

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

JULY 1958  
Vol. 10, No. 1

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, Vol. 10, No. 1. Published monthly by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC., 320 Fifth Ave., N. Y. 1, N. Y. Subscription 12 issues \$3.75, single copies 35¢. Foreign postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter at the post office, New York, N. Y. The characters in this magazine are entirely fictitious and have no relation to any persons living or dead. Copyright, 1958, by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC. All rights reserved. July, 1958.

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

# escape ferocity

by . . . William C. Gault

**Where there was life, on this earth, there were new machines. Working, carrying, entertaining — and thinking.**

EVEN here, in the flat glare of the Arizona desert, the clanking mechanism of the world he was deserting grated on Lardner's ears. It was a one track line from Phoenix and the chair car he rode in swayed and rattled on its squeaking wheels.

Lardner took two pills from the box in his jacket pocket and went up to the forward part of the car, to the water cooler. He could feel the sweat running down from the backs of his knees and his head throbbed in cadence with the swaying train.

There was a girl at the water cooler, a thin, pale girl with dark, tightly curled hair and eyes of a deep, penetrating blue. She smiled wanly at Joe Lardner.

"Gifford?" she asked.

He nodded. "And you?"

"The same. Is this the *only* way to get there?"

"I suppose we could have walked. Though not through that desert, not in August. Until this—expedition was slated to leave from Gifford, it was only an experimental station, and I guess this transportation was considered adequate for them."

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*They were all human. They had been and would be so again. William Campbell Gault, who will be remembered for TITLE FIGHT (in our December 1956 issue) and other stories, describes the move to deport to the stars the fourteen people on the space ship, unbelievers, enemies of the machine.*

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She crumpled the cup in her hand, and Joe reached out to get a fresh one. His hand trembled.

She said, "You're awfully pale. You're—all right, aren't you?"

"I'll make it," he said. "You're a little white, yourself." He popped the pills into his mouth, and took a swallow of water.

She said quietly, "There's a bit of breeze out here on the platform, and it's not much noisier. Ironic, isn't it, that this—this cattle car should be our last conveyance on earth?"

He didn't answer. He said, "Let's go out and get some of that breeze."

Her name, he learned, was Jean Savage, and she'd worked for the Department of Science in Washington.

Feeding the monster, as she called it, preparing data for the new computing marvel Science was so proud of.

"Mr. Think is what the operators called it," she told Joe, "and there were otherwise normal men who claimed it had a mind of its own."

His smile was weary. "You must have half believed them."

The deep blue eyes considered him gravely. "Because I'm here?"

"That's what I meant, yes. I'm sorry. It wasn't a nice thing to say, was it?" He felt better. The breeze and the pills had combined to give him some relief.

"I don't know if it was nice or not," she said listlessly, "but it's true."

The throbbing started again. "Easy, now," Joe said softly.

"I was put on a night shift," she said, "with two other girls. Three of us in that huge, empty office and that—monster clicking, humming, droning, ringing. Its lights flashing and those incredible answers coming off the tapes. Working, *thinking* twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. *Never silent!*"

Her voice broke, and she closed her mouth rigidly.

Joe's head throbbed steadily and the glare off the sand seemed to burn his eyeballs. As far as the eye could see from this archaic contrivance, all the way to the burning horizon, no machines. But no life, either. Where there was life, on this earth, there were now machines. Working machines and carrying machines and entertaining machines—and thinking machines. It wasn't enough that man should relieve his muscles; he must now relieve his brain.

The girl almost whispered, "I'm sorry. I— This is no time for minor hysterics, is it?"

Joe found a smile, somewhere. "We're all human. Or *were*. And will be, again."

"We hope. You know—even this passenger list was chosen by a machine. An RTM Scanner. A *machine* decided who was to make the trip."

"A machine manned by humans," Joe pointed out. His sympathy was stretched to the shrieking

point; he was beginning to be annoyed with her.

She had taken a cigarette from her jacket pocket now, and Joe reached into his pocket for his lighter.

As he held the flame out to her, both pair of eyes were fixed a moment on the simple little contrivance, and then the girl looked at Joe and began to smile.

He chuckled as he extinguished the flame and threw the lighter far out onto the sand. He brought out a box of matches. "We'll start our new life right now."

The train rattled and squeaked and clanged, but his head seemed better and there was no tremble in the hand that held the match.

The assembly room was the lower floor of a former barrack, and the government man was at a table near the door. The room was stifling, but most of the passengers were here, out of that killing sun.

Jean and Joe gave their names to the man, and he clicked the card scanner to the files so laboriously prepared by Research.

*With fourteen passengers, Joe thought, they still can't work without the machines.* They called it labor saving, but it must have taken ten times the labor to bring that scanner here than it would to handle their files by hand.

He and Jean went over to sit on a faded wicker settee. She said, "Everybody seems to be paired off. Is that just—accidental?"

"Seven men and seven women," Joe said. "All—young enough."

She smiled. "Young enough for breeding? Is that what you meant?"

His answering smile was dim. "That's about it, I guess."

Her voice was light. "You're not married, by chance, Mr. Lardner?"

"I lost my wife six months ago," Joe said harshly.

Silence from her, for seconds. Then, "I'm sorry."

"And both kids," Joe said. He looked at her. There was some color in her thin, intelligent face, now. He looked away.

It must have been minutes later that she asked, "A—machine?"

He looked at the floor, avoiding her eyes. "The only machine within forty miles. I was a Ranger at Redwood National Park and out on a routine check. When I came back to the house, it wasn't there. The refrigeration unit had blown up."

He continued to stare at the floor, and the image began to appear, the flattened house, Judy's little dresses still on the line, his wife's hand still wearing the wedding ring, the blood. . . .

He looked up to find tears on Jean's cheeks.

He looked back at the floor. "Maybe we all ought to be institutionalized. Maybe all fourteen of us are pathological."

"Maybe we are being institutionalized," she said, "in a way. We're being deported, anyway, the unbelievers, the enemies of science."

"Not science," Joe corrected her. "Machines. And by our own choice. Let's keep it as sane as we can. That Mr. Think has you believing in myths."

