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Flight of the Typhoon

by CLIFTON B. KRUSE

WHEN I had gained my space legs sufficiently to leave the cushioned protection of my bunk, I shuffled along the spiral tube which terminated in the glittering fascination of the control room. Of the four mariners in the place, only the monstrous quartermaster, who was known to spaceman and planet dweller alike as "Mark the Massive," seemed to take any note of my entrance.

"We'll be blasting again soon, laddie," the big fellow counseled solemnly. "Better you be sitting tight. You're some wabby as yet."

Nodding, yet saying nothing, I slid down to the bench, my eyes fixed upon the wondrous panorama of the huge semicircular perigraph just above the main panel.

Navigator Bloss was at the controls, with Captain Fritz Elber and Flight Engineer Darrow Riggs sitting at their stations just behind him. Every one was strangely tense. A soft throb of gently insistent energy seemed to permeate the ship, although all was peculiarly still at this moment.

The left panel, showing us a rear view from the ship, was half filled with the ruddy sphere of Mars, while dead ahead the fearful black of space was weirdly alive with the grayish dots of many hundred planetoids. I gasped in startled realization that we had come such a great way in so short a time. But then, of course, the *Typhoon* was not taking the usual, parabolic course from Mars to Io. We were blasting straight into the dreaded area of the asteroids. Our commission was to discover, if possible, a reasonably safe lane through the

asteroids, in order to shorten the present long and expensive course necessitated because of the millions of meteoric shoals and almost invisible rocks which hurtled through this belt with the speed of a bullet.

The Mars-Moons-of-Jupiter space route averaged ten passenger rockets and seventy freighters a year. If we could find a serviceable passage cutting through, instead of going around the asteroid area, the saving in time would be well over sixty per cent.

Mark the Massive was leaning toward me, his voice coming in a rasping whisper: "Not a mite fearful eh?"

The question stung me. The ponderous quartermaster was laughing as if he had just sprung a good joke. I was plenty nervous, right enough. This was my first trip in one of these speedy rocket cruisers of the Space Marines. But I was a cadet. I had passed the spaceman's exams honorably, had served my two-year term at the academy and was getting my required service experience, beginning with this official flight of the *Typhoon*. And to have this big ox kid me in that patronizing manner burned me up.

"Don't take it hard, Dannie my boy," the fellow continued. "We've a long, hard trek ahead of us and you'll make a spaceman of your fine, handsome self yet, laddie. Only I'm giving you this bit of thought: Any time you're perplexed, don't hesitate to come to old Mark. You won't, eh?"

Just then a call from Captain Elber drove all thought of pride and resentment from my mind.



“He’s shorted the power—and out there in space—his very body has turned into a search-light—”

“Shoal at Solar Angle 12. Stand by for flight orders!”

The peaked pressure helmet upon the navigator’s head bent forward in tense concentration. As the thunderous voice of Captain Elber called out the flight corrections, Bloss’ hands plunged upon the controls with the smoothness of a master musician playing upon an organ.

Then I saw thin-faced, blue-lipped Flight Engineer Riggs grasp the direction lever tightly.

“Fire!”

Timing his movement with the suddenly booming discharges of the ship, Riggs exerted brute force in quick, determined shifts of the lever. As if caught in the vortex of a cosmic mael-

strom, the *Typhoon* jerked, dived, twisted. Within the control cabin, sight and sound plunged into some terrible rhapsody of chaotic upheaval. Sibillant wails of energy-churning machinery were interspersed with the desperate pounding of swiftly released discharge valves. My head rocked back against the wall. The room swirled madly with that awful sense of speed.

NOW it eased. The *Typhoon* was plunging at an even velocity. We were spinning planetwise, and the dirge of hissing gas vents filled the ship with the noise of a speeding locomotive. The gravity disks were altered too. I felt suddenly heavy and strangely oppressed. The three officers relaxed now. Riggs moved the main lever experimentally as Navigator Bloss held the discharges at a steady blast. I noticed a hard, mirthless grin cross the captain's mouth.

"We're in it now," he said. "Every man aboard ship is personally responsible. Keep your heads up."

