn was wrong but the evidence all seemed to be in his favor. Even more than the officers, the crew was a mess underneath their clean uniforms. From Communications

Chief CPO Haskins to Spaceman Zelinski there was about as much spirit in them as you'd find in a punishment detail polishing brightwork in Base Headquarters. I'm a cheerful soul, and usually I find no trouble getting along with a new command, but this one was different. They were efficient enough, but one could see that their hearts weren't in their work. Most crews preparing to go out are nervous and high tempered. There was none of that here. The men went through the motions with a mechanical indifference that was frightening. I had the feeling that they didn't give a damn whether they went or not—or came back or not. The indifference was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Yet there was nothing you could put your hand on. You can't touch people who don't care.

Four hours after Chase came back, we lifted gravs from Earth. Chase was sitting in the control chair, and to give him credit, we lifted as smooth as a silk scarf slipping through the fingers of a pretty woman. We hypered at eight miles and swept up through the monochromes of Cth until we hit middle blue, when Chase slipped off the helmet, unfastened his webbing, and stood up.

"Take over, Mr. Marsden," he said. "Lay a course for Parth."

"Aye, sir," I replied, slipping into the chair and fastening the web. I slipped the helmet on my head and instantly I was a part of the ship. It's a strange feeling, this synthesis of man and metal that makes a fighting ship the metallic extension of the Commander's will. I was conscious of every man on duty. What they saw I saw, what they heard I heard, through the magic of modern electronics. The only thing missing was that I couldn't feel what they felt, which perhaps was a mercy considering the condition of the crew. Using the sensor circuits in the command helmet, I let my perception roam through the ship, checking the engines, the gun crews, the navigation board, the galley—all the manifold stations of a fighting ship. Everything was secure, the ship was clean and trimmed, the generators were producing their megawatts of power without a hitch, and the converters were humming contentedly, keeping us in the blue as our speed built to fantastic levels.

I checked the course, noted it was true, set the controls on standby and relaxed, half dozing in the chair as Lume after Lume dropped astern with monotonous regularity.

An hour passed and Halloran came up to relieve me. With a sigh of relief I surrendered the chair and headset. The unconscious strain of being in rapport with ship and crew didn't hit me until I was out of the chair. But when it did, I felt like something was crushing me flat. Not that I didn't expect it, but the "Lachesis" was worse than the "Clotho" had ever been.

I had barely hit my couch when General Quarters sounded. I smothered a curse as I pounded up the companionway to my station at the bridge. Chase was there, stopwatch in hand, counting the seconds.

"Set!" Halloran barked.

"Fourteen seconds," Chase said. "Not bad. Tell the crew well done." He put the watch in his pocket and walked away.

I picked up the annunciator mike and pushed the button. "Skipper says well done," I said.

"He got ten seconds out of us once last trip," Halloran said. "And he's been trying to repeat that fluke ever since. Bet you a munit to an 'F' ration that he'll be down with the section chief trying to shave off another second or two. Hey!—what's that—oh ..." He looked at me. "Disturbance in Cth yellow, straight down—shall we go?"

"Stop ship," I ordered. "Sound general quarters." There was no deceleration. We merely swapped ends as the alarm sounded, applied full power and stopped. That was the advantage of Cth—no inertia. We backtracked for three seconds and held in middle blue.

"What's going on?" Chase demanded as he came up from below. His eyes raked the instruments. "Why are we stopped?"

"Disturbance in Cth yellow, sir," I said. "We're positioned above it."

"Very good, Mr. Marsden." He took the spare helmet from the Exec's chair, clapped it on, fiddled with the controls for a moment, nodded, and took the helmet off. "Secure and resume course," he said. "That's the 'Amphitrite'—fleet supply and maintenance. One of our people."

"You sure, sir?" I asked, and then looked at the smug grin on Halloran's face and wished I hadn't asked.

"Of course," Chase said. "She's a three converter job running at full output. Since the Rebels have no three converter ships, she has to be one of ours. And since she's running at full output and only in Cth yellow, it means she's big, heavy, and awkward—which means a maintenance or an ammunition supply ship. There's an off phase beat in her number two converter that gives a twenty cycle pulse to her pattern. And the only heavy ship in the fleet with this pattern is 'Amphitrite.' You see?"