"My brother worked in Science, too," she said. "He got me my job there. He worked in Cybernetics. If you think I'm loony, you should hear some of the stories he had to tell. 'Mechanical Malignancy,' they called it. Most frightening, damned things were constantly—"

"Please," Joe said. "That's behind, that's all behind us, now." His voice had risen and the man in the next chair looked over sharply. Joe's voice was lower. "We designed them for our purposes. We conceived them with our brains and put them to work. Evil minds design evil machines, but you have to believe in the mastery of man."

"They don't, in Cybernetics," she said simply. "I'd like a drink, and there's a Coke machine in the corner, I see." She started to rise.

"I'll get 'em," Joe said. "Old fashioned gallantry, you know." His hand rested briefly on her shoulder. "We're going to be all right."

He put a token in the machine, and nothing happened. He slapped the duryllium side of it sharply with the flat of his hand, and still nothing happened.

He put his weight into the kick, and the boom of the contact reverberated in the room. He was conscious of a murmur of voices, and then the spigot began to flow, fill-

ing the paper cup he held. He was about to put in another token, when he saw the spigot was still flowing, though the cup was brimming over.

He put another cup under the spigot, and turned to face the rest of them in the room. "Will everyone please get a container of some sort? I think we are temporarily supreme."

They all smiled, and the man who had been sitting on the chair near Joe rose to lead the parade.

Back at the settee, Jean said, "We'll have some laughs on the trip, I see. You're a long way from being defeated, aren't you?"

"Not far," he said, "but I'll be all right if I don't look back and so will you."

"Lot's wife," he said. "And have you managed it?"

"Mostly. We all seem to be here. I wonder when we go."

The government man was standing now near his table, using the table for his block and the flat of his hand for a mallet. "Your attention, please."

When he had their attention, he went on. "You will be quartered on the second floor of this building for tonight. Dinner will be served in this room at six, and the ship will leave tomorrow morning at eight. Any technical questions you might have should be answered by the leaflet you will find in the quarters assigned you. For any other questions, I will be available right up to the moment of your departure."

Jean said, "A typical government announcement. And what do we do until dinner?"

"Sit here and stew. Or go out and look at the desert. Or I could have another go at the Coke machine. *Now* doesn't matter, Jean." His face was relaxed, his eyes were peaceful. "Tomorrow is what counts."

They went out, after a while, and walked along in the shade of the huge buildings that housed the Department of Agriculture's conversion equipment. For nine years, now, this station had tried to find a way to make the desert arable.

The mountains rimming them to the west were casting their shadows on the hot sand now and there was a slight breeze. To the north, the plain stretched to the horizon.

"I wonder," Jean said, "what Eldora will be like?"

"Nobody's ever been there," Joe said. "You knew that, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't."

"We're—guinea pigs," Joe said. "That's why we're going. There won't even be a crew. We'll be worked by relays out of this galaxy and self determined in Galaxy E. Somebody on board will be trained to take over the landing at Eldora."

"And nobody knows anything about Eldora?"

"Oh, yes, they know all about it, through observation. But nobody has landed there."

They walked for seconds before she asked, "Has anybody tried?

Have there been other expeditions?"

Joe took a breath. "None of record. I've heard rumors, but— Oh, I shouldn't be talking like this."

"What kind of rumors did you hear?"

"That it's been the mecca for other—crackpot expeditions."

They were at the end of the street, now, and she stopped to look up at him. "Do you think we're crackpots, Joe?"

"No, the rest of the world is crazy. We're just people licked by machines. Machine age unadaptable."

She looked up at him, and shook her head solemnly. "You phrased that wrong, Joe. We're the people who *won't* be licked by machines. Long after this civilization is gone, we'll have our machine-less civilization on Eldora."

He smiled down at her. "So you're a prophet, too?"

"No," she said. "I'm just a girl who spent a lot of time listening to the boys in Science."

He looked out at the mountains, wondering how much she said was sound and how much the product of her phobia.

"We'll be the first," she went on, "but the others will follow."

It seemed cooler as they walked back. Most of the others were out in the breeze, too, standing in knots along the shaded side of the bar-rack.

Joe said, "I think I'll take a shower before the rest of them get

the idea. I'll see you at dinner?"

She smiled. "You surely will. I've been looking over the others, and you're just about the cream."

In the small room assigned to him, he undressed slowly, thinking of this girl he'd met only today, thinking of the things she'd told him.

Something dropped to the floor from his jacket pocket, and he bent over to retrieve it. It was the box of pills and he realized he'd had no desire for them since getting off the train. Despite the heat and the gray-white barrenness stretching out on all sides of them, the desert was restful. And Eldora?

Eldora should be heaven.

The water was hard and tinged with alkali but the beat of it on his sticky body was refreshing. Through the waist-high windows at the end of the shower room, he heard the voices of the others outside. They seemed to be less tense, and occasional laughter brightened the hum of dialogue.

*The last best hope off earth*, Joe thought. No planet in this galaxy was permanently habitable, and only Eldora in Galaxy E, so far as anyone knew at this time.

Mars was mined by robots; Venus was a remote control relay station for Communication and nothing else.

*But why us?* Joe thought. *Who picked us? There must have been dozens of other applicants.*

In the washroom he examined his face and decided he didn't need

a shave. He put on his robe and straw slippers and went up the steps, feeling cooler, quieter and more hopeful.

In the doorway to his room, he paused, staring.

A man was standing with his back to the door, bending down over Joe's clothes on the chair.

"I beg your pardon?" Joe said, "but—

The man whirled. "I'm—sorry. Is this your—I saw these clothes and couldn't imagine—" He paused. "I'm sure this is the room assigned to me."

He was a stocky man, of medium height, with a square face and a crew haircut. He seemed honest enough to Joe, if appearances meant anything.

Joe said, "7-B? Is that the room you were assigned?"

"No. 7-A. Is this 7-B?"

"It was when I left it," Joe said. He went to the hall and looked up at the number above the door. The number was plainly 7-B.

The man came out to look, and then faced Joe with a wry grin. "I'm sincerely sorry. It must have looked—questionable to you. I hope you'll realize it was a stupid mistake."

"We all make them," Joe said. "It's certainly no time for suspicions." He held out a hand. "Joe Lardner's my name."

The man's grip was strong, his hand calloused. "Curt Mueller's mine. A pleasure, Joe."

