

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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A Complete Short Novel



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By LEIGH BRACKETT

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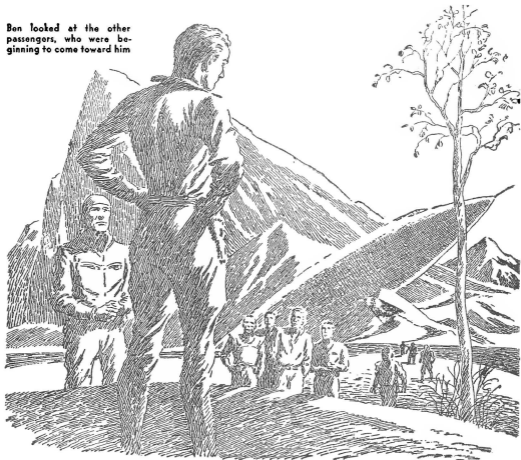
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Ben looked at the other passengers, who were beginning to come toward him



Chore for a Spaceman

By WALT SHELDON

*Harlow hated himself for being only a Space Steward,
but when disaster struck—he alone knew the answers!*

THEY came through hatch looking bored, as they always did, and once again Ben Harlow dreaded facing them. They'd seen it all out there in Interplan. They had it.

And now he had to make his silly speech—to them.

Captain Mace pushed by, headed for Control. He clapped Ben's shoulders. He was hulking, red-headed and mostly grin and muscle. "Fix 'm up good, Ben. Dies aboard this trip."

"Dies?"

"Damned Interesting Characters."

The Captain and his grin disappeared forward.

Ben laughed but his heart wasn't in it. He turned to the passengers and cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, you are now guests of Military Space Transport. Our destination is Earth and during the time we are headed there . . ."

The stilted words, the wooden words. He'd said them so many times they cloyed his ears now. Ben Harlow—Space Steward, second class—the man who had never seen the swirling poisonous clouds of Venus or the unholy glow of Saturnian rings outside the ports. Never the dark side of the Moon. Just a bare spaceport on Mars, and the New Mexico landing area on Earth.

This was his life while Earth and Jupiter warred and others filled themselves with glory.

" . . . We hope, of course, there'll be no emergencies. As far as we know the Mars-inferior area is clear of Jovian craft. But in case anything does happen . . ."

The instructions about the liferoids now. Move quickly, stay calm. He was telling them—the men who'd seen the real thing. *Them.*

There was one over there skirting space madness—eyes too big for his face and he kept swallowing his Adam's apple over and over again. Spaceman first class Eddington—Ben recalled his name from the Form 6. Then the man from Telenews, leaning forward, staring at nothing and dangling his camera between his knees, the pale, grey little man who had maybe seen too much. Beyond him two space guards—rugged flat-staring weary bulls of men—with their prisoner.

BEN'S gaze stopped on the prisoner. It was the first Jovian he had ever seen at close range. In the artificial gravity which matched Earth's he had made himself tall and elongated. He had worked his protoplasmic form into the shape of an Earthman. They were the Jovians—the shameless imitators. The color stripes on this one marked him as one of their space pilots.

" . . . so if you have any questions don't hesitate to ask them. Military Space Transport will try to make your trip to Earth as quick and comfortable as possible."

The whirring began as the blast-off energy was generated. Ben went down the line, checking the straps of the acceleration cradles. The nose of the ship rose slowly into launching position and when the ship's gravity was switched on the sensation of tilting disappeared.

Ben came to the Jovian, and began to tighten his straps. He looked up and saw a grin cross the mushy face. The prisoner kept himself in Earthman's shape by strict order—and by threat of one of the guards' acid guns.

Only acid from one of the squat hard spiky Jovian plants could hurt a Jovian—that or something violent like an explosion. Bullets or rays passed through their protoplasm harmlessly. Ben looked away from the Jovian's grin. He tried not to shudder.

"Just relax when the acceleration warning bell rings," he muttered. His litany. Same trips, same kinds of faces, same words all the time. Combat men—going back. Only the Jovian made this run a little different.

He stole another glance upward. The Jovian was still grinning at him. This time he did shudder. You had to shudder, just thinking about them. Jovians had no bones, no innards. They were just blobs of stuff. Within the tremendous gravity of their own planet they spread themselves flat on the surface or formed hemispheres.

