

## FOUNDER'S DAY

1

The girl said, "No." She shook her head, turned her ice-chip blue eyes back to the programming console that almost filled her work cubicle. "Have some sense, Gus."

"We could live with my family for a while--"

"You're already one over legal. And if you think I'd crowd in with that whole bunch--"

"Only until I get my next step-increase!"

Her fingers were already flickering over the keys. "See my side, Gus. Mel Fundy's offered me a five-year contract-with an option."

"Contract!"

"It's better than no marriage at all!"

"Marriage! That's just a lousy business proposition!"

"Not so lousy. I'm accepting. It'll mean a class B flat for just the two of us-and class B rations."

"You-and that dried-up. . . ." Gus pictured her with Fundy's crab-claws touching her.

"Better get back to your slot, Gus," she dismissed him. "You've still got a job to hold down."

He turned away. A small, balding man with a large face and a curved back was coming along the two-foot aisle, darting sharp looks into the cubicles. His eyes turned hot when he saw Gus.

"You're docked half a unit, Addison! If I find you out of your position again, there'll be charges!"

"It won't happen again," Gus muttered. "Ever."

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The shift-end buzzer went at 8 A.M. Gus pushed along the exit lane into car 98, stood packed in with the other workers while it rocketed along the horizontal track, halting every twelve seconds to discharge passengers, then shot upward three-quarters of a mile to his flat-level. In the two-foot wide corridor, a banner poster showed a Colonization Service Officer looking stern, and the slogan: FILL YOUR BLOCK QUOTA! Gus keyed the door and stepped into the familiar odor of Home: a heavy, dirt-sweet smell of human sweat and excrement and sex that seemed to settle over him like an oily patina.

"Augustus." From the food-prep ledge at the far end of the living aisle his mother's collapsed, sagging face caressed him like a damp hand. "I have a surprise for you! Mock giblets and a custard!"

"I'm not hungry."

"Evening, Son." His father's head poked from the study cubicle. "Since you don't care for your custard, mind if I have it? Stomach's been a little feisty lately." As if to prove it he belched, grimaced.

Three feet from Gus's face, the curtains of the dressing alcove twitched. Through a gap, a pale, oversized buttock showed. It moved sensuously, and Gus saw the curve of a full breast, the soft, pink nipple peering like a blind eye past the edge of the curtain. Desire washed up through him like sewage in a plugged manhole. He turned his eyes away and saw a narrow, rabbity face glaring at him in feeble ferocity from the washing nook.

"What are you staring at, you young-"

"Tell her to keep the curtains shut, Uncle Fred," Gus grated.

"You young degenerate! Your own aunt!"

"Gus didn't do anything," an uncertain voice said behind him. "She's done the same thing to me."

Gus turned to his brother, a spindle-armed, ribby-chested lad with a bad complexion. "Thanks, Len. But they can think what they like. I'm leaving. I just came to say good-by."

Lenny's mouth opened. "You're. . . . going?"

Gus didn't look at Lenny's face. He knew the expression he would see there: admiration, love, dismay. And there was nothing he could give in return.

The silence was broken by a squeak from Mother. "Augustus." She spoke quickly, in a false-bright voice, as though nothing had been said. "I've been thinking, this evening you and your father might go to see Mr. Geyer about a recommendation for class C testing-"

Father cleared his throat. "Now, Ada, you know we've been all over that-"

"There may have been a change-"

"There's never a change," Gus cut her off harshly. "I'll never get a better job, never get a flat of my own, never get married. There just isn't room."

Father frowned, the corners of his mouth drawing down in an unwittingly comic expression. "Now, see here, Son," he started.

"Never mind," Gus said. "I'll be out of here in a minute, and leave the whole thing to you-custard and all."

"Oh, God!" Gus saw his mother's face crumple into a red-blotched mask of grief, a repellent expression of weak, smothering, useless mother love.

"Say something to him, George," she whimpered. "He's going-out there!"

"You mean. . . ." Father elaborated a frown. "You mean the colonies?"

"Sure, that's what he means," Lenny burst out. "Gus, you're going to Alpha!"

"Catch me volunteering for anything," Uncle Fred shook his head. "Stories I've heard. . . ."

"Augustus, I've been thinking," Mother began babbling. "We'll leave the whole flat to you, this lovely apartment, and we'll go into Barracks, just visit you here on Sundays, just come and bring you a nice casserole or soup, you know how fond you are of my lichen soup, and-"

"I've got to go," Gus backed a step.

"After all we've done for you!" Mother keened suddenly. "All the years we've scraped and saved, so we could give you the best of everything. . . ."

"Now, Son, better think it over," Father mumbled. "Remember, there's no turning back if you volunteer. You'll never see your home again-or your mother. . . ." His voice trailed off. Even to his ears the prospect sounded attractive.

"Good luck, Gus," Lenny caught his hand. "I'll. . . see you."

"Sure, Lenny."

"He's going!" Mother wailed. "Stop him, George!"

Gus looked back at the faces staring at him, tried and failed to summon a twinge of regret at leaving them.

"It isn't fair," Mother moaned. Gus pressed the button and the door slid back.

"Say, if that custard isn't cold," Father was saying as the panel closed behind Gus.

2

Recruitment Center Number Sixty-one was a white-lit acre of noise and animal warmth and tension and people packed elbow to elbow under the low ceiling with its signs reading CLASS ONE-SPECIAL and TEST UNITS D-G and PRE-PROCESSING (DEFERRED STATUS) and its painted arrows cryptic in red and green and black. After an hour's waiting, Gus's head was ringing dizzily.