It wasn't quite that, to Joe. There

was something about the man that disturbed him. Maybe, Joe told himself, because he has a mechanic's look. He didn't look like a man who would run from a machine.

At dinner, he sat at the huge table between Jean and a Miss Amy Templeton from Chillicothe. Amy had been in a bus accident, and she had all the details for Joe, complete with sound effects. Sixteen had died, and Amy would never be the same again, not on this earth.

Joe tried to look interested and sympathetic, but the tinge of hysteria in her voice grated on him. He looked around the table, studying the others.

Jean said, "Looking for something?"

Joe smiled. "I'm not committed, yet, because you've staked out your claim. That girl at the end of the table is pretty."

"And very nice, too. I was talking to her in the shower."

"What's her problem?" Joe asked.

"Come again? Oh, you mean why is she here— I can't be sure, but I think she's like me, psychic. I think she sees the machine age coming to its logical fruition."

"You're joking, of course," Joe said.

"Yes, Master, I'm joking. Of course."

To his left, Amy said, "Who's that man next to the pretty girl at the end of the table? Do you know him?"

"I met him," Joe said. "Curt Mueller's his name."

"He gives me the shivers," Amy said.

"Good shivers or bad shivers?"

"I don't like him. He looks like one of those German scientists."

Joe smiled. "One of those *mad* German scientists?"

"No, no, I didn't mean that. I meant he looks scientific, or at least mechanically proficient."

"And how do I look?" Joe asked.

"Outdoorsy. The rough tweed, springer spaniel, briar pipe type."

Jean said, "Easy, Amy. I saw him first."

Joe said, "You girls are taking a typically female view of all this. Don't you realize how historic it is? It's no time for the light touch."

"Whistling in the dark," Jean told him. "That's all, Joe."

Oh, yes, and going out into the big dark, out into the illimitable untenanted, to start a new kind of life on an uninhabited planet known only by observation.

On the plain to the east, the dull duryllium shell of the ship was outlined by the bright desert night. Joe and Jean stood near the rear steps of the barrack, smoking.

Curt Mueller and the girl he'd talked with at dinner came through the doorway and stood for a moment on the porch. He nodded at Joe, and then the girl said something to him, and they came over to where Joe and Jean stood.

The girl's name, Joe learned, was

Berjouhi Barton. The first name was Armenian; Joe suspected the surname had formerly held an 'ian' ending. Large dark eyes and dark hair and a womanly figure, full bodied but not heavy.

She said, "I thought we all ought to get acquainted. Of course, there will be a lot of time on the ship, won't there?"

Joe nodded. "I hope we're all friends when we land. There's a thing called 'cabin fever,' you know."

Curt laughed. "In the woods, there is. But not, I hope, out among the stars."

Then Amy stood on the porch, outlined by the lighted doorway, and she was not alone. Amy had bagged a Mr. Michael Lynch, a thin and engaging Irishman with reddish hair and a bony, interesting face.

Mike Lynch had no sad stories out of his past, but he was a bit too Pollyanna-ish about his hopes for their bright future. He couldn't see how they could miss.

One way they could miss, Joe thought, was by missing the planet. This was no Pilgrim band, firm, prepared and hardy. This was a near-neurotic group of wishful thinkers trying to escape the machine age.

*Include yourself, Joe thought. You're running away, too, Joe Lardner, running away from a memory.*

They had their physicals that

evening, after which most of them turned in.

Joe sat alone on the porch steps, looking out at the stars and the bright plain dominated by the bulky shadow that was the ship. Though there was an uneasiness in him, the pills in his pocket had not been touched since he'd left the train. He felt better than he had in six months and he knew he would sleep well tonight.

His uneasiness was not because of his decision, but because he was doubtful about the staying powers of that portion of the group he had come to know so far. And then he made a reservation in his mind—he shouldn't have any doubts about Curt Mueller; he looked like a man able to cope with the unknown. And about the rest of them, he could be wrong.

The night was chilly, and he stood up, taking a last night-time look at the land of his birth before going up the steps to his room.

In the morning, he was wakened by the clatter of the water-burning tractor hauling the processed food to the ship. The sun was a red rim on the eastern horizon and heat waves danced above the sand.

As he went down to breakfast, he saw the luggage wagon going past and some of the trunks held stickers of foreign travel, Paris, Lucerne, Glasgow, Berlin.

And if they should return from this, for some reason in the unforeseeable future, would they have stickers from Eldora in Galaxy E?

Municipal thinking in a star seeking age.

There was laughter around the dining table, there were bright faces. There was chatter. Whistling in the dark?

There was a chair empty next to Jean and he took it.

"Good morning, sour puss," she said.

"Good morning. I'm a congenital worrier, and I'm sorry."

She was silent. Then, "I'm the one who should be sorry. I guess you've reason enough to be grave."

"It's only partly that. I've been wondering if this is the kind of group to send out as colonists."

"We're not colonists."

"The government thinks we are, or we wouldn't be going."

"Well, then, a little faith in your fellow humans should be cultivated, Mr. Lardner. Fortitude isn't measured with muscles."

He looked over to see how serious she was, and saw. She was glaring at him.

He smiled at her. "I'll improve. I promise."

Her hand reached out to cover his on the table. She nodded.

He was drinking his coffee when the government man came over with Curt Mueller. He told Joe, "We're going to take you out to the ship now. There are a few things that need to be done on landing, and you and Mr. Mueller will be instructed as to that."

They went out to the huge cre-falt ramp, and up the narrow, cir-

cular staircase to the passenger cabin. Through the miqurt window in here, Joe could see the bar-rack and the other passengers already getting into a passenger wagon which would be hauled by the same small tractor that had hauled the luggage and the food.

The government man said, "Here is the only control board on the ship," and Joe's attention returned from the plain.

There was a locked cover over the board, and the man gave each one of them a key after unlocking the cover.

When he lifted it, to reveal the board, it was anti-climactic. There were three buttons and a gravi-pulse gauge. The gauge was marked off in red, blue and green sections, to match the color of the buttons.

"The gauge," the man explained, "will go into the green section first, and the small forward decelerators will go on when you press the green button. Additional deceleration will be afforded when you press the blue button on entering the blue zone. The red button turns the landing blasters on, and of course, you press that when the gauge needle enters the red zone. Clear?"

Joe and Curt nodded.