They could take any form they wished within several hours. They could make clever pseudodactyls for fingers and then duplicate almost anything made in the system. They'd copied Earth's spaceships, Earth's weapons—and now Earth's old talent for war.

The Jovian's pseudo-voice came, sleazy and whispering, to Ben's ears. He used the manner and jargon of an Earthman space pilot. "Kid, you got no idea what a hot space-rock this little boy is. Me, I've pfted more Earth guys than Beethoven has notes."

Ben didn't answer and didn't look up. The Jovian laughed. "You squares won't be holding Xyl very long."

Ben heard one of the beefy guards growl, "Shut up, Xyl."

Then the warning note sounded and Ben finished his checkup quickly. He hustled forward to the crew compartment and his own acceleration chamber. He ticked on the interviz and saw Captain Mace's battered mug grinning at him.

He said, "All clear back there, sir."

"Hang on, kiddo," said Mace. Then his image vanished.

Mace had had it, too. He'd been in battle-hulls before the Space Surgeon sent him to transports. He had medals he never wore—a spacebag full.

Ben relaxed in the floating web of straps and springs. The starting bell rang hollowly. The usual terrible roar cut into the silence. It became louder and louder until Ben thought—as he always did—that he wouldn't be able to stand it any longer. Then it drifted away.

He felt himself pressed into the cradle and felt the characteristic stomach tug. His head swam. He knew that the ship was already far into space. . . .

Moments later his head cleared again and the cradle swung back to center. He waited quietly until he heard the clear bell, then extricated himself and went through the door to the waist. He glanced at the passengers, and all were more or less normal.

The little, grey Telenews man was already lighting a cigarette. The two space guards were stretching themselves and Xyl was staring at his straps, wondering how to undo them with his pseudodactyls and probably wishing he could change form instantaneously to get out of them. Most of the others were stirring in one way or another. A bridge game was being started toward the rear.

WAIT—Eddington the gaunt Spaceman 1/c was still strapped down. Ben frowned and started toward him. Then he saw that he was perfectly conscious. His eyes were moving. He

was staring at the Jovian prisoner. Unmistakable slow burning hate was in his eyes.

Ben went to him. "Feeling all right, fella?"

The starved eyes swung slowly until they fastened on Ben's. Ben felt worse in moments like this when combat men looked at him and studied him. He knew what they saw—a medium-sized guy in a blue spaceman's uniform with the vanes of rocket personnel on his chest.

Grey eyes, sandy hair, faintly freckled face. But none of that hardness around the jaw—none of those space wrinkles near the eyes. It was pretty clear what he really was—a spacegoing headwaiter. That was about the size of it.

And this gaunt stringy-cheeked Eddington said to him, "Look, buddy, go take a walk for yourself. I'm busy." Then he resumed staring at the Jovian.

"You don't like him, eh?" said Ben.

Eddington spoke softly. "I hate 'em. I hate all of 'em. Like you could never understand. I did two Earth years in one of their prisons. Their slimy arms poking all over me, cutting me open sometimes and—and—" He swallowed his larynx. He looked at Ben again. "Go on, beat it, will ya?"

Ben shrugged and turned, went forward again.

It was very puzzling for a man to know how he should feel. He knew about the Jovians—second hand, of course—and he shuddered like everybody else when he heard about the things they did to prisoners. But was it cruelty? They had no conception of pain—no real emotions outside of dim hate and a kind of heavy humor. The only thing they feared was death—and they were never quite articulate enough to explain just exactly why they feared that.

The thing was complicated enough for a philosopher, let alone a two-bit space steward.

He went into Control and saw Captain Mace and the co-pilot, Lieutenant Washam, at the panel. He stepped to the galley to make coffee. He couldn't

get Eddington off his mind. The gaunt veteran was up to something, something troublesome, only Ben didn't know exactly what to do about it.

He glanced through the plastibubble and looked at all the blackness of space, the pinpoints of stars. Worlds to conquer—the Jovian war had already brought about the development of photo-corpussular power, and there were whispers that Space Force ships had made it beyond Pluto. A whole Universe to be met and grappled with—

And here stood Ben Harlow, making coffee. He shook his head bitterly.

"Ben," Captain Mace called abruptly. "You got a minute?"