He was like that. Could whip a space ship around as easily as a wrangler would handle a spirited horse. And he expected such efficiency from every man in his command. Then he turned about suddenly. Those flint-hard, gray eyes of his were looking straight through me.

"Cadet Carter. Get over there beside Bloss. Finish this shift with him."

I flashed a salute and somehow managed to get my stumbling feet across deck. I was proud. Captain Elber was treating me like an officer. Navigator Bloss gave me a quick, tight-lipped nod and indicated that I was to keep an eye on the four obstruction finders.

Nor was this a typical errand-boy job either. I had my hands full, for at frequent intervals one or more of the obstruction gauges would flash the blue signal light. The needles would quiver, finally indicating the distance and approximate size of the solid body. We

had to judge the speed of the thing by the shifting of the distance needle.

At my calls Navigator Bloss would either jump the *Typhoon* forward or suddenly dive. But for the remainder of this watch we met with no astral body which was large or dangerous enough to give Flight Engineer Riggs any trouble. Nevertheless, I was now a part of the crew. I had a definite and worthwhile job. Then, before I realized how the time was passing, the triple chimes announced the change of shifts.

I soon discovered that off-duty hours on board a rocket scouter were little more than eating and sleeping until the chimes sounded out again. Indeed, there was no recreation room, nothing to read except a couple of texts on the mathematics of space flying. Nor were my fellow officers much inclined to talk. As a matter of fact, both Bloss and Riggs had joined Captain Elbert where the three of them worked upon the several charting sheets and route maps. The other members of the crew, Machinists Byrnes and De Grasse and the two first-class marines, Emilio Zivic and the funny little Frenchman named Loreau, were all, of course, busy at the controls.

For a while I had tried to wrangle a bit of gossip from the ship's cook, a wizened old fellow called Timothy Fleet-foot. But this soon proved dull, so it was almost inevitable that I found myself in the quartermaster's hold.

"I was watching you at the gauges this last period, Dannie," he said. "And you'll do. Old Cap Elder knows it, too."

"Thanks, Mark," I replied. "But I'm afraid he didn't pay much attention. In fact, he didn't utter a word all the while. Of course, he's got the charts to make——"

"I know; I know. But never you worry, for often did he cast those eyes of his upon you, Dannie. Trust the old red beard to see all, know all and say nothing."

SO it was that after a few hours of fitful rest in the cell which was my bunk I rejoined Navigator Bloss, all set for a full ten-hour stretch.

"Watch 'em close, Carter," the navigator mumbled sourly as I took my place. "We're in the heart of the belt right now. Anything can happen."

And this ominous warning was altogether too timely for comfort. Scarcely one hour had passed before two of the gauges began to waver as if subjected to some incalculable stress. The warning lights flashed on and off continually.

"Sand blast!" Captain Elber roared out over my shoulder even before I could call out any sort of warning myself. "Sand blast dead ahead. Riggs, cut under. Bloss, full power, upper ridge tubes—then charge it—fire!"

Scarcely had the command been uttered than the flight engineer was hauling upon the direction lever with main strength. At the same moment, Bloss discharged the upper ridge tubes so that the *Typhoon* became a veritable streak of fire as the ship dived end over end in this frantic lunge. Sirenlike, the screech of the machines rose to an ear-splitting pitch. The *Typhoon* seemed to drop through space at a crazy speed, only to be yanked again and again in the midst of deafening explosions, first in this direction, then that.

Then above this din there came a steady, nerve-cutting *rat-tat-tat*, like the beating of drums. Captain Elber groaned. Both Bloss and Riggs threw all their strength and energy into the live stuff of the instruments before them.

But still the staccato roar of grinding meteor particles pummeled the sides of the squirming, dodging, fire-spewing cruiser. I sensed rather than saw the massive bulk of Quartermaster Mark as he lunged across the deck and grasped the huge levers with Flight Engineer Riggs. Our ears throbbed with fresh

anguish now. The *Typhoon* became a screaming inferno, whirling madly, blindly, her discharges foaming from all sides as if she were some frenzied monster.