"Repeat it, then, Mr. Lardner."

Joe repeated it, and Curt went through it again.

"Now," the man said, "this is for a comfortable landing. If anything should go wrong with the blue or green stage, the blasters

will still save you in the red stage, though the safety belts had better be attached if that's necessary. The deceleration will be rapid without the preliminary stages. But that red stage is foolproof."

"I'm glad of that," Curt said, "because I'm a fool when it comes to mechanics."

The man frowned. "Your mechanical aptitude, Mr. Mueller, was the highest in the group."

"But not high," Curt said easily. "What if we are over water as we come down?"

"You won't be over water. You'll be aimed at the biggest plain on the planet. There might be a few rivers there, but none deep enough to cover the ship, I'm sure. And your chances of landing in one are theoretically all but impossible." He borrowed Joe's key, and locked the case, and handed the key back. He smiled. "Luck, gentlemen."

"Thank you," Joe said. "Will we be aware of the two earlier stages of deceleration? Will there be some sound, or something that tells us the mechanism is working?"

"Of course. I should have mentioned that. There will be not only the sound of the mechanism going into action; there will be a definite jolt as the speed drops. You won't miss it. And I wouldn't worry about it. It's about as complicated as a twentieth century mouse trap. There isn't any reason for it to fail, absolutely none."

The passenger wagon was below them, now, and there was the sound

of footsteps on the stairs. And chatter. The chatter of a holiday cruise. Joe stood by the miquart window, looking out over the flat, hot, seemingly limitless plain.

This country, too, he thought, had been born of man's dreams, man seeking the intangibles of freedom and justice and a fighting chance. Now dedicated to the elimination of human labor, as though labor was some kind of vice. If we had spent as much time on the elimination of greed and stupidity and bigotry as we had on the elimination of labor, where could we be today?

Perhaps, out there among the stars, on Eldora perhaps, the old dream could be re-born, a new world for the burnishing of old dreams. Perhaps. . . .

Jean stood next to him, now. "Saying good-bye?"

"Saying hello, I hope. To tomorrow."

Below them, there was the sound of the door closing under the terrific pressure of the hydraulic arms, and behind them a lowering in the tempo of the chatter. The significance of the moment was getting through to the magpies.

Jean said, "We can sit together, can't we?"

Joe nodded.

"How about sleeping?" she asked. "I suppose it would be in bad taste to sleep together so soon."

"The seats are also the beds," Joe said. "So—we'll need to ignore the superficial conventions."

"I want someone close," Jean said. "It's no time to be alone." Her voice trembled, and she put a hand in his. "I'm frightened."

"We all are and we always have been. Let's get a pair of seats." His voice was rough, but he kept her hand in his.

A vibration, a rumble like all the waterfalls in the world emptying into a funneled gorge, a rumble that took command of the cabin. All the faces were tense, Joe saw, all the hands were rigidly gripping the hand rails.

The vibration growing, pressure in the seats, the rumble dying very little. The seats were swivel-mounted and not locked for the take-off; the pressure now was directly beneath them. Once free of gravity, they could be locked and put to whatever purpose the occupant desired.

Joe wondered how much desire there was in the house at the moment.

Jean's hand tightened on his; dialogue would be futile in the roar. The big dial at the front of the room was climbing. As it swung past eight hundred, the sound ceased.

Once out of the atmosphere, it would be worthless until they entered the atmosphere of Eldora, but Joe watched it now, climbing toward twenty-five thousand, toward escape velocity.

Curt and Berjouhi sat behind them, and Curt leaned forward to

say, "I hope you two play bridge."

This was on August 14th.

By the eighteenth, Joe had had more bridge than a reasonable man can absorb. On the evening of the eighteenth, using earth time, they turned out the lights at tenthirty.

That was the night Mary Lang died. Joe came up out of the depths of a dream to see the floating ball of fire in the cabin. A shriek had wakened him. He fumbled for the light switch, as Jean muttered next to him.

Then there was a flash, as the lights went on.

There was no one in the seat next to Mary Lang. The washroom door opened and Nels Andriesen stood there, staring at the seat he had deserted momentarily, next to Mary. The upholstery was burned, scorched. And there was an odor of burnt hair in the cabin.

Jed Landry, who had the seat opposite, rose now and bent over Mary Lang.

Joe came forward. "You're a doctor, aren't you, Jed?"

Jed shook his head. "Never completed my internship. But it doesn't need a doctor to see she's dead."

There was a murmur behind Joe, and a woman fainted in the forward part of the cabin.

Berjouhi said, "I was the one who screamed. I saw that ball of fire, and—"

Murmuring all around them, hysteria mounting. One woman

said, "Ball lightning. I've seen it before, on the farm. It's—"

Joe raised a hand for silence. "We'll need to be calm. Jed, will you take a look at that woman who fainted? And Curt, how about her—? If it was electricity, would it still be dangerous to touch her?"

Curt shook his head. "I don't think so. How about artificial respiration, Jed?"

Landry shook his head. "Not for that one. You haven't seen her, Curt."

Very few of them could see the scorched, ugly sight. Joe stayed close to the seat as a shield, and gestured for Curt to come over.

Curt stared at her without apparent emotion. "If we'd entered an atmosphere, it could be frictional electricity through the ship's skin." He looked up at the huge dial at the front of the cabin, which registered zero. He looked at Joe. "Or some kind of static electricity from the various mechanisms aboard, or a million other things I'm not prepared to know about. I was never an electrician. As that woman said, it looked like ball lightning."

Joe took a blanket from Andriesen's chair and covered the body.

Andriesen stood next to them, now. "Lord, I could have been sitting there. If I hadn't had to go to the washroom, I—" He shook his head.

Landry was back now. "The woman's all right. She's come out of it. How about this one? What

do we do with Lang's body?"

Curt Mueller said, "The same thing we do with all our waste. I hope nobody here is sentimental about dead bodies."

Landry said, "The rest of our waste is still following us. There's nothing to prevent it. It would be rather ghastly to see this body following us through space, too."

"Not as ashes," Curt said. "We have the incinerator."

Joe shivered. Landry frowned. Curt said, "I hope that doesn't sound heartless. But cremation isn't any worse here than on earth. Should we take a vote on it?"