His turn came. A woman in a tan uniform thrust a plastic tag at him, looking past his left ear.

"Station twenty-five on your left," she intoned. "Move along. . . ."

"I'd like to ask some questions," Gus started. The woman flicked her eyes at him; her voice was drowned in the chopping of other voices as the press from behind thrust Gus forward. A thick-shouldered man with reddish hair put his face near Gus's.

"Some mob," he shouted. "Geeze, it's a regular evacuation, like."

"Yeah," Gus said. "I've heard Alpha was next best to Hell, but it seems to be popular."

"Hah!" the redhead leaned closer. "You know the world population as of Sunday night stat cut-off? Twenty-nine billion plus-and the repro factor says she'll double in twelve hundred and four days. And you know why?" he warmed to his subject. "No politician's going to vote to cut down the vote supply-"

"You-over here." A hand grabbed Gus and thrust him toward a table behind which sat a pale man with thin, wispy hair. He pushed two small punched cards across.

"Sign these."

"First I'd like to ask a few questions," Gus started.

"Sign or get out. Snap it up, Mac."

"I want to know what I'm getting into. What's it like, out on Alpha Three? What kind of contract do I-"

A hand closed on Gus's arm. A man in Ground Corps uniform loomed beside him.

"Trouble, fella?"

"I walked in here voluntarily." Gus threw the hand off. "All I want-"

"We process twenty thousand a day through here, fella. You can see we got no time for special attention. You've seen the broadcasts; you know about New Earth-"

"What assurance have I got-"

"No assurance at all, fella. None at all. Take it or leave it."

"You're holding up the line," the thin-haired man barked. "You want to sign, or you want to go back home. . . . ?"

Gus picked up the stylus and signed.

\* \* \*

An hour later, aboard a converted cargo-carrier, Gus sat cold and airsick on a canvas strip seat between the red-headed man, whose name he had learned was Hogan, and a fattish fellow who complained continuously in a tremulous tone:

". . . . give a man time to think. Big step, going out to the colonies at my time of life. Leaving a good job. . . ."

"They washed a lot of 'em out on the physical," Hogan said. "Figures. Tough out on Alpha; why haul freight that can't make it, hah? Costs plenty to lift a man four light years."

"I thought they took anybody," Gus said. "I never heard of anyone who

volunteered coming back home."

"I heard they send 'em to labor camps." Hogan spoke confidentially from the corner of his mouth. "Can't afford to send malcontents back to the hive."

"Maybe," Gus said. "All I know is, I passed and I'm going-and I don't want to come back, ever."

"Yeah," Hogan nodded. "We made it. To hell with them other guys."

". . . . no time to think it over, consider the matter in depth," the fat man said. "It's not what I'd call fair, not fair at all. . . ."

\* \* \*

They debarked on a flat, dusty-tan plain that stretched away to a distant rampart of smoke-blue mountains. Gus resisted an impulse to clutch the railing as he descended the ramp; the open sky made him dizzy. The air was thin, after the pressurized city and the transport's canned air. Gus felt lightheaded. He hadn't eaten all day. He looked at his watch, was astonished to see that it had been less than five hours since he had left the flat.

Uniformed cadremen called orders up and down the line. The irregular ranks of recruits started off, following a dun-colored lead car. After half an hour, Gus's legs ached from the unaccustomed exercise. His breath was like fire in his throat. The car moved steadily ahead, laying a trail of dust across the empty desert.

"Where the hell we going?" Hogan's voice wheezed beside him. "There's nothing here but this damned desert."

"Must be Mojave Spaceport."

"They're trying to kill us," Hogan complained. "What do you say we fall out, catch some rest?"

Gus thought about dropping back, throwing himself down, resting. He pictured a cadreman coming over, ordering him back.

Back home.

He kept going.

\* \* \*

They marched on through the afternoon, with one brief break during which paper trays of gray mush were handed out. Marching, they watched the sun go down like a pour of molten metal. Under the stars, they marched. It was after midnight when a string of lights appeared in the distance. Gus slogged on, no longer conscious of the pain in his feet and legs. When the halt was called on a broad sweep of flood-lit blacktop, he was herded along with the others into a barracks that smelled of new plastic and disinfectants. He fell on the narrow bunk pointed out to him, sank down into a deeper sleep than he had ever known-

-and awoke in the pre-dawn chill to the shouts of the noncoms. After a breakfast of brown mush, the recruits were lined up before the barracks and a cadre officer mounted a low platform to address them.

"You men have a lot of questions to ask," he said. His amplified voice echoed across the pavement. "You want to know what you're getting into, what kind of handout of jobs or farm land or gold mines you'll get on New Earth." He waited ten seconds while a murmur built up.

"I'll tell you," he said. The murmur stilled.

"You'll get just one thing on Alpha Three, an even chance." The officer stepped down and walked away. The murmur rose to an angry mutter. A noncom took the platform and barked, "That's enough, you Covvs! When the major said an even chance, that meant nobody gets special privileges! Nobody! Maybe some of you were big shots once; forget all that. From now on, it's what you can do that counts. Only half of you are going to Alpha. We'll find out which half today. Now. . . ." He dictated orders. Gus found himself in a group of twenty men tramping out across the pavement toward a tall, open-work structure. A tall, black-haired man marched beside him.

"These boys don't give away much," he said. "A man'd think they had something to hide."

