

## THE CHOICE

For a second or two, when the red ALERT light started flashing, I didn't know what it meant; then I saw the crinkly lines wiggling across the counterscope and I knew that something out there was giving off patterned radiation. Considering the fact that we were nine hundred million miles out from Earth in unexplored space, that was kind of a surprise. My first impulse was to switch on the transmitter and give whatever it was a hail—but Commander Ironblood was awake when he shouldn't have been. In two of those snappy military steps he was beside me, elbowing me out of the comm seat and pushing buttons with both hands. He was a big, thick man with quarter-inch gray stubble across his skull, and barbed wire for nerves.

"Mr. Barker," he spat me as if I wasn't there, "duty station, if you please. Power off. Observe total radiation silence." I wish I could say he yelled, but he sounded just as iceberg-cool as he had back at Sands, the day he told me the personnel computer had picked me out of the reserve files as third man on the Neptune Probe.

"I didn't ask to have an untrained, unqualified civilian aboard my command," he had told me, "but since you're assigned, you'll conduct yourself as a SpArm officer. The first thing you'll do is get a haircut—and get rid of that vacuous smile. Space is a serious business."

I stopped smiling, all right, as soon as I got my first look at the ship, all gray paint and DO and DON'T signs.

"You mean I'm going to spend a year and a half cooped up in this oversized phone booth?" I yelled.

Barker, the Number Two, had grinned at me out of the corner of his mouth. He had one of those scraped-bone faces, plastered over with freckles.

"What did you expect, Goodlark," he asked, "the Imperial suite, complete with gold doorknobs, silk sheets, and breakfast in bed?"

"Sure," I said. "Why not? Exploring the planets ought to be a groove. Why come on like a bunch of monks? Why not have a little fun while we're at it?"

He was grinning the same grin now; I guess he read my expression.

"Still looking for kicks, Goodlark?"

"Why the creep routine?" I countered. "Why don't we get excited and yell and wave or something?"

"That's not the SpArm tradition, boy. No sissy stuff for us. We mean business."

"I always thought seeing Barsoom up close would be a gas," I said. "But all we gave it was a dirty look. How did we ever get started with this by-the-numbers jazz? Where's all the music and laughter gone?"

"Are you kidding?" Barker looked shocked. "At two point seven billion bucks

a shot, you better not be caught laughing."

Just then the main fore DV screen picked up something. Ironblood switched it up to high mag. The image jumped at us.

"Holy leaping Mehitable," Barker said. "Would you look at that!"

It was something to look at: like the insides of a satellite radar station, but without the station. Big—no telling how big against all that blackness—and complicated, glittering all over with lights and shiny planes and tubes, and things that moved in long, slow strokes like mechanical arms. It hung there, looking at us. It was alert, aware—but not alive. Somehow you could tell that, just looking at it. It got bigger fast.

"That's nothing our boys ever built," Barker said. "Ye gods, Cap'n—that thing's alien!"

"We're closing rapidly," Ironblood said with no visible emotion. "Recommendations, Mr. Barker?"

"Let's arm our missiles and get a look at the whites of their eyes," Barker said in clipped tones.

"Captain Ironblood," I said, "I have a better suggestion: let's turn on our nav lights and blink out a greeting. Maybe an eight-bar rhythm. They might dig that better than the pussyfoot routine—"

He gave me a look like a jab with a sharp stick.

"SpArm isn't paying our salaries to play astrohippy on NASA time," he barked. That was as far as he got before there was a sharp bleep! and the walls dissolved around us like a switched-off solido.

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We were still strapped into our acceleration couches, but now they were sitting in the middle of a little white-walled room about the size of a dentist's surgery, and with that same feeling of something painful about to happen.

"Great galloping giraffes!" Barker said. "The ship's gone! Dissolved around our ears like . . . like—"

"Like a solido projection switching off," the captain said. "Stand fast." He unstrapped and prowled the room, feeling of the walls.

"They're real enough," he said. "It appears, gentlemen, that we've been made captive." He faced the two of us. "It's pretty plain that we're in the hands of a nonhuman intelligence of a high technical competence. I don't need to remind you that from this point on, our actions will determine their impressions of the human race. Whatever happens, we must show no signs of weakness or uncertainty. We'll present a united façade of defiance and dare them to do their worst."