"Yes, sir?" Ben looked up from the hot plate. Mace was beckoning. He went over to the panel as Lieutenant Washam, who was young and blond and very poised and correct, took over the controls.

Mace swiveled around in his chair. He was still grinning but his eyes were serious. "Ben, I don't want you to worry, or anything like that—but you'd better know that a Viz came in from patrol headquarters a few minutes ago. So you can be ready to take care of the passengers, just in case."

"What was the Viz about, Captain?"

Mace jerked his thumb at space in general. "Couple of Jovian fighters slipped in through Mars-inferior. That's the report, anyway. The teledars are fingering for 'em now."

Ben smiled dryly. "Be just my luck never even to get a look at a Jovian fighter."

"You'd like to see a little action, huh?" Mace's grin almost disappeared and he looked at Ben very steadily. "It's no fun, Ben. Space-war is no fun at all."

"I know that," Ben said. "I can figure about how bad it is. Just the same—"

"Don't ever look for it," Mace said earnestly. "Don't ever."

Ben didn't answer. He just looked back. Mace met his stare for a moment or so, then swung around to the controls again. Ben went back to the galleys.

The transport roared through space.

Its rockets flamed and the red disc of Mars behind it became a spot. Earth and Mars were degrees out of conjunction now and the ship cross-orbited. The bright, golden blob of the sun was to the left and had the usual illusory look of moving in a trajectory across the heavens.

After awhile Ben made supper, filled the first tray and pushed back into the passenger compartment with it. The group looked quiet enough, content enough. The four bridge players still sat cross-legged in the after portion. Several viewed minifilms in their laps. The Telenews man wrote silently on a small steno-machine. The beefy guards were smoking. Xyl, the Jovian prisoner, had his leg forms drawn up between his arms and sat with the guards, grinning at everybody and everything.

Eddington was on the edge of his bunk—on the very edge. He was glaring across the aisle at the Jovian. He moved only his fingers, resting them along the lock of his space-bag and drumming them steadily.

Ben frowned at him for a moment, then began to pass out the food. A dish and a knife and a fork to each man. No tasteless concentrates or synthetics on transport ships—this was a cushy job, a soft job. Out there in Interplan right now gaunt raw-nerved men were swearing because they had to live on pills.

Ben glanced back at Eddington every once in awhile. It was an instinct as much as anything that told Ben something wasn't quite right—maybe it was just long subconscious understanding of human behavior in these surroundings. Anyway he felt compelled to do this.

THAT was how it happened that he saw Eddington open his space bag, lean forward, crouch and reach into it with his eyes still on the Jovian across the aisle.

Ben moved fast. He whirled, knocking his supper tray on a stanchion and spilling it all over a non-rated Colonel with a clipped white mustache. He sprang down the aisle and across it. He

still didn't know exactly what Eddington was up to—he didn't have to know exactly. The look in the man's smoking eyes was enough.

He reached Eddington at about the time Eddington reached the Jovian. The thin spaceman had moved with hungry animal speed—too fast for the big space guards. They'd been staring out the ports, paying little attention, keyed only to move if the prisoner tried something funny. They weren't expecting trouble from across the aisle, from one of their own guys.

Ben slammed into Eddington's shoulder and knocked him aside. He remembered that in that moment a kind of insane laugh came from the Jovian.

Eddington found his balance again and turned and faced Ben. His eyes were wider. The lids had peeled back showing the dead-white cornea around the dark pupils. It seemed that his face was nothing but eyes.

He said to Ben, "Why, you lousy little wear-line punk!"

Ben looked at him quietly, looked at the thing in his hand and then back into his eyes again and said, "Take it easy, Eddington."

One of the space guards started to get up.

Ben said, "I'll handle it."

The space guard grunted and sat down again.

"One of these chicken-livered guys, huh?" Eddington said to Ben. "Love the Jovians. Love everybody. National be-kind-to-the-enemy week. Yeah, I know."

"Eddington, you'd better sit down and take it easy," said Ben.

Eddington took a step forward. He dropped the thing in his hand, and it clattered on the floor. He said, "I know your kind, brother."

"Careful, Eddington," said Ben.

Eddington came at him, swinging. He left came first in a wide loop and Ben stepped inside of it. Ben wasn't much of a boxer. He didn't like fighting either. It choked him up inside and usually made him feel sick afterward.