"No talking in ranks!" a wide-faced cadreman with gaps between his teeth barked. "You'll find out all you need to know soon enough, and you won't like it." He leered and moved on. There was no more talking.

\* \* \*

At the tower, the men were herded into a large open-sided lift that lurched as it rumbled upward. Gus watched the desert floor sink away, spreading out below like a dirty blanket. He shied as the gate whooshed open beside him at the top.

"Out, you Covvs!" the burly noncome shouted. Nobody moved.

"You," the cadreman's eyes fixed on Gus. "Let's go. You look like a big, tough boy. All it takes is a little guts."

Gus looked out at the railless platform, the four-foot catwalk extending across to a wider platform twenty feet distant. He felt his feet freeze to the car floor.

The noncom shook his head, brushed past Gus, walked halfway across the catwalk, turned and folded his arms.

"Alpha's that way," he jerked his head to indicate the far end of the walk.

Gus took a breath and walked quickly across. Others followed. Three stayed behind, refusing the walk. The noncom gestured.

"Take 'em back!" The car door closed on them. The cadreman faced his charges.

"This scares you," he said. "Sure, it's something new; you never had to do

anything like that before. Well, out on Alpha everything'll be new. You Covvs'll have to adapt or die."

"What if somebody fell?" the black-bearded man asked.

"He'd be dead," the noncom said flatly. "That's real rock down there. If you're going to die, it's better to do it here than after the government's wasted the cost of shipping you four lights into space."

\* \* \*

After the tower, there was a climb up a tortuous construction of bars and angles, a maze on edge that led to dead ends and impasses that forced the climber to descend, find a new route, while his hands ached and his legs trembled with fatigue. Then there was a water hazard: Locked in a large cage suspended over a muddy pond, Gus listened to instructions, held his breath as the cage submerged, rose, dripping, submerged again. . . . and again. When the torture ended he was half drowned. Two unconscious men were carried away. Then there was an obstacle course, with warning signs posted. Several men ignored the signs-or forgot-or lost their balance. They were carried away. Gus stared at one blood-spattered face, unbelieving.

"They can't do this!" Hogan said. "By God, these birds have gone out of their minds! They. . . ." He fell silent as the gap-toothed noncom strolled past.

There was a half-hour break while the colonists ate another mush ration; then the day went on. There was a run across a rock-strewn ground where a misstep meant a broken ankle, or worse; a passage through a twisted, eighteen-inch duct where panic could mean entrapment, upside down; a ride in a centrifuge that left Gus dizzy, shaking, soggy with cold sweat. None of the trials were particularly strenuous-or even dangerous, if the subject kept his head and followed instructions. But steadily the roster of men dwindled. By nightfall, only Gus and eight others were left of the twenty who had started together. Hogan and the black-haired man-Franz-were among them.

"Haven't you caught on to what's going on here yet?" Hogan whispered hoarsely to Gus as the survivors tramped back toward the barracks area. "I heard about this kind of place. They brought us out here to do away with us. The whole deal-free trip to a new planet, the whole colonization program-it's a phony, a cover-up for killing off everybody who's not satisfied with things."

"You're nuts," Franz said.

"Yeah? You've heard the talk about euthanasia. . . ."

"A little gas in the hive would be easier," Gus said.

"That pond! If I wouldn't of seen it, I'd of called the man a liar told me about it!"

"Sure, it's a screwy setup," Franz conceded. "But this is a crash program. They had to improvise. . . ."

A murmuring sound had grown unnoticed in the distance. Now, as it swelled, Gus thought of distant thunder, and his imagination pictured cool wind, a cloudburst after the misery of the day's heat.

"Look!" Men were pointing. A flickering white star at zenith grew visibly brighter, and the sound grew with it. The rumble rolled across the plain, and the light brightened into a glittering play of fire at the end of a trail of luminosity.

"Stand fast!" the noncoms shouted as the ranks broke. A jet plane thundered across from the east, shot upward, dwindling toward the descending ship, which grew, waxing like a moon, as a hot wind sprang up, blowing outward from the landing point ten miles distant. A glint of high sunlight showed on the flank of the great vessel. It sank gently on its pillar of fire, dropped again into darkness, a moving tower of lights, sliding down to settle in its bed of roiling, fiery cloud. Slowly, the bellow of the titanic engines died, the glare faded. Echoes washed back and forth across the plain.

"Starship!" the words ran through the ranks. Gus felt his heart begin to thud in his chest. Starship!

There was no sleep that night. "You'll get plenty from now on," the cadreman told the recruits, as they formed up into double lines leading to a white-painted building that gleamed pale in the polyarcs. It seemed to Gus that the plain was filled with men, shuffling toward the lighted doorways. Hours passed before he reached the building. He blinked in the greenish glare of the long, antiseptically bare room. Teams of surgically masked men and women worked over rows of tables.

"Strip and get on the board," a voice chanted. Technicians closed in around Gus. He backed, gripped by a sudden panic.

"Wait-"

Hands caught him. He fought, but cursing men forced him back. Hyposprays jetted icy cold against his arms. Questions clamored in his brain but before he could form them into words he felt himself sinking down into the fleecy softness of sleep. . . .

3

Someone was talking urgently. The voice had been going on for a long time, he knew, but now it began to penetrate:

" . . . . you understand? Come on, Covv, wake up!"

Gus tried to speak, said "Awwrrr. . . ."

"Come on, on your feet!"

Gus forced his eyes open. It was a different face that bent over him, not one of the technicians. A half-familiar face, except for the half-inch beard and hollow cheeks.