I saw—with respect. "You know all the heavies like that, sir?" I asked.

"Not all of them—but I'd like to. It's as much a part of a scoutship commander's work to know our own ships as those of the enemy."

"Could that trace be a Rebel ruse?"

"Not likely—travelling in the yellow. A ship would be cold meat this far inside our perimeter. And besides, there's no Rebel alive who can tune a converter like a Navy mechanic."

"You sure?" I persisted.

"I'm sure. But take her down if you wish."

I did. And it was the "Amphitrite."

"I served on her for six months," Chase said drily as we went back through the components. I understood his certainty now. A man has a feeling for ships if he's a good officer. But it was a trait I'd never expected in Chase. I gave the orders and we resumed our band and speed. Chase looked at me.

"You acted correctly, Mr. Marsden," he said. "Something I would hardly expect, but something I was glad to see."

"I served under Andy Royce," I reminded him.

"I know," Chase replied. "That's why I'm surprised." He turned away before I could think of an answer that would combine insolence and respect for his rank. "Keep her on course, Mr. Halloran," he tossed over his shoulder as he went out.

We kept on course—high and hard despite a couple of disturbances that lumbered by underneath us. Once I made a motion to stop ship and check, but Halloran shook his head.

"Don't do it, sir," he warned.

"Why not?"

"You heard the Captain's orders. He's a hells for having them obeyed. Besides, they might be Rebs—and we might get hurt shooting at them. We'll just report their position and approximate course—and keep on travelling. Haskins is on the Dirac right now." Halloran's voice was sarcastic.

I didn't like the sound of it, and said so.

"Well, sir—we won't lose them entirely," Halloran said comfortingly. "Some cruiser will investigate them. Chances are they're ours anyway—and if they aren't there's no sense in us risking our nice shiny skin stopping them—even though we could take them like Lundy took Koromaja. Since the book doesn't say we have to investigate, we won't." His voice was bitter again.

At 0840 hours on the fourth day out, my annunciator buzzed. "Sir," the talker's voice came over the intercom, "Lieutenants Marsden and Allyn are wanted in the Captain's quarters."

Chase was there—toying with the seals of a thin, brown envelope. "I have to open this in the presence of at least two officers," he said nodding at Allyn who came in behind me. "You two are senior on the ship and have the first right to know." He slid a finger through the flap.

"Effective 12, Eighthmonth, GY2964," he read, "USN 'Lachesis' will proceed on offensive mission against enemy vessels as part of advance covering screen Fleet Four for major effort against enemy via sectors YD 274, YD 275, and YD 276. Entire Scouting Force IV quadrant will be grouped as Fleet Four Screen Unit under command Rear Admiral SIMMS. Initial station 'Lachesis' coordinates X 06042 Y 1327 Betelgeuse-Rigel baseline. ETA Rendezvous point 0830 plus or minus 30, 13/8/64.

"A. Evars, Fleet Admiral USN Commanding."

There it was! I could see Allyn stiffen as a peculiar sick look crossed Chase's dry face. And suddenly I heard all the ugly little nicknames—Subspace Chase, Gutless Gus, Cautious Charley—and the dozen others. For Chase was afraid. It was so obvious that not even the gray mask of his face could cover it.

Yet his voice when he spoke was the same dry, pedantic voice of old. "You have the rendezvous point, Mr. Marsden. Have Mr. Esterhazy set the course and speed to arrive on time." He dismissed us with the traditional "That's all, gentlemen," and we went out separate ways. I didn't want to look at the triumphant smile on Allyn's face.