But he lashed out just the same. He had to. It was his job. This thing hap-

pening right here, right now, was just an extension of his job. He felt his fist slam into Eddington's midsection. He felt the force of the blow all the way up to his elbow.

Eddington whooshed with pain but his right was already on its way, following the left-handed swing Ben had caught on his shoulder. The right struck Ben's cheek. Ben heard a sound—*clok!*—in his own head and for just an instant his vision blurred. But it was surprising how little actual pain there was to the blow. Maybe later it would hurt. Right now it seemed only annoying.

Meanwhile Eddington, face twisted with agony, was falling back from the punch to his middle. Ben swung an uppercut at the man's sharp chin. It missed. Eddington saw him off balance and jabbed at his face. The jab smashed Ben's lips against his teeth and his teeth cut the lips on the inside. But it didn't blur things as the last one had. That midsection punch had taken something out of Eddington.

Ben braced himself and cocked his right fist as a man cocks a pistol for firing. He fired the fist at Eddington.

He knew the instant it landed that it would do the trick. There was that kind of a solid final sound to it. And the pain in his knuckles and up along his forearm was excruciating.

Eddington, quietly and without a twitch or gesture, fell flat on his face.

BEN stared at his skinned knuckles.

He held his right fist in his left hand and stood there for a moment, breathing hard. Then he looked around. The other passengers were still silent. They merely sat and stared at what had happened. No exclamations, no congratulations, no approval or disapproval, not even a whispered comment. Not much of a fight to them, Ben supposed. They had seen worse, much worse.

He heard the deep voice of one of the space guards. Speaking to the prisoner. "Sit down, you."

He turned and looked and saw that Xyl had tried to get up. Xyl was staring at Ben. For just a passing instant it

seemed to Ben that there was a kind of gratitude in the Jovian's eyes. But that was impossible, he guessed. According to all the dope he'd ever heard Jovians didn't feel things like gratitude.

Ben lifted and then dropped his shoulders in something akin to a shrug. He looked down and saw that Eddington was stirring, moaning. He stepped past Eddington, and retrieved the thing he'd dropped. Then he moved forward again and stood with his legs spread and waited for consciousness to come back to the gaunt spaceman.

Eddington finally made it to his hands and knees. He rested like that with his face toward the floor. He shook his head and spat several times. Then he looked up and glared at Ben.

Ben said, "Don't do it again, Eddington—do you hear me? Don't do it again?"

Eddington blinked and didn't answer. Ben turned to go forward. He'd need methiolate for those knuckle scratches and maybe Eddington could use some of the stuff in the first-aid kit, too.

He might behave after this or he might not—he was on the edge of a kind of madness, no question about that. The others, the guards especially, would keep a close eye on him now. But Ben still worried about it. It was his baby, this situation, and he worried about it.

He found the first-aid kit in the racks and tucked away the little souvenir he'd taken from Eddington. He turned and came back into the waist again. Eddington was back in his place. He was rubbing his jaw and looking rueful.

Ben got halfway down the aisle—

The space ship lurched suddenly and he was slammed to the left. When it lurched like that, too quickly for its artificial gravity to follow, something was wrong—very wrong. His shoulder and arm hit the bulkhead. The protruding knob of something stabbed him viciously. Hot pain went the length of his arm. And through it all he heard the sound of an explosion, of tearing metal. . . .

Ben acted from his spine, not his brain. He didn't stop to wonder exactly what had happened—in a broad way

that was clear. This was an attack of some kind. The ship had been struck. He heard the air whoosh through the hole in the hull, disappear forever into space, and he began to feel the terrible cold.

He caught the screeching sound of the oxy-renewer forward, near the control deck. That would send enough atmosphere through the compartment to keep a man conscious a few seconds. The emergency heaters were already glowing, cutting into the dark cold of space. But they wouldn't last forever either.

Ben turned and staggered again toward the forward part of the ship. The tremendous air pressure of the atmosphere from the oxy-renewer tried to shove him back. He squinted to protect his eyes from it and kept his stare on the plate-mesh switch, which was on the emergency panel just beside the control deck door.

Once he reached that switch they'd be safe—for a while, anyway. The hull of the ship was built in three layers and the middle layer consisted of a series of magnetic plates which moved automatically, when the switch was thrown to any aperture in the hull.