"Sergeant. . . . Berg. . . ." Gus got out.



"That's right, Covv, come on, let's move, there's work to be done."

"Wha' went wrong. . . ."

"Hah? What didn't go wrong? Hull damage, mutiny-but that's not for you to worry about, Covv. We're ten hours out; you've had your sleep-

"Ten hours. . . . from Earth?"

"Hah? From Alpha Three, Covv! Eighteen hundred and fourteen days out of Terra."

Gus rocked as though he had been struck. Almost. . . . five years.

"We're almost there," he said. Berg was urging him to his feet.

"That's right. And you've been tapped for ship's complement-you and a few other Covvs-to help out during approach. Coolie labor. Follow me."

Staggering a little, Gus trailed the noncom along a tight gray corridor, green-lit by a glare-strip running along the low ceiling. Passing an open door, he caught a glimpse of a wrecked wall, sheet plastic partitioning bulging out of line, broken pipes and tangled wires, a scatter of debris.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Never mind," Berg growled. "You're just a dumb Covv. Stay that way."

They rode a lift up, walked along another corridor, came into the Christmas tree brilliance of the bridge. Silent, harried-looking men in rumpled tan peered worriedly into screens and instrument faces. Officers muttered together; technicians chanted into vocoders. A young-looking officer with short blond hair gestured to Berg.

"This is the last of 'em, sir," the noncom said.

"I'll use him as a messenger. No communications with sections aft of Station Twenty-eight now. The tub's coming apart."

"Stand by here," Berg told Gus, and went away.

"Lieutenant, take over on six," a guttural voice called. The blond lieutenant moved to a gimbaled seat before a screen that showed a vivid crescent against velvet black. A moon was visible at the edge of the screen, a tiny blob of greenish-white. No stars showed; the sensitivity of the screen had dimmed in response to the blaze of the nearby sun.

Gus moved back against the wall. For the next hour he stood there, forgotten, watching the image of the planet grow on the screens as the weary officer worked over the maze of controls that swept in a twenty-foot horseshoe around the compartment.

". . . . we're not going to try it-not while I'm on the bridge." The words caught Gus's attention. A lean, hawk-faced officer tossed papers onto the floor. "We'll have to divert!"

"You're refusing to carry out my instructions?" The squat, white-haired man

who Gus knew was the captain raised his voice. "You press me too far, Leone-"

"I'll put her down for you on Planet Four," the first officer shouted him down. "That's the best I can do!"

The captain cursed the tall man. Other voices joined in the dispute. In the end the captain bellowed his capitulation:

"Planet Four, then, Leone! And there'll be charges filed, I guarantee you that!"

"File and be damned!"

The argument went on. Pressed back against the wall, Gus watched as the crescent swelled, grew to fill the screen, became a curve of dusty-lighted horizon, then a hazy plain dotted with the tiny white flecks of clouds. Faint, eerie whistlings started up, climbed the scale; buffeting started. The men on the bridge had forgotten their differences now. Crisp commands and curt acknowledgements were the only words spoken.

Under Gus, the deck bucked and hammered. He went down, held onto a stanchion as the shaking grew, the scream of air became a frantic tornado-

Then, quite suddenly, the motion smoothed out as a new thunder vibrated through the deck: the roar of the engines waking to life.

Minutes crawled past while the Niagara-rumble went on and on. Then a shock slammed the deck, sent Gus sprawling. Half-dazed, he got to his feet, saw the officers swinging from their places, whooping, slapping each other's backs. The captain bustled past, leaving the bridge. The big General Display screen showed a stretch of dull gray-green hills under a watery sky.

"What the devil are you doing here?" a voice cracked at Gus like a whip. It was First Officer Leone. "Get off the bridge, you bloody Covv!"

"Sir," Sergeant Berg said, coming up, "Captain's orders-"

"Damn the captain! Damn the lot of you." He waved an arm to include everyone on the bridge. "Reservists! The bunch of you wouldn't make a wart on a regular officer's rump!"

Gus made his way alone back down to the level where he had been brought out of Coldsleep. A cadreman greeted him with a curse.

"Where the hell have you been, Covv? You're on the defrost detail. Get aft and report to Hensley in the meat room-and don't get lost!"

"I wasn't lost," Gus said, returning the noncom's glare. "But I think a fellow named Leone was."

"Ahhh. . . ." the noncom gave him terse directions. He followed them to a narrow, high-aisled chamber, bright-lit, frosty. A bowlegged NCO waddled up to him, pointed to a rack of heavy parkas, assigned him to a crew. Gus watched as they undogged a thick, foot-and-a-half square door, drew out a slab on which the frost-covered body of a man lay under a thin plastic

membrane.

"Automatics are out," the foreman explained. "We got to unload these Covvs by hand-what's left of 'em."

"What do you mean?"

"We took a four-ton rock through the hull, about fifty hours ago. Lost a bunch of officers and some crew-and before Leone got around to checking, we lost a lot of Covvs. Splinter right through the master panel." The man lifted the plastic, which peeled away from the waxy flesh with a crinkling sound. "Spoiled, you might say-like this one."

Gus looked at the drawn, hollow face, the glint of yellowish teeth behind the gray lips. The plastic dropped back and the crew moved on to the next door.

In the next five hours, Gus saw twenty-one more corpses. One hundred and forty-one presumably intact colonists were rolled into the revival room. Gus caught glimpses of the gagging, shivering men as they responded to the efforts of the Med crews.