We hit rendezvous at 0850, picked up a message from the Admiral at 0853, and at 0855 were on our way. We were part of a broad hemispherical screen surrounding the Cruiser Force which englobed the Line and supply train—the heavies that are the backbone of any fleet. We were headed roughly in the direction of the Rebel's fourth sector, the one top-heavy with metals industries. Our exact course was known only to the brass and the computers that planned our interlock. But where we were headed wasn't important. The "Lachesis" was finally going to war! I could feel the change in the crew, the nervousness, the anticipation, the adrenal responses of fear and excitement. After a year in the doldrums, Fleet was going to try to smash the Rebels again. We hadn't done so well last time, getting ambushed in the Fifty Suns group and damn near losing our shirts before we managed to get out. The Rebs weren't as good as we were, but they

were trickier, and they could fight. After all, why shouldn't they be able to? They were human, just as we were, and any one of a dozen extinct intelligent races could testify to our fighting ability, as could others not-quite-extinct. Man ruled this section of the galaxy, and someday if he didn't kill himself off in the process he'd rule all of it. He wasn't the smartest race but he was the hungriest, the fiercest, the most adaptable, and the most unrelenting. Qualities which, by the way, were exactly the ones needed to conquer a hostile universe.

But mankind was slow to learn the greatest lesson, that they *had* to cooperate if they were to go further. We were already living on borrowed time. Before the War, ten of eleven exploration ships sent into the galactic center had disappeared without a trace. Somewhere, buried deep in the billions of stars that formed the galactic hub, was a race that was as tough and tricky as we were—maybe even tougher. This was common knowledge, for the eleventh ship had returned with the news of the aliens, a story of hairbreadth escape from destruction, and a pattern of their culture which was enough like ours to frighten any thinking man. The worlds near the center of humanity's sphere realized the situation at once and quickly traded their independence for a Federal Union to pool their strength against the threat that might come any day.

But as the Union Space Navy began to take shape on the dockyards of Earth and a hundred other worlds, the independent worlds of the periphery began to eye the Union with suspicion. They had never believed the exploration report and didn't want to unite with the worlds of the center. They thought that the Union was a trick to deprive them of their fiercely cherished independence, and when the Union sent embassies to invite them into the common effort, they rejected them. And when we suggested that in the interests of racial safety they abandon their haphazard colonization efforts that resulted in an uncontrolled series of jumps into the dark, punctuated by minor wars and clashes when colonists from separate origins landed, more or less simultaneously, on a promising planet, they were certain we were up to no good.

Although we explained and showed them copies of the exploration ship's report, they were not convinced. Demagogues among them screamed about manifest destiny, independence, interference in internal affairs, and a thousand other things that made the diplomatic climate between Center and Periphery unbearably hot. And their colonists kept moving outward.

Of course the Union was not about to cooperate in this potential race suicide. We simply couldn't allow them to give that other race knowledge of our whereabouts until we were ready for them. So we informed each of the outer worlds that we would consider any further efforts at colonizing an unfriendly act, and would take steps to discourage it.

That did it.

We halted a few colonizing ships and sent them home under guard. We uprooted a few advance groups and returned them to their homeworlds. We established a series of observation posts to check further expansion—and six months later we were at war.

The outer worlds formed what they called a defensive league and with characteristic human rationality promptly attacked us. Naturally, they didn't get far. We had a bigger and better fleet and we were organized while they were not. And so they were utterly defeated at the Battle of Ophiuchus.

It was then that we had two choices. We could either move in and take over their defenseless worlds, or we could let them rebuild and get strong, and with their strength acquire a knowledge of cooperation—and take the chance that they would ultimately beat us. Knowing this, we wisely chose the second course and set about teaching our fellow men a lesson that was now fifteen years along and not ended yet.

By applying pressure at the right places we turned their attention inward to us rather than to the outside, and by making carefully timed sorties here and there about the periphery we forced them through sheer military necessity to gradually tighten their loosely organized League into tightly centralized authority, with the power to demand and obtain—to meet our force with counterforce. By desperate measures and straining of all their youthful resources they managed to hold us off. And with every strain they were welded more tightly together. And slowly they were learning through war what we could not teach through peace.

Curiously enough, they wouldn't believe our aims even when captured crews told them. They thought it was some sort of tricky mental conditioning designed to frustrate their lie detectors. Even while they tightened their organization and built new fleets, they would not believe that we were forcing them into the paths they must travel to avoid future annihilation.