"Got to make it, got to make it!" he kept telling himself desperately, hypnotically. Sudden weariness bogged his feet, weakened his knees. It was getting colder. Things swam in his vision.

The ship was rocking and swerving in space. He could tell that by the way the artificial gravity lagged each change of direction—giving him a weird, floating, dreamlike sensation. Once lurching in a complete circle, he was able to glimpse the other passengers.

Two of the bridge players near the rear were missing—they'd been blown through the hole probably. Now, frozen to the hardness of metal, they'd just keep traveling in space in their original direction. Forever, probably. Most of the others had been thrown about considerably. One of the big space guards was flat on his face, wedged between two piles of baggage.

The Telenews man had a twisted

blood-soaked leg and sat there, staring at it stupidly. The Jovian prisoner, Xyl, was experiencing the only terror he knew—the fear of death. He was trying to flatten himself against the bulkhead.

Ben swung around again, nearly lost balance, recovered, then gave himself one tremendous push forward. He reached the panel. His hand closed on the mesh switch—he lost consciousness just as he closed it.

HE couldn't have been out long. He was on his knees and his face was slumped against the bulkhead between the waist and control deck when he opened his eyes. He got up unsteadily. The air was tighter. The wailing of the oxy-renewer had stopped.

He turned. He put his shoulder blades and palms to the bulkhead. He stood there, panting, and his eyes took everything in. The passengers were milling about. Some were just recovering from anoxia. A few were muttering. Several were moaning. They were very confused.

"All right, back to your seats everybody," Ben said.

They stared at him vaguely.

"I said back to your seats!"

He was a little startled at the firmness of his own voice. He was even more startled at how quickly they moved to obey.

They went back to their seats and then they sat there, staring at him. He pointed to the guard on the floor and to the Telenews man. "See what you can do. I'll be back in a second with plasma."

He stepped into Control. He stepped once more, forward—and then he stopped short. His eyebrows rose and without willing it he stepped back again.

Control was a shambles. Something—probably a nuclear shell—had come through the hull and exploded. Both Captain Mace and Lieutenant Washam were slumped over the panel. Mace's red head was twisted at an angle no living head could possibly assume. The grin was still on it.

Mace's hand rested on the panel, where it had fallen, on the mesh-switch.

That explained why there was air and warmth in the Control room. Beside Mace Lieutenant Washam was slumped back in his seat and his cropped blond head was split down the middle as though by an axe.

Ben felt sickness at his palate. He swallowed, and tried not to think about it.

He grabbed plasma from the racks and stumbled back into the passenger compartment. It seemed to him that he was now in more of a daze than he had been just before losing consciousness.

In the waist he took a deep breath and got to work. Some of the others were trying to move the guard who lay face down on the deck. He stopped that. He pushed them away and examined the man quickly and thoroughly.

He set up a plasma bottle, hung it on someone's outstretched hand, inserted the needle. Then he moved quickly to the Telenews man. More plasma—and plenty of narcophine, too.

Funny, Ben thought, most of these combat boys knew first aid—knew it better than he did. Yet they'd been undecided—even a little stupid about the whole thing. Maybe it was the shock—maybe the suddenness of everything. Well, he couldn't worry about that, now. He had something to tell them. This was going to be the toughest little speech of all.

He went forward and stood by the door to Control, and said, "May I have your attention, please."

He flushed slightly as they all turned blank stares upon him. What a fool thing—what a stuffy thing to say! Anybody worth his salt, any real leader, would have used other words, another tone of voice. Ben didn't know just what words or what tone—but he knew that he had been wrong.

Well, he had their attention.

He cleared his throat. He looked around. He was too embroiled within his own thoughts, his own doubts, really to see anything. He moistened his lips. "There's been trouble in Control. Both of our pilots have been hit. They're dead."

Complete silence, still the blank stares.

Ben said, "Uh—" and then he couldn't think of anything else to say. Stoppage. He swallowed hard.

He said, "We seem to be all right for the time being. An attacking spaceship can't possibly turn back for another pass before a matter of hours." Sure, he was telling *them*. He'd never seen an attacking spaceship, not even the one that had just attacked. *They* had. *They'd* seen it all.