"B-but what if they're friendly?" I asked.

Ironblood jerked a thumb at the walls that enclosed us. "Does this look friendly?"

"Where are they hiding?" Barker blurted. "Why don't they come out and fight like men?"

There was a loud click! from somewhere, and he whirled, fists cocked.

"Welcome aboard, gentlemen," a smooth voice said. "Please remain calm. You have been randomly selected for stat analysis, and are herewith designated specimens A, B, and C. If you're ready, testing can commence at once."

There were a few seconds of a silence as heavy as wet underwear. Then Ironblood spoke up:

"Who are you?" he called. "Where are you?"

"I'm all about you," the voice said. "Or, more simply stated, you are inside me."

"You mean we've been eaten?" Barker yapped.

"Not precisely, since I don't eat. I am a mere artifact, an information gathering device dispatched by the Galactic authorities on a routine sweep of the sector."

"Galactic authorities, eh?" Ironblood muttered. "Well, now we know who the enemy is. I suppose their espionage apparatus has been spying on us for years, monitoring our radio broadcasts, waiting for this opportunity. But they'll find SpArm personnel tough nuts to crack. Name, rank and serial number, that's all we tell them."

"Listen, Captain," I said quickly, "why don't we mention that we bruise easily, and that, although we come from a small, backward planet, we're pretty important to ourselves? Once they realize we're harmless and scared—"

"As you were, Mr. Goodlark!" Ironblood cut me off. "We'll wait for their next move without whining. I suspect they can observe our actions, overhear our talk—perhaps even read our thoughts. We'll, therefore, think positively. Keep your minds on SpArm regulations. Think of the Alamo and Pearl Harbor. Let them know we're prepared to die like men!"

"Why rush things? If we think peaceful thoughts, maybe they'll get the idea—"

"The idea we're weaklings?" Ironblood barked at me.

"That's it!" I said. "I mean, why put on an act? Just let it all hang out. We'll tell them we like to dance and sing; too bad SpArm regs didn't allow me to bring my eighty-eight stringer, I could play a few cool notes for them—"

"Dance? Sing? You're out of your mind with terror, man! Consider yourself under arrest!"

"What's the point of this kamikaze approach?" I yelled. "I have plans that involve living to a ripe old age—and there's a girl named Daisy Fields who'll be pretty broken up if I don't come back—"

"Mere individuals are expendable, Goodlark, you know that—"

"Time is of the essence, gentlemen," the voice cut in. "We'll have to hurry along now. I'll fire a standard stimulus-array at you and record your response-gestalts . . ."

"Ignore Goodlark's responses," Ironblood ordered the voice. "The man is a degenerate, a freak, not representative of his species. You may base your conclusions on my reactions, and those of Mr. Barker. Remember, Barker," he added in a low tone, "Regulations! Discipline! CinC SpArm is counting on you!"

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Suddenly the floor turned to wax. As we floundered, lights flashed, red and green and blue. I was clawing my way through a fog as thick as taffy, while sounds blared, squeaked, buzzed. There was a reek of burnt feathers, synthetic rubber, a whiff of molasses, attar of roses, old socks, new leather, dead fish. I was hot, then cold. Pictures of tigers and girls and fast cars and tidal waves and pizzas and sunsets flashed through my brain. Voices yelled, whispered, things poked, rubbed, pinched, stroked me. I mustered what control I had left for a yell, and abruptly it was all gone and the white walls were back. Barker hung in his chair, looking a little pale under the freckles. Captain Ironblood's hair was slightly ruffled and his collar was turned up on one side, but he was still holding a face like a sphinx.

"Let them have their fun," he rasped. "We'll show them they can't break us."

"Why not yell or something, Captain?" I managed to croak. "Maybe they think we like it."

"I'm warning you, Goodlark," Ironblood snarled, "you do or say anything to disgrace the uniform, and I'll personally throttle you! Clear?"