It was one of the ironies of this war that it was fought and would be fought with the best of intentions. For it was obvious now that we could never win—nor could they. The Rebels, as we called them, were every whit as strong as we, and while we enjoyed the advantages of superior position and technology they had the advantage of superior numbers. It was stalemate,—the longest, fiercest stalemate in man's bloody history. But it was stalemate with a purpose. It was a crazy war—a period of constant hostilities mingled with sporadic offensive actions like the one we were now engaged in—but to us, at least, it was war with a purpose—the best and noblest of human purposes—the preservation of the race.

The day was coming, not too many years away, when the first of the aliens would strike the Outer worlds. Then we would unite—on the League's terms if need be—to crush the invaders and

establish mankind as the supreme race in the galaxy.

But this wasn't important right now. Right now I was the Executive Officer of a scout ship commanded by a man I didn't trust. He smelled too much like a stinking coward. I shook my head. Having Chase running the ship was like putting a moron in a jet car on one of the superhighways—and then sabotaging the automatics. Just one fearful mistake and a whole squadron could be loused up. But Chase was the commander—the ultimate authority on this ship. All I could do was pray that things were going to come out all right.

We moved out in the lower red. Battles weren't fought in Cth. There was no way to locate a unit at firing range in that monochromatic madness. Normal physical laws simply didn't apply. A ship had to come out into threespace to do any damage. All Cth was was a convenient road to the battlefield.

With one exception.

By hanging in the infra band, on the ragged edge of threespace, a scout ship could remain concealed until a critical moment, breakout into threespace—discharge her weapons—and flick back into Cth before an enemy could get a fix on her. Scouts, with their high capacity converters, could perform this maneuver, but the ponderous battlewagons and cruisers with their tremendous weight of armor, screens, and munitions couldn't maneuver like this. They simply didn't have the agility. Yet only they had the ability to penetrate defensive screens and kill the Rebel heavies. So space battle was conducted on the classic pattern—the Lines slugging it out at medium range while the screen of scouts buzzed around and through the battle trying to add their weight of metal against some overstrained enemy and ensure his destruction. A major battle could go on for days—and it often did. In the Fifty Suns action the battle had lasted nearly two weeks subjective before we withdrew to lick our wounds.

For nearly a day we ran into nothing, and such are the distances that separate units of a fleet, we had the impression that we were alone. We moved quietly, detectors out, scanning the area for a light-day around as we moved forward at less than one Lume through Cth. More would have been fatal for had we been forced to resort to a quick breakout to avoid enemy action, and if we were travelling above one Lume when we hit threespace, we'd simply disappear, leaving a small spatial vortex in our wake.

On the "morning" of the third day the ships at the apex of Quadrant One ran into a flight of Rebel scouts. There was a brief flurry of action, the Rebels were englobed, a couple of cruisers drove in, latched onto the helplessly straining Rebel scouts and dragged them into threespace. The Rebs kept broadcasting right up to the end—after which they surrendered before the cruisers could annihilate them. Smart boys.

But the Rebels were warned. We couldn't catch all their scouts and the disturbance our Line was making in Cth would register on any detector within twenty parsecs. So they would be waiting to meet us. But that was to be expected. There is no such thing as surprise in a major action.

We went on until we began to run into major opposition. Half a dozen scouts were caught in englobements at half a dozen different places along the periphery as they came in contact with the Rebels' covering forces. And that was that. The advance halted waiting for the Line to come up, and a host of small actions took place as the forward screening forces collided. Chase was in the control chair, hanging in the blackness of the infra band on the edge of normal space. But we weren't flicking in and out of threespace like some of the others. We had a probe out and the main buffeting was taken by the duralloy tube with its tiny converter at its bulbous tip. With consummate pilotage Chase was holding us in infra. It was a queasy sensation, hanging halfway between normalcy and chaos, and I had to admire his skill. The infra band was black as ink and hot as the hinges of hell—and since the edges of threespace and Cth are not as knife sharp as they are further up in the Cth components, we bucked and shuddered on the border, but avoided the bone-crushing slams and gut-wrenching twists that less skillful skippers were giving their ships as they flicked back and forth between threespace and Cth. Our scouting line must have been a peculiar sight to a threespace observer with the thousand or so scouts flickering in and out of sight across a huge hemisphere of space.