"It ain't easy to die and come to life again," the bandy-legged corporal conceded, watching as a man retched and bucked against the hold-down straps.

The work went on. The horror had gone out of it now; it was simply monotonous, hard, bone-chilling work. He had learned to spot the symptoms of tragedy early: a bulge of frost around a door invariably meant a dead man inside. The trickle of life processes of a living Coldsleep subject generated sufficient heat to prevent frosting inside the capsule.

There was the tell-tale trace on the next door. Gus opened it, tugged to break the ice seal, slid the tray out. There was a heavy layer of ice over the plastic. Gus leaned close, his attention caught by something in the face under the ice. He stripped the sheet back from the body, felt an icy shock that locked his breath in his throat.

The face was that of his younger brother, Lenny.

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"Tough," the corporal said, flicking an eye curiously at Gus. "According to the tag, he was in the draft next to yours; must have come into Mojave the day after you. We was five weeks loading. . . ."

Gus thought of the screening trials, the torture of the dunking cage, the walk across emptiness on the narrow catwalk. And Lenny, trying to follow him, going through all of it, and dying like this.

"You said by the time Leone got around to checking, some of the colonists were dead," Gus said in a ragged tone. "What did you mean?"

"Forget it, Covv. Let's get back to work. We got the live ones to think about." The corporal put a hand on the small pistol strapped to his hip. "We're not out of the woods yet-any of us."

The ship had been on the ground twenty-seven hours when Gus' turn came to walk down the landing ramp and out under the chill sky of a new world. A light, misty rain was falling. There was a sour smell of burned vegetation and over it a hint of green, growing things, alien but fresh, not unpleasant.

The charred ground was a churn of black mud trampled by the thousands of men who had debarked ahead of him. They were lined up in irregular ranks, row after row, that stretched out of sight over a rise of ground. Gus's group was formed up and marched off toward the far end of the bivouac area.

"This don't look like much to me," Hogan said. His red hair looked wilder than ever. Like the other colonists, he had acquired an inch of beard while in Coldsleep.

"This isn't where we were supposed to land," Gus told him. "We're on the wrong planet."

"Hah? How do you know?"

Gus told him what he had heard during his stay on the bridge.

"Cripes!" Hogan waved a hand at the treeless, rolling tundra. "The wrong planet! That means there ain't no colony here, no housing, no nothing!"

"As the man said," Franz put in, "we're on our own. We can carve our own town out of this-"

"Yeah? With no trees, no lumber, no running water-"

"Sure, there's running water. It's running down my neck right now."

"We been had!" Hogan burst out. "This ain't the deal I signed on for!"

"You signed like the rest of us, no questions asked."

"Yeah, but-"

"Don't say it," Franz said. "You'll break my heart."

"No shelter," Hogan said an hour later. "I heard the best food all went to the colonists. Where is it?"

"Wait until the ship's unloaded," Franz said.

"Nothing's come off that tub yet but us Covvs." Hogan rubbed his hands together for warmth, looking toward the grim tower of the ship. The damage done to the hull by the meteorite was clearly visible as a pockmark near the upper end.

"They're probably still busy doing emergency repairs," Franz said.

"Don't look like a little hole like that could of done all that damage," Hogan said.

"That ship's nearly as complicated as a human body," a man standing by said. "Poking a hole in it's like shooting a hole in you."

"Hey-look there!" Hogan pointed. A new group of parka-clad colonists was filing over the brow of the hill.

"Women!" Franz whispered.

"Females, by God!" Hogan burst out.

"It figures," someone said. "You can't make a colony without women!"

"Boys, they kept that one up their sleeve!"

The men watched as squad after squad of female colonists toiled up the hill, forming up beyond the men. Then they turned at the sound of car engines. A carryall towing a small trailer came along the line, stopped near Gus. A cadreman jumped down, pulled back the tarp covering the trailer, hauled out a heavy bundle.

"All right, you Covvs," he shouted as the car pulled away. "You're going to dig in. File up here and draw shovels!"

"Shovels? Is he kidding?" Hogan looked around at the others.

"Dig for what?" someone called.

"Shelter," the corporal barked. "Unless you want to sleep out in the open."

"What about our pre-fabs?"

"Yeah-and our rations!"

"There's power equipment aboard the ship! If there's digging to be done, by God, let's use it!"

The corporal unlimbered his foot-long club. "I told you Covvs," he started, and his voice was drowned by the clamor as the men closed in on him.

"We want food!"

"To hell with digging!"

"When you going to hand out the women?"

"I. . . I'll go see." The noncom backed away, then turned, went off quickly down-slope. Voices were being raised all across the hill now. Gus saw other cadremen withdrawing, one with blood on his face and minus his cap. The uproar grew. A carryall raced up from the ship, took cadremen aboard. Clubs swung at colonists who gave chase.

"After 'em!" Hogan yelled. Gus grabbed his arm. "Stop, you damned fool! This is a mistake!"

"It's time we started getting a fair deal around here! We've not convicts, by God!"

"The power's all theirs," Gus said. "This won't help us!"

"We outnumber them a hundred to one," Hogan crowed. "Look at 'em run! I

guess the digging party's off!" He shook off Gus's grip, looked toward the women. "Boys, let's pay a call. Them little ladies look lonesome-

Gus shoved the redhead back. "Start that, and we're done for! Can't you see the spot we're in?"

"What spot?" Hogan began to bluster. "We showed 'em they can't push us around!"

"They're loading up, going back aboard." Gus pointed. Heads turned to watch the last of the cars wheeling up the ramp.