"She wouldn't fit," Joe said. "The incinerator isn't big enough."

Landry shrugged. "I could do the surgery. There's no state board to interfere, here."

"Where?" Joe asked.

"In the washroom." He put a hand on Joe's shoulder. "You seem to have taken command, a very satisfactory situation to me. You suggest the vote."

The vote favored cremation, nine to four. The four who voted against it were women, and not one of them seemed too sorry to have the vote go against them.

Less than an hour later, the ashes of Mary Lang went out to join the trail of debris following them through the universe.

The lights in the cabin were still on; nobody wanted to go back to sleep. In the washroom, Joe and Jed studied Mary Lang's file.

She'd been a personnel director

for a large industrial firm, despite her less than thirty years. She'd had a brother killed in an industrial accident and quit her job, soon after, going to Hawaii to live. She had a phobia regarding anything mechanical, but was otherwise sound, her psychiatric report stated.

"Like all of us," Jed Landry said.

Joe stared at him. "You, too?"

"Like all of us," Jed repeated, "or we wouldn't be here. You should circulate more, Joe, like I did when I got to Gifford. And now this." He took a deep breath.

"Now what—?" Joe's voice was annoyed.

"Now this — *mechanical* accident."

"For heaven's sakes," Joe said. "People are bitten by snakes, and fall off cliffs and drown and get hit by falling trees and—"

"But not here."

"No, not here. Here, they get hit by lightning."

Jed's smile was dim. "All right, Joe. Let's not get worked up."

"You're right," Joe agreed. He looked around. "I suppose we'd better be sure this place is washed up well before we let the others in, again."

Curt helped with that. And, surprisingly, Jean. Fortitude isn't measured with muscles, as she'd said.

Out in the cabin, the passengers talked in subdued voices. In a corner, Nels Andriesen was trying to improvise a bed with blankets and pillows.

Everybody had paired up, and Joe wondered about that. Had the RTM Scanner also chosen them for romantic preferences? It must have. But Nels was now alone, and afraid to go back to his scorched seat.

Curt and Berjouhi had swung their seats around to face Joe's and Jean's. They all stopped talking as Joe sat down. They looked at him.

"If it's an electrical leak, somewhere," Joe said, "couldn't we put up something like lightning rods, or a net of wires that would act the same way?"

Curt shrugged. "Electricity was never my long suit, Joe. It would not hurt to try. And it might help to quiet some of the more hysterical passengers. It will look like *something* is being done."

Berjouhi said, "And where would we get the wire, or the rods?"

"We could pull the wiring out of the walls," Joe said. "We don't need all these lights. We could scrape the insulation off it, and—"

"Take another look at the walls, Joe," Curt said. "They aren't bolted on; they're moulded in one piece."

Which they were, seamless duryllium, seven hundred times as hard as chrome steel, after six months of seasoning. And this ship was more than six months old.

"There must be wire in the cargo compartment," Joe guessed.

Curt nodded. "And we can get to it, once we land. They didn't figure we'd be using any wire on

the trip. Remember, as the government man said, it's all fool-proof."

"Proof against fools," Berjouhi said. "I never stopped to realize, when I applied for this trip, that we wouldn't be traveling on a flying carpet. This, too, is a machine, isn't it?"

Curt said, "Let's be sensible now. That way lies madness."

Berjouhi opened her mouth to say something, and Joe thought, *here we go, again. Now we get the Barton story.*

But Curt said quickly and sharply, "I'm serious, Berj. That's not good talk for now, even if it made sense."

"The true mechanic talking," Berjouhi said.

Curt flushed, and there was a silence. Curt rose and went over to the miquart window to stare out at the stars.

Jean said, "That wasn't enough to hurt him that much. Is he ashamed of being a mechanic?"

"He wanted to keep it secret," Berjouhi answered. "He's had a sad history as a mechanic, a lot of close calls. He wants to forget all about it."

"Well, then," Jean said calmly, "you were a Grade A bitch, and you ought to go over and tell him so."

Berjouhi nodded, and rose. "You're right on both counts." She went over to stand next to Curt, to link her arm in his.

Jean said, "Couldn't we have the

communication box on? There might be some news from earth."

There was news from earth. A passenger air liner had crashed at Miami. Automobile fatalities for the first six months of the year were doubled over the same period last year. A rail wreck in Illinois had cost three hundred lives. Joe snapped it off, again.

Silence. He looked at Jean, and she was looking straight ahead, at nothing.

Joe said, "It was your idea. That's behind us."

Her voice was ragged, and she continued to look straight ahead. "All of them, all of those accidents were in transportation."

"On earth. None of them can happen in Eldora. There'll be plenty following us."

"How? Are they going to sprout wings?"

He said nothing. The tremble started in one knee, and he felt cold, and the throbbing in his skull began again dimly. He reached for the pills, and decided against them. He put an arm around Jean's shoulders. "We're not licked yet, honey."

She burrowed close to him, tears running down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Joe. I guess it—was—that washroom." She cried silently, shivering in his embrace.

Joe thought about Curt, who'd been called a mechanic by Berjouhi. That could mean more; if that was Curt's line he was more than a mechanic. An engineer? A mechanical theoretician?

And why was he here? Well, why hadn't Jed Landry finished his internship? There were a multitude of 'whys'; the room was haunted with them.

Curt and Berjouhi came back, smiling and sheepish. They looked wonderingly at Jean's tear stained face and inquiringly at Joe.

Joe said, "Reaction. The wash-room and then we turned on the communication box, and the news from earth was bad."

Curt said, "It will get worse, the news from earth. Some day, some of the cheap help they're getting at Los Alamos will make a more serious mistake than they've already made, and there'll be no more news from earth."

"Mistakes? I didn't read about any mistakes in the papers, Curt."

"The smallest mistake there," Curt said, "is too big for the papers. Let's not talk about earth."

He didn't voice it, but implicit in his words was the declaration, *and let's not talk about me.*

The lights stayed on, but fatigue took over. They dozed.

The next day, Joe talked to the woman who had screamed, who had first seen the floating ball. He learned very little from her that he hadn't seen with his own eyes.

"It moved so slowly," she said. "Not at all like—electricity or lightning. As though it were—seeking somebody."

"It was seeking a medium with a lower potential," Joe said calmly. "Like lightning. If it was ball

lightning, there was nothing personal in it, Miss Hought."