And then we saw them. Our probe picked up the flicker of enemy scouts.

"Action imminent," Chase said drily. "Stand by."

I clapped the other control helmet over my head and dropped into the Exec's chair. A quick check showed the crew at their stations, the torpedo hatches clear, the antiradiation shields up and the ship in fighting trim. I stole a quick glance at Chase. Sweat stood out on his gray forehead. His lips were drawn back into a thin line, showing his teeth. His face was tense, but whether with fear or excitement I didn't know.

"Stand by," he said, and then we hit threespace, just as the enormous cone of the Rebel Line flicked into sight. The enemy line had taken the field, and under the comparatively slow speeds of threespace was rushing forward to meet our Line which had emerged a few minutes ago. Our launchers flamed as we sent a salvo of torpedoes whistling toward the Rebel fleet marking perhaps the opening shots of the main battle. We twisted back into Cth as one of the scanner men doubled over with agony, heaving his guts out into a disposal cone. I felt sorry for him. The tension, the racking agony of our motion, and the fact that he was probably in his first major

battle had all combined to take him for the count. He grinned greenly at me and turned back to his dials and instruments. Good man!

"Target—range one eight zero four, azimuth two four oh, elevation one oh seven," the rangefinder reported. "Mass four." Mass four:—a cruiser.

"Stand by," Chase said. "All turrets prepare to fire." And he took us down. We slammed into threespace and our turrets flamed. To our left rear and above hung the mass of an enemy cruiser, her screens glowing on standby as she drove forward to her place in the line. We had caught her by surprise, a thousand to one shot, and our torpedoes were on their way before her detectors spotted us. We didn't stay to see what happened, but the probe showed an enormous fireball which blazed briefly in the blackness, shooting out globs of scintillating molten metal that cooled and disappeared as we watched.

"Scratch one cruiser," someone in fire control yelled.

The effect on morale was electric. In that instant all doubts of Chase's ability disappeared. All except mine. One lucky shot isn't a battle, and I guess Chase figured the same way because his hands were shaking as he jockeyed us along on the edge of Cth. He looked like he wanted to vomit.

"Take it easy, skipper," I said.

"Mind your own business, Marsden—and I'll mind mine," Chase snapped. "Stand by," he ordered, and we dove into threespace again—loosed another salvo at another Reb, and flicked out of sight. And that was the way it went for hour after hour until we pulled out, our last torpedo fired and the crew on the ragged edge of exhaustion. Somehow, by some miracle compounded of luck and good pilotage, we were unmarked. And Chase, despite his twitching face and shaking hands, was one hell of a combat skipper! I didn't wonder about him any more. He had the guts all right. But it was a different sort of courage from the icy contempt for danger that marked Andy Royce. Even so, I couldn't help thinking that I was glad to be riding with Chase. We drove to the rear, heading for the supply train, our ammunition expended, while behind us the battlegons and cruisers were hammering each other to metal pulp.

In the quiet of the rear area it was hardly believable that a major battle was going on ahead of us. We raised the "Amphitrite," identified ourselves, and put in a request for supply.

"Lay aboard," "Amphitrite" signalled back. "How's the war going?"

"Don't know. We've been too busy," our signalman replied.

"I'll bet—you're 'Lachesis,' aren't you?"

"Affirmative."

"How'd you lose your ammo? Jettison it?"

"Stow that, you unprintable obscenity," Haskins replied. "We're a fighting ship."

"Amphitrite" chuckled nastily. "That I'll believe when I see it!"

"Communications," Chase snapped. "This isn't a social call. Get our heading and approach instructions." He sounded as schoolmasterish as ever, but there was a sickly smile on his face, and the gray-green look was gone.

"Morale seems a little better, doesn't it, Marsden?" he said to me as the "Amphitrite" flicked out into threespace and we followed.

I nodded. "Yes, sir," I agreed. "Quite a little."

Our cargo hatches snapped open and we cuddled up against "Amphitrite's" bulging belly while our crew and the supply echelon worked like demons to transfer ammunition. We had fifty torpedoes aboard when the I.F.F. detector shrilled alarm.