"They're scared of us-

"We jumped them, forced their hand-

"Yeah?" Hogan frowned ferociously. "So they ran from us."

"You damned fool," Gus said wearily. "Suppose they don't come back out?"

\* \* \*

"They can't do this to us," Hogan whined for the fortieth time. The suns-both of them-had set hours before. The rain had turned to sleet that froze on the springy turf and on the men's clothing.

"It must be five below," Franz said. "You think they'll leave us out here to freeze, Gus?"

"I don't know."

"They're in there, eating our rations, sleeping in soft beds," Hogan growled. "The dirty blood-suckers!"

"Can't much blame 'em," Franz said. "With boneheads like you roughing 'em up. You expect 'em to come out and let you finish the job?"

"They can't get away with it!"

"They can get away with anything they want to," Gus said. "Nobody back on Earth knows what's going on out here. It takes ten years to ask a question and get an answer. And in ten years the population will have tripled. They'll have other things to think about than us. We're expendable."

A ripple of talk was passing through the ranks of men squatting on the exposed hillside under the relentless sleet. Dark figures were advancing from the direction of the women's area.

"It's the girls," Hogan said. "They want company."

"Leave them alone, Hogan," Gus said. "Let's see what they want."

\* \* \*

The leader of the women's delegation was a strong-looking blonde in her late twenties, muffled in an oversized parka. She planted herself in front of the men. They closed in, gaping.

"Who's in charge over here?" she demanded.

"Nobody, baby," Hogan started. "It's every man for himself. . . ." He reached out with a meaty paw. The girl brushed it aside. "Pass that for now, Porky," she said briskly. "We've got important things to talk about, like not freezing to death. What are you fellows doing about it?"

"Not a damn thing, honey. What can we do?" Hogan jerked a thumb toward the lights of the ship. "Those lousy crots have cut us off-"

"I saw what happened; you damned fools started a riot. I don't blame them for pulling out. But what are you going to do about it now? You going to let your women freeze?"

"Our women?"

"Whose women you think we are, Porky? There's even one for you-if you can keep her alive."

"We've got a few shovels," Gus said. "We can dig in. This sod ought to be good enough to make huts of."

"Dig holes for over nine thousand people, with a couple dozen shovels?" Hogan jeered. "Are you nuts-"

A crackle like near-by lightning sounded. "Attention-on," a vast voice boomed across the bivouac. "This is Captain Harris-is. . . ." Floodlights sprang into life at the base of the ship.

"You people are guilty of mutiny-any," the great voice rolled. "I'd be justified in whatever measures I chose to take at this point-oint. Including leaving you to suffer the consequences of your own actions-shuns." There was a pause to allow the thought to sink in.

"However, as it happens, I have repairs to undertake-ache. I'm shorthanded-dead. Time is important-ant-ant."

"Tough," Hogan growled.

"I want twenty volunteers to aid in the work of preparing my ship for space-ace. In return, I'll see to it that certain supplies are made available to you people-lull."

A mutter went up from the men. "The son of a bitch is holding us up for our own rations!" Hogan yelled.

"At the first sign of disorder, I'll clear a one-mile radius around the ship," the captain's voice boomed out. "I'm offering you mutineers the one chance you'll get-et! I suggest you think it over carefully! I want you to select twenty strong workers and send them forward-herd!"

"Let's rush the crots when they open the ports," Hogan shouted over the surf-noise of the crowd. "We can take the ship and rip those crots limb from limb! There's enough supplies aboard to last us for years! We can live in the ship until a rescue ship gets here!"

Faces were turning toward Hogan. Greedy eyes glistened in half-frozen faces.

"Let's go get 'em!" Hogan yelled. "Let's-"

Gus stepped after him, caught him by the shoulder, spun him around, and hit him square in the mouth with all his strength. Hogan went back and down and lay still.

"I'm volunteering for the work crew," Gus called, and started forward. A path opened to let him through.

Franz walked at Gus's side, leading the little troop of volunteers down the slope to the ship. The big floods bathed them in bluish light. Gus could feel the muscles of his stomach tighten, imagining guns aimed from the open ports. Or maybe it would be a touch of the main drive. . . .

No guns fired. No flame blossomed beyond the gigantic landing jacks rising from the mud. A squad of crewmen met them, searched them for weapons, detailed them off, marched them away. Gus and the blond woman were escorted to the Power Section, handed over to a bald, grim-faced engineering officer.

"Only two? And one of them a woman? Damn the captain's arrogance! I told the-" He shut himself up, barked at a greasy-handed corporal who gave the newcomers a ration of mush and set them to work disassembling a fire-blackened mechanism.

"What's the rush?" the girl asked the NCO. "Why work all night? We're all tired-you too. How long since you've slept?"

"Too bloody long. But it's captain's orders."

"What's he doing for the colonists? Has he sent out the food and shelter he promised?"

"How do I know?" the man muttered. "Just stick to the job and can the chatter."

\* \* \*

Half an hour later, with the corporal and the engineer busy cursing over a frozen valve at the far end of the room, the girl whispered to Gus, "I think we're being double-crossed."

"Maybe."

"What'll we do?"

"Keep working."

Another hour passed. Abruptly, the engineer threw down the calibrator with which he had been working, stamped out through the outer door.

"Try keeping the corporal occupied for a few minutes," Gus hissed at the girl. She nodded, rose, and went over to the corporal.



"I feel a little dizzy, sugar," she said, and folded against him. Gus went quickly to the door and out into the green-lit corridor.