But the grinding of the meteor particles had ceased, only to be supplanted by the nerve-chilling wail of the emergency siren. Mute horror gripped every man of us in the control room. The hull had been ground through. Somewhere upon the *Typhoon* a hold had exploded, the inner pressure forcing the hull plates out at the weakened point. Choking out a curse, Captain Elber ordered Flight Engineer Riggs to take charge. Immediately the commander dashed to the underdecks in order to determine the extent of damage.

We were out of this first drive of the scourging sand blast, but by no means free of danger yet. We were still cutting and dodging like madmen.

Then, above the frightful din, the barking voice of Captain Elber roared out again. He was staggering into the room, carrying the inert bodies of Fleet-foot and Loreau, which he immediately lay upon the floor. The poor devils were horribly cut, their gaping wounds spilling into a bloody pool.

"Zivic and De Grasse—gone!" Elber panted. "I got there too late."

The announcement made me shudder. He meant that the explosion had probably blasted them to pieces. And from the ugly sight there on the floor I was not sure but what they had been more fortunate than these two. Fleet-foot especially—the poor fellow was blubbering out some kind of agonized cry.

At this moment the forward gauge became so brilliant that the tubes burned out. The remaining three were wildly erratic, too. We were charging head on into a planetoid!

Screaming in terror I leaped from the bench. I am not sure what it was that I said. For the moment my nerves were

lashed with horror. I was acting from pure instinct. But Bloss was not holding the controls. He had turned around at that instant. Only Riggs and Quartermaster Mark understood my meaning, for they were staring, wide-eyed, up at the lurid perigraph.

AS IF we were all parts of a single mechanism, the two of them hurled their bodies upon the levers, even as I was hammering at the controls. Had I stopped to reason, it is more than doubtful that I could, in my inexperience, have explained just what ought to have been done. It was a matter of pure instinct, as though my stabbing fingers were being directed by some superbrain. Yanking the T-bar release furiously, I cut away the underslung reserve storage bodies which were attached as separate units upon rocket cruisers of this type.

Then, in response to the new directional movement which Riggs and Mark had given to the *Typhoon*, I began to roll the lightened ship with all the force of the stubby side jets. Rolling and dropping, while we endured the torturing stress as best we could! Nor did we cease this move until the two at the main levers had steadied the *Typhoon*. Then, holding it to a normal afterjet discharge, we let her drive forward.

Not until this had been done was I really conscious of my part in the job. A sharp, incredulous cry from Navigator Bloss brought me to my senses. He grabbed at the controls, hands shaking and face drained of all color.

Bloss was easing the *Typhoon* into a coasting flight. The noises of the recent strain died down to a sepulchral silence, until only the groans of the two upon the floor could be heard. We were all too torn from the shock to speak. A moment before we had been face to face with death. The fact that the *Typhoon* had neither exploded nor crashed upon that charging planetoid

was still too fresh in our minds to be fully understood. Bloss had said something to the effect that that had been the only thing to do.

I heard the captain telling Mark to do what he could for Fleetfoot and Loreau. Vaguely I wondered what had happened to Byrnes. Had he been in the area of the ripping sand blast, too? Then I heard the fellow himself stagger into the control room and call out to Elber. They were conferring with Flight Engineer Riggs and from the tenor of their voices I realized that we were far from being safe.

"But the supplies are gone! When the navigator cut those undertubes loose he tossed all our reserves into space."

The remark chilled me. For the first time I understood the meaning of what I had done. The *Typhoon* was far out in the asteroid belt—with the bulk of her reserve of food and water lost. Then, after a bit, the slow, heavy voice of Flight Engineer Riggs was clearly audible.

"Right, sir. We'll dock somewhere and attempt repairs. Maybe yet—"

The *Typhoon* sprang to life. We were spiraling now. Upon the center of the perigraph the grayish-blue disk of some barren little asteroid began to grow. Bloss was making up for that moment of inattention now. Skillfully, even desperately, he was docking the crippled ship upon this uncharted rock. And doing the job with the *Typhoon* charging through space at top speed. We were encircling the tiny sphere now. Sight became impracticable. Great spirals of flame streaked the harsh blackness of the sky while a single beam of bluish light stabbed groundward, swathing the jagged terrain as Bloss measured our gradual descent to the surface.