"Strange, very strange," the disembodied voice of the machine said. "They're going to have a hard time believing some of this back at Galactic Center. Still, I suppose it takes all kinds of life forms to make a Universe. Now, gentlemen, Galactic policy requires that all testees be fully compensated for any inconvenience I may have caused. Accordingly, I'm prepared to render my assistance to you in the achievement of your personal goals. My facilities are limited, of course, but I can offer you a degree of choice in the matter—"

"You mean—you've already completed your evaluation?" Ironblood took a deep breath and straightened his collar.

"Chins up, men," he murmured. "We'll soon be on our way." He cleared his throat.

"Ah, before we go," he called, "I wonder if you'd mind telling us how we measured up—just as a matter of curiosity?"

"Why, you reacted as you must, what else? But now, on to the final question: Specimen A, how would you prefer to die: by hanging, drowning, or fire?"

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"It's no more than I expected from the beginning," Ironblood said, looking a little pale around the jaws but still holding his cool.

"Cap'n, tell 'em they can't do this—" Barker started.

"I'll not beg for quarter."

"I guess it figures," Barker said. "It can't complete its report until it sees one of us die. Well, I guess you'll show 'em, Cap'n—"

"Stop chattering, you fool," Ironblood said. "I have a decision to make. I'll discount hanging at once. It has a felonious connotation I don't care for."

"I don't know, Cap'n," Barker said judiciously. "They say it's pretty humane. I mean the neck snaps, zop, like that, and it's all over—unless the drop is too short and you choke to death," he added doubtfully.

"I've never cared much for the idea of drowning," Ironblood said. "On the other hand, death by fire is reported to be rather uncomfortable too, for that matter."

"Boy, I've really got to admire the way you're taking it, Cap'n," Barker said.

"I seem to recall that if you inhale the flames, you scorch the bronchi, bringing instant death," Ironblood said hopefully.

"Hey, neat," Barker said. "I'll remember that."

"Good luck, Mr. Barker." Ironblood thrust out his hand and they gave each other the Grip, their Academy rings glinting in the glow from the walls. Ironblood looked at me.

"You're a civilian, Goodlark," he said, "but I expect you to follow Lieutenant Commander Barker's orders as if they were my own." He looked up at the ceiling.

"All right, fire it is," he said. "I'm ready."

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There was a sharp hissing sound, and suddenly there was a heap of faggots half as big as a haystack, and Ironblood strapped to a stake in the middle. Smoke whiffed up, and then red flames flickered and grew and in five seconds the whole thing was blazing away. I got a last glimpse of Ironblood standing at attention in the middle of the bonfire, and then the smoke and flames covered him.

"He went out like a man," Barker said. "He gave himself to save us, and

never whimpered."

A brisk draft had carried the last of the smoke away. There wasn't even a singed spot on the floor to show where the captain had made his exit.

"All right, you've had your fun," Barker said to the room. "Now how about putting us back aboard our vessel so we can get on with the mission?"

"Unfortunately," the voice stated, "your ship has been disassociated into its component atoms, in much the same manner as has Specimen A."

"You destroyed our ship?" Barker yelled.

"It could be reconstituted, of course, if needed," the voice said. "But to what end? I have a question for you to answer, remember?"

"Huh? You mean—the captain's sacrifice was for nothing? You're going to offer me the same lousy choice he had?"

"You disapprove of the alternatives offered?"

"I sure as hell do!"

"In that case, B, you may select your preference from among the following: shooting, stabbing, or garroting."

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Barker gave me his favorite crooked grin. "Well, Goodlark, it looks like the end of the trail for me. But don't feel bad. I guess your turn comes next."

"Listen, Barker," I said, feeling kind of cold-sweaty and hot at the same time. "Why take it like a bunch of zombies? Why don't we do what comes naturally and kick and scream and beg for mercy or something?"

Barker showed me a large, knuckly fist. "You let the cap'n down and I'll beat your skull in."

"What I mean is, I don't like those choices at all, frankly. Do we have to just sit here?"

Barker's grin got crookeder. "Forget it, kid. We've had it. But you're right about one thing. I'm not sitting here and taking it like a little lamb, like the cap'n did. I'm giving them a fight."