Three hundred feet above us the "Amphitrite's" main battery let loose a salvo at three Rebel scouts that had flickered into being less than fifty miles away. Their launchers flared with a glow that lighted the blackness of space.

"Stand by!" Chase yelled as he threw the converter on.

"Hatches!" I screamed as we shimmered and vanished.

Somehow we got most of them closed, losing only the crew on number two port turret which was still buttoning up as we slipped over into the infra band. I ordered the turret sealed. Cth had already ruined the unshielded sighting mechanisms and I had already seen what happened to men caught in Cth unprotected. I had no desire to see it again—or let our crew see it if it could be avoided. A human body turned inside out isn't the most wholesome of sights.

"How did *they* get through?" Chase muttered as we put out our probe.

"I don't know—maybe someone wasn't looking."

"What's it like down there?" Chase asked. "See anything?"



"Amphitrite's' still there," I said.

"She's *what*?"

"Still there," I repeated. "And she's in trouble."

"She's big. She can take it—but—"

"Here, you look," I said, flipping the probe switch.

"My God!" Chase muttered—as he took one look at the supply ship lying dead in space, her protective batteries flaming. She had gotten one of the Rebel scouts but the other two had her bracketed and were pouring fire against her dim screens.

"She can't keep this up," I said. "She's been hulled—and it looks like her power's taken it."

"Action imminent," Chase ordered, and the rangefinder took up his chant.

We came storming out of Cth right on top of one of the Rebel scouts. A violent shock raced through the ship, slamming me against my web. The rebound sent us a good two miles away before our starboard battery flamed. The enemy scout, disabled by the shock, stunned and unable to maneuver took the entire salvo amidships and disappeared in a puff of flame.

The second Rebel disappeared and we did too. She was back in Cth looking for a better chance at the "Amphitrite." The big ship was wallowing like a wounded whale, half of one section torn away, her armor dented, and her tubes firing erratically.

We took one long look and jumped back into Cth. But not before Haskins beamed a message to the supply ship. "Now you've seen it, you damned storekeeper," he gloated. "What do you think?" "Amphitrite" didn't answer.

"Probe out," Chase ordered, neglecting, I noticed, to comment on the signalman's act.

I pushed the proper buttons but nothing happened. I pushed again and then turned on the scanners. The one aft of the probe was half covered with a twisted mass of metal tubing that had once been our probe. We must have smashed it when we rammed. Quickly I shifted to the auxiliary probe, but the crumpled mass had jammed the hatch. It wouldn't open.

"No probes, sir," I announced.

"Damn," Chase said. "Well, we'll have to do without them. Hold tight, we're going down."

We flicked into threespace just in time to see a volcano of fire erupt from "Amphitrite's" side and the metallic flick of the Rebel scout slipping back into Cth.

"What's your situation, 'Amphitrite'?" our signal asked.

"Not good," the faint answer came back. "They've got us in the power room and our accumulators aren't going to stand this load very long. That last salvo went through our screens, but our armor stopped it. But if the screens go down—"

Our batteries flared at the Rebel as he again came into sight. He didn't wait, but flicked right back into Cth without firing a shot. Pollard was on the ball.

"Brave lad, that Reb," Chase said. There was a sneer in his voice.

For the moment it was stalemate. The Reb wasn't going to come into close range with a warship of equal power to his own adding her metal to the "Amphitrite's," but he could play cat and mouse with us, drawing our fire until we had used up our torpedoes, and then come in to finish the supply ship. Or he could harass us with long range fire. Or he could go away.

It was certain he wouldn't do the last, and he'd be a fool if he did the second. "Amphitrite" could set up a mine screen that would take care of any long range stuff,—and we could dodge it. His probe was still working and he had undoubtedly seen ours crushed against our hull. If he hadn't he was blind—and that wasn't a Rebel characteristic. We could hyper, of course, but we were blind up there in Cth. His best was to keep needling us, and take the chance that we'd run out of torps.

"What's our munition?" Chase asked almost as an echo to my thought. I switched over to Pollard.

"Thirty mark sevens," Pollard said, "and a little small arms."