It was a test of skill. A triumph of human mechanics. The *Typhoon* swept low, dropped to within inches of a narrow stretch of plateau. Then, suddenly,

she seemed to explode in a final splurge of pyrotechnic glory. The pulsations of her motors ceased. The flames died out. Silent and motionless, the little rocket cruiser rested. Navigator Bloss had docked her, crippled as she was, with scarcely a noticeable jar.

IT WAS a matter of eight or ten hours later—although the mere measurements of time had but one significance for us now—that I had the temerity to face Captain Elber. With his straggling red mustache spearing across each side of the thick, square jaw, and the peaked pressure helmet glistening in the blue-white light, he looked like some ancient viking warrior. We had welded the double plate upon both primary and secondary hulls of the ship. Another two hours, or three at most, would be consumed while Riggs and Byrnes were making certain adjustments in the side jets. Our food had been entirely destroyed by the sand blast, in addition to the loss when I had dropped the two storage tubes in that wild attempt to prevent the collision.

"With your permission, sir," I asked, "I should like to join the quartermaster. He thinks that if we explore around a bit——"

Quite gruffly the commander interrupted with: "Don't tell me that overstuffed walrus thinks anything could grow on one of these infernal rocks?"

At this moment Mark the Massive chanced to waddle into the room, whereupon he sounded off without so much as a respectful salute in approaching the captain.

"My dear Elber," the big fellow murmured, "you are totally lacking in the instincts of a gentleman. As for that, there's not a human aboard who knows better than I of the improvident ways of these places. Food indeed will we not find."

"Mark, if you weren't such a damned pig."

"I?" Mark looked positively hurt. "You do me wrong. I was but going forth to bury the dead."

"To bury the—what!" Captain Elber stood up, glaring first at the quartermaster and then at me.

"The venerable Fleetfoot," Mark replied, "has ceased to rant against the bitterness of our ways, captain. He died only an hour ago."

So it was that the monstrous quartermaster and the ship's cadet hauled the battered little body of poor old Fleetfoot out upon the forsaken plain. We carried him a hundred yards or so to where was a pile of loose shale. For a moment Mark the Massive intoned some mumbled word above the corpse and then we set about covering the remains with the shale.

Crude and heartless it seems, and yet it was done in all kindness. Back in the *Typhoon* every man was fighting against time in order to rearrange the firing jets to obtain a speed sufficient to carry us on to Io before we would starve to death. In a way, Fleetfoot's burial was heroic. He had died in line of duty and his body rested in honor upon this flying tomb.

Through the radiophone of our space suits I could hear Mark the Massive chanting some harum-scarum ballad of the spaceways. This he stopped long enough to instruct me to search for a broad flat stone of suitable hardness. But for what it might need be suited I could not even guess. However, after a bit of searching about in the awful glare of Mars light, which was accentuated by the absolute black of the shadows, we did select two slabs of granite-like material. On our way back to the ship I finally nerved myself to present my troublesome problem to the fellow.

"It's my fault, isn't it, Mark? I mean, don't you think that Captain Elbert and the others feel that I—I blundered when I jumped ahead of Navigator Bloss? About those storage tubes——"

"Enough of that, Dannie." And the

huge fellow threw one immense arm across my shoulders. "Did I not myself say that you had the makings of a spaceman? You saved the *Typhoon*, Dannie. It was the finest, bravest stunt—but whist, none of that talk, for the captain is strong against soft words."

"But he didn't say a word," I argued. "Neither did Bloss."

"Sure they didn't. But no more worry. When back to Mars again you'll find a neat citation attached to the proud name of Cadet Dannie Carter. But here we are—give me both stones; you manage the ports."

WE HAD GONE twenty hours without food when Captain Elber, grim-faced and hard-eyed, sounded the gong for the flight. There were six of us huddled in the crowded control room; the seventh, Spaceman Loreau, having been placed in his bunk cell to live or die according to the strength of his body. The air lines heading to the lower decks had been twisted beyond use, so it was that for the ten days estimated as necessary for reaching Io we would all be confined to the control room or the spiral tube which led to the sleeping cells.