He kept talking with a kind of insane determination. "The problem is to land—somewhere, if we can't make the Earth spaceport. We've got to get in somehow."

Another long silence and then a scarred construction sergeant said in a croaking voice: "Okay. What do we do?"

The meaning of it didn't hit Ben right away. The fact that one of the combat men had asked *him* what to do. Come to think of it it had sounded almost like sarcasm. Maybe, maybe not—Ben wasn't sure.

He asked, "Anybody here know how to land a spaceship?"

They took their blank stares away from his this time and turned them upon each other. Several shook their heads. Two nuclear gunners faced each other and shrugged.

Ben's eyes swung across the lot of them—and then landed on Xyl, the Jovian.

They stopped.

"You."

Ben pointed at him

Xyl had resumed man-shape again. Either he had quieted down by himself or the remaining guard had threatened him with an acid gun. He sat far back in the seat. He turned his expressionless eyes on Ben and his mushy voice, cast incongruously in a breezy space pilot's idiom, sounded.

"What's up? Why give me the big finger and the boiled eye, kid?"

"You're a space pilot," Ben said. "You can get us on course. And you can land this thing."

XYL threw back the blob of his head and laughed. When he brought his head down again, he had stopped laughing. His face was flaccid. "Do you think I'd get *you* stupid jerks out of a hole? When did I take out citizenship papers for planet number three? Don't be silly."

"Okay," said Ben. "Suit yourself. Our rations will last maybe a week. You Jovians need food like anybody else. But even if we had food we're off course and the chances are maybe a million to one we'll hit Earth or any other planet. We're in a fair way to be space derelicts. You know that, don't you?"

Xyl thought it over. He gave no sign of thinking, such as cocking his head or frowning or squinting. But he was silent, clearly thinking it over. He looked up finally. He rose. The guard rose with him.

He said to Ben, "Come on kid, let's take a look at the driver's office."

There was the messy business first of moving the bodies of Mace and Washam. Ben called others in to help. He noticed that they sprang pretty quickly when he called them—even the bird Colonel with the clipped white mustache. He noticed that when they had finished doing something they looked to him for further instructions.

Xyl worked at the navigation table until he found the course. He said curtly, "Okay," out of the side of his mouth, then poured himself into the seat and began to manipulate the instruments. Ben and the guard stood behind him. Once he turned and grinned and then he laughed in a crazy way—more to himself than to the others.

The guard was a beefy man with bluish jowls and shortcropped black hair. His voice was a strident bass. He turned to Ben and said, "I don't like it. I don't like it one damn bit."

"Me, either," Ben said. He scratched his cheek. He shifted his stance. Seemed to him the backs of his knees prickled. He watched and waited.

Hard to tell what was happening. The big burning eye of the sun was still to the left, so they seemed to be on course.

Xyl, controlling, merely sat most of the time and watched dials and indicators. Once in awhile he pushed a button, moved a scale. He could be taking them out into eternal nothing for all Ben knew. He dropped that suspicion only when he saw the bright oval of Earth begin to grow in the front plates.

Ben said to the guard, "He's on course."

The guard said, "Yeah."

And Ben knew by the tone of the guard's voice that they were both thinking the same thing. Xyl might be going to Earth, all right, but he might just deliberately forget to decelerate. He might hang the nose on a course to Earth's big fat bosom—and just keep going. That might appeal to his sense of humor.

Ben said, "There's nothing we can do about it. We've got to take the chance he'll bring us in. We've got to stand here and wait."

The guard said, "Yeah."

Both shifted their feet again.

They neared Earth. They could see the continents and the oceans and the night shadow line moving against the planet's rotation. It was in the Atlantic. The telesight showed, enlarged, their own target—the state of New Mexico in the North American continent where the spaceport lay.

"So far so good," said Ben.

The guard merely nodded this time. Once Xyl turned his face to Ben. That insane grin was still on it. He looked steadily and impudently at Ben for a moment, then said, "How come you saved my life from that combat-looney character, boy?"

If Ben had been able to find the words to explain it he probably wouldn't have liked the sound of them anyway. For an answer he shrugged.

Xyl said, "I see," and turned back to the controls.

The image of Earth filled the front plates before Xyl readied for his orbit turn. Again he looked at the other two. His wise-cracking manner was gone now. His dead pan was still there.