"One good salvo," Chase said, thoughtfully.

The Rebel flashed in and out again, and we let go a burst.

"Twenty, now," I said.

Chase didn't hear me. He was busy talking to Allyn on damage control. "You can't cut it, hey?—All right—disengage the converter on the auxiliary probe and break out that roll of duralloy cable in the stores—Pollard! don't fire over one torp at a time when that lad shows up. Load the other launchers with blanks. Make him think we're shooting. We have to keep him hopping. Now listen to me—Yes, Allyn, I mean you. Fasten that converter onto the cable and stand by. We're going to

make a probe." Chase turned to me.

"You were Exec with Royce," he said. "You should know how to fight a ship."

"What are you planning to do?" I asked.

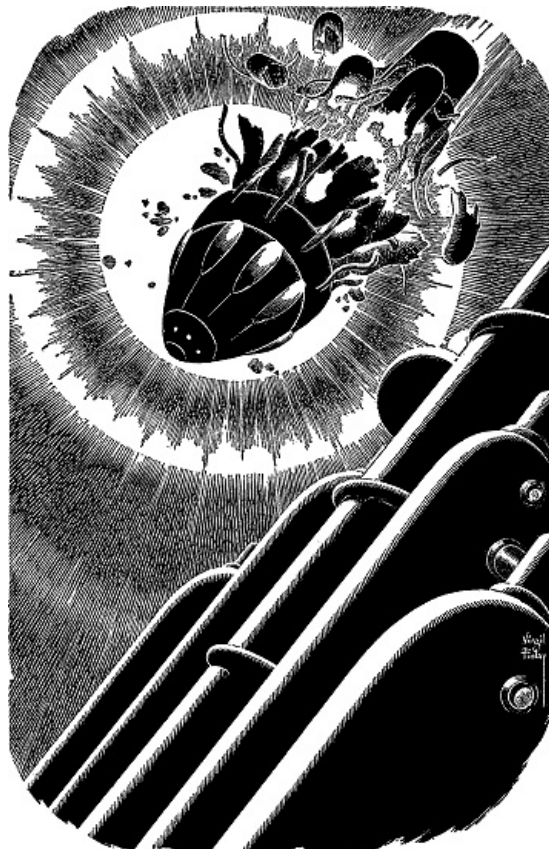
"We can't hold that Rebel off. Maybe with ammunition we could, but there's less than a salvo aboard and he has the advantage of position. We can't be sure he won't try to take us in spite of 'Amphitrite's' support and if he does finish us, 'Amphitrite's' a dead duck." The "Lachesis" quivered as the port turrets belched flame. "That leaves nineteen torpedoes," he said. "In Cth we're safe enough but we're helpless without a probe. Yet we can only get into attack position from Cth. That leaves us only one thing to do—improvise a probe."

"And how do you do that?" I asked.

"Put a man out on a line—with the converter from the auxiliary. Give him a command helmet and have him talk the ship in."

"But that's suicide!"

"No, Marsden, not suicide—just something necessary. A necessary sacrifice, like this whole damned war! I don't believe in killing men. It makes me sick. But I kill if I have to, and sacrifice if I must." His face twisted and the gray-green look came back. "There are over a thousand men on the 'Amphitrite,' and a vital cargo of munitions. One life, I think, is fair trade for a thousand, just as a few hundred thousand is fair trade for a race." The words were schoolmasterish and would have been dead wrong coming from anyone except Chase. But he gave them an air of reasonable inevitability. And for a moment I forgot that he was cold-bloodedly planning someone's death. For a moment I felt the spirit of sacrifice that made heroes out of ordinary people.



"Look, skipper," I said. "How about letting me do it?" I could have kicked myself a moment later, but the words were out before I could stop them. He had me acting noble, and that trait isn't one of my strong suits.

He smiled. "You know, Marsden," he said, "I was expecting that." His voice was oddly soft. "Thanks." Then it became dry and impersonal. "Request denied," he said. "This is my party."