"Mary's just as dead," she said.

Nels Andriesen slept on the pillows in a corner of the cabin. At the forward window, Jed Landry was looking out at the red disc of Mars. Joe went over to stand next to him.

"Into the asteroid belt, now," Jed said. "Anything can happen."

Joe said nothing.

Jed studied him. "Dispirited?"

"I've a little headache."

"I've some pills that will fix you up."

Joe took the box from his pocket and held it in the palm of his hand for Jed to see.

Jed took it and studied the prescription on the cover. "Ouch. You're careful with these, aren't you?"

"I was told never to take more than two a day."

"One a day would be better, and not two days in a row. Eight of these would stop your heart like a bullet."

Joe looked out and saw Deimos. And saw the the shattered house and the clothes on the line, and closed his eyes.

Jed said, "I could doctor the food, a little. There's an undercurrent of hysteria here."

"A good idea," Joe said, and opened his eyes. *Man can't escape,* he thought, *not from himself.*

The mechanisms of the ship worked on, creating oxygen, filtering the water to be used over and

over again, sending the solid wastes out into space, scattering their offal into the growing tail that followed them through the universe. A comet with a garbage tail.

The woman who'd seen ball lightning on the farm came over to tell Joe, "If Mr. Andriesen wants, he can have my seat. I'll take his."

"I'll tell him," Joe said. "You won't be—frightened?"

She shook her head, smiling. "Lightning never strikes twice in the same place."

From his seat, Curt looked up, opened his mouth—and closed it as Berjouhi prodded him with an elbow.

The woman and Nels traded seats an hour later.

At dinner, Joe asked Curt, "Have you given any thought to some kind of protection, some net of electricity conducting material, or rods?"

"I've thought of it," Curt said, "but I haven't come up with anything. There's nothing to work with, Joe."

"There must be wire in these communication boxes."

Curt glanced at the box and back at Joe. "Yes, there must be. Very fine wire, though, nothing that would carry off the terrible amperage of that—lightning."

"Maybe not. But wouldn't it act as a preventive, siphoning off any accumulations of electricity before they became dangerous?"

"And grounding them where?"

"Into the body of the ship. That must be the ground. The metallic tops of these seats must have been the attraction. It acted as an—oh, electric chair for Mary Lang."

Curt said, "How about the floor of the ship? It's magnetic enough to keep us from drifting. Perhaps it's the source of our trouble, too."

"And if it is?"

"Nothing. It was just a suggestion. You know as much about electricity as I do, which is very little, Joe. But if you want me to help you rig this net or whatever you have in mind, I'll be glad to help."

They dismantled one of the boxes right after lunch and there was wire in it. Wire as thin as fine hair, thinner. On a coil.

Curt looked at it and shook his head.

Joe said, "All right, it's thin. But it carries electricity; it could carry away any accumulations before they get big enough to be dangerous." He frowned. "Wouldn't it?"

Curt smiled. "You know exactly as much about it as I do. Nothing. Let's get to work."

They scraped the insulation off, with help from the girls. And then they strung it back and forth across the roof of the cabin, grounding it to the screws that held each communication box to the wall of the ship, a total of fourteen ground connections.

And left Joe and Jean no communication box. "Which I can do without," Jean said, and Joe agreed.

It was nine in the evening, earth time, when they finished.

Jean said, "I wonder if anybody will kick if we turn the lights out, tonight? I'd like some rest."

"We could leave a light on near the washroom," Joe suggested. "That should make everybody happy."

It was a restless night for Joe. The reaction to last night's tragedy had stirred them all into restlessness; each time Joe opened his eyes, there were at least three or four others awake.

At breakfast, it seemed to him, there was a lessening of the general tension; above the murmur of dialogue there was an occasional laugh.

An hour after breakfast, there was a scream and Joe glanced toward the last two seats, where a bridge game was going on. He saw no ball of fire, this time, though some one of the four must have seen it. All Joe saw was the flash.

For a moment there was absolute silence, and then a woman screamed. The smell turned Joe's stomach, and Jean's fingers were digging into his forearm.

"Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God—" Jean's voice was a dull monotone. She closed her eyes.

Jed Landry looked at Joe and took a breath. And then the babble of voices around them grew and the threat of hysteria filled the cabin. Joe sat stunned, unable to move.

Jed Landry rose and took a

blanket from the storage box under his seat. Joe sensed what he meant to do; Joe rose and followed him to the far end of the cabin.

There, he helped to hang the blanket from the wires overhead, screening the spectacle from the eyes of the others.

Jed looked at Joe's trembling hands and up into his white, sick face. "You up to it, Joe?"

"Somebody has to do it."

"But not necessarily you. We could ask for volunteers. I've been trained to look at things like this, but you—?"

Then Jean was there. "I can help."

"No," Joe said. "No women."

"I can help," she repeated.

This time, it was Jed who answered. "No. I appreciate your courage, but I won't have it. There are plenty of men here to help."

One of the girls was Amy Templeton; one of the men Mike Lynch. The other pair were the only married couple on board, a Mr. and Mrs. George Desni of Gary, Indiana.

In the washroom, Jed Landry said, "Maybe I'd better really dope that food, put the whole gang in a semi-coma. Damn it, that's what I'll do. Before they start killing each other."

"Or themselves," Joe said. "You don't think this is anything but an—accident, do you, Jed?"

Jed didn't look up, intent on his work. "How do you mean?"

"Maybe the government was

glad to get rid of us, and this was one way to do it."

"A very expensive way. No, Joe, the government didn't have this in mind, at all, I'm sure."

"What are we, a bunch of accident prones, then?"

"It looks that way, doesn't it?" Jed still hadn't looked up. "Or maybe we're just enemies of the machine, and this machine knows it."

"Oh, Lord— What kind of talk is that from a scientifically trained man?"

Jed looked up now. "Strange talk, isn't it? You might ask the man who calls himself Curt Mueller." He went back to his cutting.

"Calls himself—? Isn't it his right name?"

"Ask him. I've said too much already."

"It would look like prying," Joe said. "It's none of my business, really."

Jed worked on without answering, and Joe began to wrap the parcels for the calcifier.

When they were mopping up, Jed said, "Five gone. I wonder who's next?"