\* \* \*

He emerged in the darkened anteroom outside the bridge.

". . . . nine hours at the outside!" a harsh voice was saying. "We lift before then, or we don't lift!"

"I don't trust your calculations, Leone."

"I showed you the fatigue profiles; check them for yourself-but do it fast! The structure is deflecting at the rate of two centimeters per hour. We'll have major strains in three hours, and buckling in eight-"

"I'll need six hours, minimum, to unload cargo, after the priority one work is out of the way-"

"Forget unloading, Captain. Your first job is to get your ship back, intact!"

"And you with it, eh, Leone?"

"The other officers feel as I do."

"After you've brow-beaten them! What about the colonists? Their equipment, their rations-"

"We can't spare the food," Leone said crisply. "You know what the damage inventory showed. We'll be lucky if we make it ourselves. The Covvs will manage-they'll have to. That's what they're here for, remember?"

"They were slated for an established colony on Three-"

"They can survive on Four. It's chilly, but no worse than plenty of areas of Terra."

"You're a cold-blooded devil, Leone."

"It's what you've got to do. . . ."

Gus stepped back, departed as silently as he had come.

The engineer whirled with an oath as Gus appeared. Gus stepped directly to him, and without warning hit him hard in the stomach, hit him again on the jaw as he doubled over. The corporal yelled and jumped, tugging at his gun. He went down hard as the girl threw herself at his legs. Gus knocked him cold with a blow on the head.

"Let's get out of here!" Gus helped the girl up; her nose was bleeding. He led her into the corridor, headed back toward the loading deck. They had gone fifty yards when a crew of armed men burst from a crossway and cut them off. It took three of them to hold the blond girl. Gus saw a club swinging toward his head; then the world burst into a shower of fireworks.

Bright light glared in Gus's face. He was lying on his back on the floor, his hands locked behind him. Across the small room, a tall man in a tan uniform sat at a desk. Gus sat up painfully; at the sound, the man turned. It was the first officer, Leone. He gave Gus a sardonic look. His eyes were red, his chin unshaven.

"I could have had you shot," he said. "But I wanted to learn a few things first. Speak freely and I may be able to do something for you. Now: who was in on the scheme with you? Are those"-he tilted his head to indicate the planet outside-"poor grubbers planning some sort of attack?"

"I'm on my own," Gus said.

"Come on, man, speak up! You're already deep enough: striking an officer, desertion-"

"I'm not in your army," Gus cut him off. "I want to see the captain, if you haven't eaten him for breakfast."

Leone laughed. "To claim your rights, I suppose."

"Something like that."

"There are no rights," Leone said flatly. "Only necessities."

"Like food and shelter. Those people out there came here expecting a decent chance. You plan to abandon them here-with nothing."

"Ah, so that was what was behind your little dash for freedom." Leone nodded as if pleased. "You need to adjust your thinking, Covv-"

"My name's Addison. Calling us Covvs won't take us off your conscience."

"Wrong on two counts. I have no conscience. As for names, they imply family ties, a place in a social structure. You have none-except what you might have made for yourself, out there." Leone shook his head. "No, Covv it is. It's the role you were born for-you and millions like you." He poured himself a drink from a bottle on the desk, tossed it back with a practiced flip of the wrist.

"There was a time when I wondered at the purpose of it all-man's slow climb up to the present mad carnival of spawning that's turned a planet into nothing more than a surface on which nameless, faceless nonentities breed endlessly, in a doomed effort to convert the entire mass of the world into human flesh. It seemed so pointless. But now I understand." Leone smiled crookedly. He was very drunk.

"Ah, you're wondering, but too proud to ask! Proud! Yes, every little unremembered mote of humanity has his share of that fatuous delusion of self-importance! Funny; very funny!" Leone leaned toward Gus, waving the glass in his hand. "Don't you know your function, Covv?" He grinned expectantly. Gus looked at him silently.

"You're a statistic!" Leone poured again, raised the glass in a mock toast. "Nature brings forth millions, that one may survive. And you're one out of the millions."

"Now that you have it all figured out," Gus said, "what are you going to do about us? Those people will freeze out there."

"Perhaps," Leone said carelessly. "Perhaps not. The toughest will survive-if they can. Survive to breed. And in time, devour this world, and jump on to a new star. Meanwhile, it hardly matters what happens to a statistic."

"They were promised an even chance."

"Promises, promises. Death in the end is the only promise, my boy. As for those ciphers out there in the cold-think of them as fish eggs, if that will help you. Spawned by the million so that one or two can live to spawn in turn. Life goes on-as long as you've got plenty of fish eggs."

"They're not fish eggs. They're men, and they deserve simple justice-"

"You call justice simple?" Leone leaned forward, almost rolled from his chair before he caught himself. "The most sophisticated concept with which the mind of man deludes itself-and that's the only place it exists: in men's minds. What does the Universe know about justice, Covv? Suns burn, planets whirl, chemicals react. The fox devours the bunny rabbit with a clear conscience-just the way Alpha Four will devour those poor clots out there." He waved an arm. "And that's as it should be. Nature's way. Survive-or don't survive. It's natural-like an earthquake. It'll kill you without the least ill-will in the world."

"You're not an earthquake," Gus said. "It's you that's holding back the food those men need."

"Don't come whining to me for your lousy justice!" Leone shouted, swaying in his chair. "We were having a well-earned drink in the wardroom when the rock hit. Killed half the officers of this damned tub-killed my friend, my best friend, damn you! After five years, cruise almost over. . . . and all for the sake of a load of caviar. . . ."