"How?" I said. "Who do you fight?"

"I dislike rushing you, but I'm a hundred and three years behind schedule already," the voice said. "Your choice, please, Specimen B."

"Shooting, stabbing, or garroting," Barker mused. "A bullet is an easy out, assuming the hit man knows his job. Stabbing: slower, unless the knife gets to just the right spot—and messy. Garroting, now—that's the lousiest way to go yet. But at least there's something to get hold of. Yeah. I'll go the rope route."

Barker clenched his fists, half crouched, and tried to watch in every

direction at once. He almost made it—except that the noose dropped from straight above, whipped around his neck like a snake, and snapped tight before he could make a move. His tongue poked out, and his eyeballs, and something made a noise like stepping on a paper cup, and it was all over.

And now it was my turn.

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"Specimen C, judging by B's reaction, you, too, will desire a unique demise," the voice said cheerfully. "Accordingly, I can offer you the following selection: death by poisoning—fast-acting, of course; anoxia; or simple heart failure. I'd have liked to widen the scope to include exhaustion, desiccation, and starvation, but they're too time-consuming, I'm afraid."

I heard myself swallow. I tried to speak, but my tongue didn't want to cooperate. I thought about the bitter taste of arsenic; I thought about not being able to breathe; I thought about sharp pains in the chest . . .

"Well, how about it, C?" the voice said. "Name your choice."

"N-n-n," I said. "None of them."

"Eh?" the machine said. "How's that?"

"None of them, blast you!" I yelled. "I don't like any of your shortcuts to oblivion! I prefer to get there in my own way, in my own sweet time!"

"Really?" the voice sounded shocked. "But—my study of the motivations of specimens A and B indicated that their whole lives were a pell-mell rush to destruction—theirs, and everyone else's—"

"Maybe so—but don't include me in your statistics! I'm not quite as high-minded as they were."

"Then—what do you want?" the machine asked.

I told it.

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"Routine, Mr. Barker," Captain Ironblood said. "It was a simple matter of calling their bluff. Once they saw we weren't to be intimidated by their threats, they back-tracked in a hurry."

"I've got to admit it looks that way," Barker said. "But I'll tell you frankly, Cap'n: when I felt that hemp cut into my neck, I never expected to wake up back here aboard ship, on course and in perfect health."

"The illusions were fairly graphic," Ironblood said. "But I was quite certain, privately, that they would never go so far as to murder SpArm personnel."

"Well, I guess all's well that ends well," Barker said. "But I'd like to see the look on Headquarters' face when they get our report."

I had an urge to speak up and tell them how surprised the Census machine

had been when it found out SpArm regs didn't quite cover the whole range of human aspirations, and how accommodating it had been, once it realized its mistake.

"There's one other thing," I had told it after it had reconstituted the ship and fixed it up a little. "Kind of a minor point, I guess, but don't you think you ought to reconstitute specimens A and B, too?"

"But surely, in view of their avowed aspirational patterns, they are better off where they are."

"Probably; but CinC SpArm might not understand. And I wonder if you couldn't make a few adjustments to help them adjust to the new conditions."

So the machine had popped them back into existence, as good as new, or maybe a little better. But it wouldn't do any good to tell them that. They wouldn't have believed a word of it.

"There's just one thing that's a little unclear, Cap'n," Barker was saying. "Why is it that you and I have to spend the rest of the cruise cooped up in this crummy little compartment, while Mr. Goodlark has the Imperial suite to himself, complete with a staff of ten, breakfast in bed, et cetera?"

Ironblood frowned. "I can't recall at the moment just why that is," he said. "No doubt the strain of what we've been through has given us a little area of confusion there. Suffice it to say it's all in accordance with SpArm regs . . . I think."

"It must be," Barker said. "Otherwise, why would there be an Imperial suite aboard a three-man scout in the first place?"

"Logical thinking, Barker," Ironblood said.

I didn't wait around to hear the rest. I eased the gold-plated door shut and turned and walked across the ankle-deep carpet past the table where the evening banquet was spread out to where Daisy Fields waited for me.