"That's what they're all wondering, probably," Joe said. "You'd better get your opiates ready, Doctor."

Not all of the passengers ate lunch. Those who did could be determined soon after. They dozed, they yawned, they slept, depending on their resistance and their temperaments.

Jed Landry gave them a short talk as the ashes of the last four victims joined the growing tail. He talked of hysteria and fortitude, of faith and doubt. The words were all there, but he didn't sound as though he believed any of them personally.

The ones who hadn't eaten lunch became aware of the relaxed mental attitude of those who had. They all ate dinner. Joe and Curt and Jed were the only men who didn't want the opiate in their food. Jean was the only woman.

Past Jupiter, the huge ship bored through space, out of the asteroid belt, moving steadily toward Galaxy E.

Nels Andriesen died that night, and no one had seen the ball of fire. The shock of his death didn't seem to disturb the doctored passengers; they were like slave robots.

But Curt decided to take the opiate after that.

Jean said to Joe, "I won't take it until you do."

"Because of that crack I made about colonists, because I doubted the courage of the group?"

"Maybe. But isn't an opiate the same as a—surrender?"

"I don't see why. Staying completely aware of things isn't going to do any good unless we can fight. And we can't fight the inevitable."

"Coming around, are you, Joe?"

"Around to what?"

"To—Mr. Think?"

"If you mean there's a design to this, no. It's faulty thinking by

the men who designed the ship. It's their error."

"How do you know?"

"How else can a man believe and stay sane?"

"The boys in Cybernetics were sane, and 'mechanical malignancy' was their word."

Behind them, Curt Mueller said, "The boys in Cybernetics, Jean, weren't all sane. Not after they'd been there a while."

Joe turned around. "How do you know, Curt?"

Curt stared at him with dull and hopeless eyes. "A little bird told me."

Berjouhi said, "Curt, you didn't mean that. And if you can help us, now, you *must*."

"If I could, I would," Curt said, and closed his eyes.

Berjouhi flushed and she looked at Joe beseechingly. Jean said, "There's probably nothing that can be done, Berjouhi. Or I know Curt would help."

Nothing from Curt; he kept his eyes closed. Joe turned around, annoyance growing in him.

Jean said, "Maybe we'd better get some of Jed's dope."

"I've got something better than that, if I want to use it."

*Eight of these would stop your heart like a bullet. . . .*

Jean's hand wormed its way into his, and she said wearily, "I wonder if any of us will make it?"

Behind them, Curt said, "Joe or I will. Those landing blasters can't go on automatically. So, unless the

ship intends to destroy itself, Joe or I will make it."

Joe didn't turn around, this time. Later, he took Jed and Jean over to the box and opened it with his key. He explained the three stages and the coordination between the colors on the gauge and the three buttons.

When Joe and Jean returned to their seats, Curt's eyes were open and he smiled at Joe. "You've cut down our odds. Now, it's one in four."

"I'm not superstitious," Joe said.

Curt held Joe's gaze. "Neither am I."

For seconds, Joe stared at him and then Curt closed his eyes again.

Berjouhi died that night, and it was a replica of the first death. The scream, the ball, the flash, the stench—and Curt Mueller standing in the door of the washroom, where Nels Andriesen had stood in that first nightmare.

This time, it had been Jean who'd screamed. The dull eyes of the other passengers were focused on the seat behind them, but nobody made a move to help.

Next to Joe, Jean started to moan, her face rigid in shock, saliva dribbling from one corner of her mouth.

Then Jed stood next to them, and Jed had a hypodermic needle in his hand.

Jean turned his way, saw the needle, and held out her arm. Behind them, Curt was cursing softly, the same words over and over again.

Jed told Joe, "I'll take care of this one, alone. You stay here."

Jed didn't take care of it alone. Curt went into the washroom with him.

Jean dozed and Joe sat there, staring at nothing, and then the woman ahead of them turned to face him. "How much longer?"

"Five days."

"None of us will make it, will we?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows."

She took a deep breath, and turned around again. Joe saw her head tilt forward a few seconds later, and then her partner was lowering the back of her seat, and Joe saw she had fallen asleep.

Jed must really have them doped, he thought. Why shouldn't I join them? It's not my burden. I've done my share. There's no way to fight.

Around him, they all dozed. While, in the washroom, Curt and Jed prepared the body of Berjouhi for disposal.

When Curt came out, his face was haggard, his eyes blank. Jed stayed in the washroom, and Joe went in there, after a while.

Jed told him, "Curt was really hit by this death." He rubbed the back of his neck wearily. "I think I'll stay in here. Maybe it isn't as dangerous. I've suddenly developed a great desire to live."

"Maybe we all ought to crowd in here," Joe suggested.

Jed shrugged. "And if we're wrong about it—who's left? We'd

be jammed so tight, one bolt would do it. I don't want to be responsible for that kind of decision."

"Maybe you're right." Joe went over to lean against one of the dryers. "Do you want to tell me about Curt, before it might be too late?"

"I don't follow you, Joe."

Joe told him about finding Curt in his room, that day. "And now he's so damned secretive about his past. Why?"

Jed was silent a moment. Then, "I believe that he went into your room by mistake, as he claimed. And about his past, it's *his*, and if he doesn't want to talk about it, I surely don't."

"All right, all right. Will you give me something? I'd like to get some sleep, too."

It was four hours later that he was roused from a troubled sleep, awakened to find Curt shaking his shoulder.

"In the washroom," Curt said. "Jed's dead in there."

Joe nodded. "Sure. We were picked by a machine. An RTM Scanner. What did you expect?"

"Joe, in the name of God—"

"All right. So he's dead. I can't cut him up. Can you?"

Curt nodded. "I've a medical degree, among the others. I'll handle it alone, then."

"Handle it," Joe said, and went back to sleep.

In the morning, Curt handed out the food to the five who were left besides himself. He told Joe, "I

doctored it. Maybe I'd better tell you about me, Joe. In the wash-room, after we eat."

"Not unless you want to," Joe said.

"I wouldn't have mentioned it if I didn't want to."

In the washroom, half an hour later, Curt told him, "My real name is Lars Knutsen. Recognize it?"