"In the cradles," he said. He reached for the lever that would tilt his own con-

trol seat into a vertical, spring-supported affair. He pressed the warning bell for the passengers.

Ben and the guard took two of the cradles in the crew quarters. They could watch Xyl from there. They could see him manipulate the controls like an organist at a six part fugue. They could hear him swear—they could see the times when he was puzzled and unsure.

Ben called across the aisle to the guard, "He doesn't know this type of ship. He's running on a prayer."

"Yeah," the guard said. He watched Xyl flatly.

THE ship's gravity lagged the change of direction and the cradles swung gently as it curved to the left to enter a standard orbit. They heard the faint hiss of the decelerators, still on low. Then there was a swing over to the right and the ship was on a wide involute spiral around the earth.

From his cradle Ben could see the third planet's surface move by. The ship, still at space-speed, curved around to center lightside. The sun glared in through the port windows.

Ben heard the creaking and felt the terrible heat first. He recognized it immediately. He brought his head up fast. "We've hit atmosphere!" he yelled at Xyl. "Your coolers! Get 'em on!"

Xyl pounced on the cooling switch. The hull plates kept creaking—the tech manual didn't recommend switching the coolers on with more than 250 C. on the outside plates. Ben looked up and eyed the patched shell hole anxiously.

Then the roar of the decel jets pounded in his ears. He was jolted. He felt himself swing in the cradle. He felt the straps bite into his limbs and body. He swore. A hardened space pilot could decel this fast with a cargo of freight—but not with passengers. Then he laughed a little crazily. Those passengers back there would be lucky if they landed alive and here he was worrying about their comfort.

The roar got louder. It filled everything everywhere. It became one over-

whelming mass of vibration. Ben began to get sick and dizzy. He tightened his lips. First time he'd had landing or blast-off sickness in ages. He swore again and forced himself to relax.

Blackness came suddenly and washed over him like a breaker.

The roar was still all about him when he awoke. He came to with most of his senses and the blurred objects in his sight came quickly into focus. He was still in the cradle. Xyl was still at the fore-plates, hunched over the control console. Earth loomed beyond him. Earth close and solid—Ben could see the shadow side of a mountain range, could even make out faintly the greener areas. The whole of it seemed to slam toward the ship.

Too fast—he's going too fast, Ben thought.

The guard across the way yelled. "*Hey—look out!*"

There was a crash.

Ben didn't go into blackness this time. He fell into a swirling kaleidoscopic unreality. It was like coming home late at night very drunk, lying on the bed, closing your eyes and feeling that the room went round and round.

Later he discovered that he was moving although he wasn't sure how or where and he didn't remember getting himself out of the cradle. The full use of his senses came back to him slowly. The first thing he noticed was that he was standing on ground—good firm ground—Earth ground.

That was a thrill you never quite lost, no matter how many planetfalls you made. He was outside then. He could smell Earth—he could smell growing things. He breathed deeply. His vision cleared and he saw the ship, plowed

deep and at an angle in a mountainside. He saw some of the other passengers wandering about, some in a daze very much like his own.

He had something in his hand. With mild surprise he looked at it. It was the thing he had taken away from Eddington during the fight.

And there was the sound of a step beyond his elbow and he turned and saw Eddington standing there. Eddington had his palm out. There wasn't any more wild look in his big eyes. He was grinning faintly.

"You can give that back to me now, buddy. After this it'll be just a souvenir."

Ben smiled back and handed him the thing. He said, "Where's Xyl?"

Eddington jerked his thumb at the ship. "He got in the blast of a decel jet when we hit. No more Xyl. But even if there was I wouldn't use this." He held up the object. "A spiky leaf from a Jovian cactus," he said. "The only thing besides acid that can kill one of those guys. Well—it'll look good in the living room some day. I'll look at it and remember you, buddy—and Xyl."

"Sure," said Ben. "Sure you will." But he wasn't really listening. He was looking around at the other passengers, who were beginning to form groups and come toward him. They were looking at him. They were waiting for him to tell them what to do—they depended on him to get them off the mountainside and back to some kind of civilization. They'd been depending on him all along.

Ben Harlow smiled and drew his shoulders back and got ready to give them a little briefing speech. He knew that this one—and any after it—would finally sound right in his own ears.