Leone gulped the rest of his drink, threw the glass across the room. "Don't chatter to me about what's fair," he muttered. "It's what's real that counts." He put his head down on his arms and snored.

\* \* \*

It took Gus five minutes to reach the desk, grope in the drawers until he found the electrokey which unlocked the cuffs on his wrists. There was a crew-type coverall in the closet. Gus donned it, added a small handgun from a wall chest. In the passageway, all was silent. Most of the crew were busy, Gus knew. He made his way down to the lower levels, finally encountered a familiar corridor leading to the Power Section. He passed two men on the way; they hardly glanced at him.

The red-painted door to the Power Control Room stood ajar. Gus slipped past it, closed it silently, dogged it down. The engineering officer yelped when Gus poked the gun into his back.

"Quiet," Gus cautioned. He prodded the man along to a parts locker, motioned him inside.

"What do you hope to gain by this, you madman?" The man's red face blazed almost purple. "You're asking to be shot down-"

"So are you. No noise." Gus shut the door and locked it. He went on to the room that housed the control servos. Three technicians worked over a disassembled chassis. They whirled when Gus snapped an order at them. Their hands went up slowly. Gus herded two of them into a parts locker. The third backed away, trembling and sweating, as Gus pressed the gun to his chest.

"Show me how this setup works," Gus ordered.

The technician began a confused lecture on the theory of cyclic fusion-fission reactors.

"Skip all that," Gus told him. "Tell me about these controls."

The technician explained. Gus listened, asked questions. After fifteen minutes he indicated a red plastic panel cover.

"That's the damper control unit?"

"That's right."

"Open it up."

"Now, just a minute, fellow," the man said quickly. "You don't know what you're getting into-"

"Do as I said."

"You tamper with that, you can throw the whole core out of balance!"

Gus rammed the gun hard into the man's chest.

"OK, OK." He set to work with fingers that shook.

Gus studied the maze of exposed circuitry. "What happens if you cut those conduits?" he pointed. The technician backed away, shaking his head. "Wait a minute, fellow-"

Gus cuffed the side of his head hard enough to send the man sprawling.

"The whole revert circuit will be thrown on the line! You'll get a feed into the interlock system, and-"

"Put it in English!"

"She'd climb past crit and blow! She'd blow the side of the planet out!"

"What if you just cut that one?" Gus indicated another lead.

The technician shook his head. "Nearly as bad," his voice broke. "She'd run away and the core would begin to heat. She'd run red in an hour, and slag down in three. The gamma count-"

"Any way to stop it, once it starts?"

"Not once you let her climb past critical! You red-line her, and we're all finished!"

"Cut that lead," Gus commanded.

"You're out of your mind-" The man launched himself at Gus; he hit him with the gun, sent him reeling. There was a heavy pair of bolt-cutters on the nearby bench. Gus used them to snap through the pencil-thick lead. At once, a bell sounded stridently. Gus tossed the cutters aside, dragged the groaning man to a tool locker; then he went to the wall phone, punched a code from the list beside it.

"Captain, this is one of the fish eggs," he said. "I think we'd better have a talk about a choice you're going to have to make."

5

Gus stood with Captain Harris on a hillside a mile from the ship, watching with the others as the spot of dull red grew on the side of the gleaming tower that was the stricken starship. A sigh went up from the men as a long ripple appeared across the flawless curve of the great hull.

"Broke her back," the captain said tonelessly.

"She'll cool down enough by spring for us to go aboard and salvage whatever might be of use to the colony. Meanwhile, what we took off her before she got too hot ought to last us."

Harris gave Gus an ice-blue glare that reminded him of a girl left behind on faraway Terra. The memory seemed as remote as the planet.

"Yes-you should be able to survive until then-"

"We ought to survive," Gus corrected. "We're all in this together, now."

"When the story of your treachery gets out-"

"It's to your advantage not to let it," Gus interrupted the threat. "Better stick to the story we agreed on, about my lucky hunch and your heroic action, saving as much as you did."

"My officers would tear me apart if they knew I'd come to terms with a mutinous, sabotaging scoundrel!"

"The colonists would rip all of you apart if they knew you'd planned to maroon them."

"I'm still wondering if you'd have made good your threat to blow her apart."

"Either way, you'd have lost. This way, you have a certain amount of goodwill going for you with the colonists. They think you chose to lose the ship rather than abandon them."

"If there'd been any other way. . . ."

A tall figure staggered across toward the two men.

"Cap'n. . . ." Leone blurted. "I tol' you. . . . tol' you she'd buckle."

"Yes, you told me, Leone. Go sleep it off."

"Last cruise," Leone muttered, watching the ship as the proud nose visibly leaned as the weakened structure yielded to the massive pressure of gravity. "My retirement, flat of my own, wife. . . . all gone, now. Stuck here, on this. . . . this cold desert!"

"We'll march south," Gus said. "Maybe we'll find better country."

"I'm not sure we should leave this area," Harris said. "If we're to have any chance of rescue-"

"We're pollen on the wind," Gus said. "Nobody will ever miss us. It's up to us, now; what we do for ourselves. Nobody else cares."

"My authority-"

"Doesn't mean a thing," Gus cut him off. "We're all Covvs together, swimming in the same waters."

"Shark-infested waters!"

Gus nodded. "We won't all make it; but some of us will."

Harris seemed to shudder. "How can you be sure?"

"We have a chance," Gus said. "That's all any man can ask for."