Joe nodded. "I guess I should. Dr. Lars Knutsen. Worked on that cybernetic marvel that was supposed to make man obsolete. I remember reading about how you failed, and what a razzing you got in the papers. The 'artificial man' you were going to make, weren't you? The mechanical man?"

"We did, Joe. You didn't read that in the papers. We made it and saw it walk and heard it talk. And we destroyed it."

"Why—?"

"Because it killed one of our men, one of our young assistants. For no reason at all, except that the assistant happened to jostle it."

"A mechanism," Joe said, "gone wrong because there was some error in its design. But designed by man, *faultily* designed by man."

"Maybe. It strangled the assistant. Put both hands on his neck and efficiently strangled him."

"It's not something I understand," Joe said, "enough to argue about."

"Right. I've degrees in engineering, medicine and chemistry and it's not something I can understand, either, Joe. But it's why I'm here.

I know you've been suspicious of me, and I wanted you to know my background. If we get through this, there should be no suspicions on Eldora, not between men."

"Okay, Doctor," Joe said, and held out a hand.

"I'm still Curt to everybody. From now on, I'm Curt Mueller."

"All right, Curt. We live in hope. Maybe, once out of this galaxy— Well, maybe— Who knows?"

A few hundred million miles beyond Pluto, Elsbeth Mariner and Arthur Paganto died, holding hands. They'd been holding hands for that doubtfully romantic purpose; they wanted to die together.

Joe helped Curt with them, and now there were just the four of them, Curt and Joe and Jean and Ruth Schmidt.

Eldora was in sight when Ruth died.

Jean said, "No more opiates for me. I want to see that planet get bigger. I want to see it turn green. Joe, others will follow now, won't they? We're just the first."

"I hope," Joe said. "Unless we want to breed our own children."

"Well, there's Curt—but he'd be kind of old by that time. Oh, Joe, we're going to make it, aren't we? And this trip will just be a nightmare, fading in our memories?"

"If you believe," Joe said, "now would be the time to pray."

Curt said, "After the first two stages go, the green and the blue, the ship will turn, Joe. The landing

blasters are the same propellant we used to escape earth. If we get too deep into the red zone, we'd better lock ourselves to something stationary."

Joe nodded. "You'd better handle it. I've more faith in you than I have in myself."

Curt's smile was wry. "That's some change."

At the forward window, Jean said, "It seems to be getting bigger. Or is that just an illusion?"

Joe went over to stand next to her at the window. "I don't notice any change, but it will get bigger."

"And better," Curt said. He headed for the washroom. "Better unlock the board, Joe."

Curt hadn't closed the door to the washroom when the flash came.

Joe saw the smoke billowing out, smelled the stench of burned flesh and heard Jean moan beside him. He held her tight.

"Oh, Joe—not Curt, too."

She was trembling in his arm. There was a tremor in his knees, but he walked with her to the board, and unlocked it.

They stood there, their eyes locked to the gravi-pulse gauge. The needle was at rest in the neutral section.

Joe said, "Maybe there's life on the planet that we don't know about."

"And if there isn't, others will follow, anyway. Joe, I love you."

"And I love you. The Scanner did a good job there, anyway."

"Let's not talk about that. We're

going to make it, aren't we? We have to make it."

"We're still here, alive. I don't know anything beyond that." He indicated the straps. "We'd better buckle ourselves in."

Ten minutes passed, twenty. An hour passed, and he was wet with perspiration and his knees ached like rotten molars. Two hours, three. . . .

Jean said, "Could the gauge be wrong?"

The needle wavered, and Joe stiffened. The needle moved slowly through the neutral section, edging almost imperceptibly toward the green section.

Sweat ran down over Joe's eyes, and he wiped it away with a forearm. Jean was whispering, "We're going to make it," over and over and over.

The green, and he pressed the green button, felt the drag, heard the distant rumble of the forward guide blasters. He saw Eldora through the rear window and knew the ship was tilting, end for end.

And then, dimly, he thought he felt the pull of gravity as the gauge worked up toward the blue zone. Through the window, he saw the ashes move past the ship, and turned to see Jean watching them, too.

The gauge climbed to blue, and he pressed the blue button, and now there was a definite sense of gravity tugging at him. Curt's body came sliding down from the washroom, and Jean screamed.

"We're going to make it," Joe

said. "We're in the gravitational field of Eldora now, I'm sure. Easy, honey."

The rumble of the second stage blasters grew stronger, and the gauge climbed toward the red, and Joe looked up at the huge gauge in the front of the cabin. It was beginning to flicker.

A few minutes later, it swung to the end of its semi-circle.

"What does it mean?" Jean asked.

"It means we're traveling faster than twenty-five thousand miles an hour," Joe said. "It's not meant for landing; it shows our escape velocity."

His eyes were on the gravi-pulse gauge, and now it came into the red. He pressed the red button.

And nothing happened, nothing at all.

Jean said, "Something's wrong?"

Joe remembered Curt telling him that the *first two stages* were fool-proof. This one, obviously, wasn't. He pressed the red button again.

"Joe, what is it? For heaven's sakes, Joe, what—"

"We're going to die a different way," Joe said, and looked at her. "We're going to smash up with the ship. I can't slow it, and we're aimed at Eldora at a speed beyond twenty-five thousand miles an hour, I'm sure. The blasters, the last stage, is out of commission." Desperately, he jabbed at the button, bruising his thumb,

"How long, Joe? How long before we—"

"I don't know."

"I wish I had a knife," she said. "Anything—I wish I could cheat the machine out of that much."

*Eight of these will stop your heart like a bullet. . . .*

Joe brought them out, and there were seventeen in the box. He said, "One way's as painless as the other."

"But this is our volition. That much decision we should have left, shouldn't we?"

"It's surrender," Joe said.

"I don't put that interpretation on it. I want them, Joe. How many will it take?"

"Eight. I'll give you nine. I'll take the eight. If it's the way you want it, it's the way I want it."

Below them, the green dish that was Eldora rushing toward them, as the pills went down, one after another, melting on the tongue. Below them, Eldora growing bigger as their hearts gave that last hammering jolt, as they died, holding hands.

Below them, the huge landing blasters coming into flaming life as the solenoid worked the massive switch. The fall was slowed, and their dead bodies strained at the straps as the blasters bit into their acceleration, slowing and finally killing it.

Cushioning the descent, preserving the machine.