The take-off from the planetoid was grandly made. And it was cheering to feel the fierce drive of the rocket cruiser as she hurled herself off into the perilous black. Captain Elbert, Bloss and Machinist Byrnes took off over the first of the four-hour shifts. Due to the fearful task ahead of us—of taking the *Typhoon* the rest of the way to Io on empty stomachs—Captain Elber had decided that four hours' work and four hours' rest was as much as could be expected of even the best of us.

I was all set to follow the example of Darrow Riggs and try to get my four-hour sleep when Quartermaster Mark crooked his finger at me. I was to don a space suit and go to the now airless lower decks and secure a chest of space suits. The suits were in the engine

room, Mark informed me, and were spanking new.

By the time I had returned I was beginning to feel the first bad effects of hunger. Strange aches and pains tormented my insides. I felt feverish and my head seemed to have swelled. But the thought of the many long hours yet to be endured was the cruelest torture. I felt myself burn with futile anger, and my eyes blurred with tears until I could no longer see the colorless, strained faces of my companions.

"Steady, Dannie my lad," Mark's voice buzzed in my ear. "Here—use this knife."

Something to do was a salvation. I must keep busy. So it was that I worked with frenzied energy in cutting out the long, narrow strips of leather from the suit. These were placed upon the largest of the stones and then with two smaller ones we pounded these strips until they were frayed, flattened strands. Frequently we applied drops of water, but did so in a miserly fashion. Fully half of the first watch had passed before the quartermaster seemed at all satisfied. Next he secured a huge kettle, and dumping the mashed strips of leather into the pot he filled it with water. This he placed upon the improvised electric stove which he had made by removing the boxing from a certain section of power cables.

It was then that Captain Elber took note of our queer activities. He questioned Mark as to our purpose. And when the incredible fellow assured us solemnly that within a few hours we should eat, the tension broke. We all laughed, crazily, drunkenly. Oh, it was good to laugh. We had been so long under a terrible strain, that it was a wonder we were not all quite mad.

"An old trick of the buccaneers," Mark the Massive explained. "And there is leather enough for all of us—if only our water holds out."

Six periods of work, and one day was

gone. Slowly, tortuously, the one day stretched to two. And still we flew the *Typhoon*. We had ceased to become men. Ceased to speak save in grunted monosyllables. Our fevered brains were able to concentrate only upon the mechanical details of keeping the *Typhoon* charging through space.

Occasionally a chance meteor or the horror of a sand blast would force us to think. Yet even then it seemed that our hands performed maneuvers with the controls without conscious volition. And eat the tasteless rubbery stuff from the stinking pot we did; although not infrequently our stomachs would seem to revolt against it.

Only Mark the Massive remained a man, despite the fact that his ponderous torso seemed visibly to shrink as the awful hours went by. Now and again I would rouse up from a nightmarish doze only to hear his ridiculous voice bellowing a song. Nor did he seem concerned with what he sang, chanting whatever chanced to come into his head, be it an operatic aria or some obscene ditty such as one hears chiefly sung by the common run of spacemen when on their regular sprees in the ports from Mercury to Pluto.

IT WAS WELL into the mid part of the ninth day when the cracked voice of Captain Elber sounded the cry of: "Clear flight—blast for the crest."

It was a ghostly cheer we gave, but nevertheless, sincere. The captain was calling for one more spurt and then the *Typhoon* would have reached a point at which the gravity of Io would pull us to her moon. From there on it would be only a matter of steady braking and gradually easing the speeding ship into a spiral descent. Already we could imagine the cutting shriek of wind as the *Typhoon* would encircle the little globe, slowly settling groundward.

Like one in a dream I staggered across the room, nearly sprawling upon

Navigator Bloss. Tears streamed down the fellow's lean, leatherish face, and his hands shook as they pressed upon the controls. For the moment I forgot the eternal gnawing of my stomach and the burning ache in my head. I was proud of the *Typhoon* and her valiant crew, proud that I was one of them. We had made a grand run. Even including our stop upon the barren planetoid we would make a record trip from Mars to Io.

Perhaps Bloss was overanxious. More likely the strain and horror had clouded his judgment. The fellow was shooting a full flow of nitroline into the white-hot drivers, forcing the ship beyond its capacity to withstand the strain.