I shivered inside. While I'm no coward, I didn't relish the thought of slamming around at the end of a duralloy cable stretching into a nowhere where there was no inertia. A hair too heavy a hand on the throttle in Cth would crush the man on the end to a pulp. But he shouldn't go either. It was his responsibility to command the ship.

"Who else is qualified?" Chase said answering the look on my face. "I know more about maneuver than any man aboard, and I'll be controlling the ship until the last moment. Once I order the attack I'll cut free, and you can pick me up later."

"You won't have time," I protested.

"Just in case I don't make it," Chase continued, making the understatement of the war with a perfectly straight face, "take care of the crew. They're a good bunch—just a bit too eager for the *real* Navy—but good. I've tried to make them into spacemen and they've resented me for it. I've tried to protect them and they've hated me—"

"They won't now—" I interrupted.

"I've tried to make them a unit." He went on as though I hadn't said a thing. "Maybe I've tried too hard, but I'm responsible for every life aboard this ship." He picked up his helmet. "Take command of the ship, Mr. Marsden," he said, and strode out of the room. The "Lachesis" shuddered to the recoil from the port turrets. Eighteen torpedoes left, I thought.

We lowered Chase a full hundred feet on the thin strand of duralloy. He dangled under the ship, using his converter to keep the line taut.

"You hear me, skipper?" I asked.

"Clearly—and you?"

"Four-four. Hang on now—we're going up." I eased the "Lachesis" into Cth and hung like glue to the border. "How's it going, skipper?"

"A bit rough but otherwise all right. Now steer right—easy now—aagh!"

"Skipper!"

"Okay, Marsden. You nearly pulled me in half—that's all. You did fine. We're in good position in relation to 'Amphitrite.' Now let's get our signals straight. Front is the way we're going now—base all my directions on that—got it?"

"Aye, sir."

"Good, Marsden, throttle back and hang on your converters."

I did as I was told.

"Ah—there she is—bear left a little. Hmm—she's looking for us—looks suspicious. Now she's turning toward 'Amphitrite.' Guess she figures we are gone. She's in position preparing to fire. *Now!* Drop out and fire—elevation zero, azimuth three sixty—*Move!*"

I moved. The "Lachesis" dropped like a stone. Chase was dead now. Nothing made of flesh could survive that punishment but we—we came out right on top of them, just like Chase had done to the other—except that we fired before we collided. And as with the other Rebel we gained complete surprise. Our eighteen torpedoes crashed home, her magazines exploded, and into that hell of molten and vaporized metal that had once been a Rebel scout we crashed a split second later. Two thousand miles per second relative is too fast for even an explosion to hurt much if there isn't any solid material in the way, and we passed through only the outer edges of the blast, but even so, the vaporized metal scoured our starboard plating down to the insulation. It was like a giant emery wheel had passed across our flank. The shock slammed us out of control and we went tumbling in crazy gyrations across space for several minutes before I could flip the "Lachesis" into Cth, check the speed and motion, and get back into threespace.

Chase was gone—and "Lachesis" was done. A week in drydock and she'd be as good as new, but she was no longer a fighting ship. She was a wreck. For us the battle was over—but somehow it didn't make me happy. The "Amphitrite" hung off our port bow, a tiny silver dot in the distance, and as I watched two more silver dots winked into being beside her. Haskins reported the I.F.F. readings.


"They're ours," he said. "A couple of cruisers."

"They should have been here ten minutes ago," I replied bitterly. I couldn't see very well. You can't when emotion clogs your tubes. Chase—coward?—not him. He was man clear through—a better one than I'd ever be even if I lived out my two hundred years. I wondered if the crew knew what sort of man their skipper was. I turned up the command helmet. "Men—" I began, but I didn't finish.

"We know," the blended thoughts and voices came back at me. Sure they knew! Chase had been on command circuit too. It was enough to make you cry—the mixture of pride, sadness and shame that rang through the helmet. It seemed to echo and reecho for a long time before I shut it off.

I sat there, thinking. I wasn't mad at the Rebels. I wasn't anything. All I could think was that we were paying a pretty grim price for survival. Those aliens had better show up pretty soon—and they'd better be as nasty as their reputation. There was a score—a big score—and I wanted to be there when it was added up and settled.

## THE END

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