The sudden explosion was like facing the dazzling glow of the Sun. I felt myself hurled bodily across the room. And so terrible had been the sound that for several minutes I was completely deafened. The *Typhoon* seemed a dead thing. Soundless, motionless, and without a spark of light. As soon as my ears could receive sound again I heard the moans of the others. Where were we? What had happened? Then I heard the shrill cries of Bloss, shrieking out that he was dying. But I was too sickened and weak at the moment to get to my feet.

After a while I saw the sharp beam of a flash spearing about the room. Then it fell upon me. Blinking against the glare, I attempted to get up when a powerful arm reached down and pulled at my arm. It was Quartermaster Mark.

"The drivers blew up—engines wrecked!" I was babbling insanely.

The hoarse voice of Captain Elber jarred me to clear-headedness.

"Got to do something. Here—who's this? Byrnes? Get up, man! Get alive! Where's Riggs? Bloss?"

"They're both done in." Mark the Massive kept shooting his flash here and there. "Just four of us up, captain. You and Byrnes and Dannie and me.

But the devil's to pay. Do you know we're moving?"

"Moving? What the hell——"

"We're falling, captain."

"Then we passed the crest!"

"No, sir. It's not toward Io. Jupiter herself has got us in her clutches."

"Lord help us! We're done for. The crash'll flatten us."

"Can't we budge a single tube?"

"Hell, no—here, bring that damned light over this way, Mark. Look, it's worse than dead—we've opened up the rear end of the ship. Do you get it men? All that's left of the *Typhoon* is the blasted control room."

Byrnes was laughing hysterically. "Coffin!" the fellow was shouting.

"She's a blooming coffin, that's what!"

"Shut up! I said keep your heads," Captain Elber roared out. "There's a chance yet. If we could get a signal to the base on Io."

Mark cut in sharply: "You mean they could grapple us with a freighter before we hit Jupiter?"

"That's it. We've got ten or fifteen hours—maybe more. Get out the reserve gravity cells. There's power enough there."

"I thought of that—but how are we going to flash?"

"Get them out! You, Byrnes—and Carter—lend a hand—and while you rig them to the flasher I'll try to get the thing in shape."

We toiled like madmen. Ripped up the flooring, re-aligned cables. And as we worked it was Mark the Massive's calm voice that steadied us. Less than an hour later we had the connection made. The ship's motors were totally wrecked. This was our only chance.

Then came the hideous realization that the flasher, the ship's signal beam, was destroyed. We were lost. Our last hope was gone. I can still hear old Captain Elber standing there cursing in the dark. It was weird. Then, suddenly, he belated out: "Where's Mark? Where's

that damn flashlight of his? I've got to do something!"

Then we saw the glow in the perigraph. The crazed quartermaster had climbed to the outer hull of what was left of the *Typhoon*.

"He's signaling with that damned flashlight. Trying to signal clear to Io!" Byrnes screamed. "The loon—why it's—it's—oh——"

Both the captain and I joined in this last gasp of amazement. For suddenly, upon the nose of the slowly spinning *Typhoon*, the massive figure of the huge quartermaster had suddenly become incandescent.

"He's shorted the power," Byrnes murmured. "And out there in space he—so help me, his very body has turned into a searchlight!"

For a full thirty minutes the body of Mark the Massive gleamed across space, a grotesque, ghostly thing of dazzling light which slowly faded as the power of the *Typhoon's* gravity reserves burned out. Yet not in vain. For stanching what revulsion he might have felt, Captain Elber forced himself to the signal dials where he flashed a code call to Marine Observatory, Io.

OF THE TEN who had started upon that terrible journey but four of us reported to the governor of Io: Captain Fritz Elber, Machinist Byrnes, Flight Engineer Riggs and myself. Of course, there were praise and honors and all that, but strangely they don't mean much. Captain Elber saw that a citation was written into the records for Cadet Dan Carter. I'm proud of it, but not as I'd have been before this trip upon the *Typhoon*. I understand now why there is so little of boasting among real spacemen. And over and over again I seem to hear the voice of old Mark the Massive saying: "You'll make a spaceman of your fine, handsome self yet, laddie."

Now, I'm really proud of that!