

## **HEARING**

### **Part 1 of 2**

by

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Selena Schlein dreamed. She lay in cold sleep, very cold and very deep, so cold that her mind had the illusion of warmth, so cold that the stream of life had ebbed to a trickle—and as she slept, she dreamed a nightmare.

For she dreamed of the Fleet, whose ships chased those of her family over the sky—which couldn't be; they didn't know of the Schlein family. At least, so far as anyone knew, they didn't know of the Families—but there was no telling what their spies had ferreted out, and in her dream, the Fleet had found them, and had chased Selena's exploration ship to the center of the galaxy, even though they couldn't have, even though part of her shouted silently, No! It wasn't that horrible Fleet, it was those implacable insects!

But in the nightmare, the pursuing ship loomed larger and larger in their viewscreen, and her husband Hans was shouting, "Get the women into the lifeboats!" but she was protesting that, no, she would rather remain there by him, to die with him if it was necessary, but the whole ship shuddered as the Fleet vessel grappled it, one of the bulkheads fractured and split open like an egg, and an alien form slipped through, but it wasn't the dreaded Fleet uniform, nor one of those horrible bugs, it was even more horrible, it was one of those vicious, savage Weasels, the Khalians, whom the Families' agents had so successfully suborned into attacking the Alliance, but now it was not a Khalian, but Dobie and Harl who were carrying her away to stuff her into the life-pod, strapping the tubes with the needles to her wrists, and she was screaming, "No! I can

fight, too!” but the drugs were taking effect, the world was growing dim, then vague and fuzzy, then totally dark, and she relaxed with a flood of relief, safe in the darkness even as her heart ached for Hans, frantic with worry for him, but her fear and worry were distanced somehow by the darkness....

But the blackness was lightening, her eyelids trembling, trying to open. She fought to keep them closed, keep the safe warm darkness wrapped about her, but it wasn't warm anymore, it was chilly, and she shivered, it was cold, so cold, and her eyelids opened all by themselves, to look for warmth...

And the nightmare slammed back, her two worst fears coupled together, for there, not two feet from her face, hung the monstrous Khalian face under the Fleet uniform cap, its furry snout split in an evil, gloating grin, and Selena screamed, thrashing about, trying to escape, but horrible soft arms held her imprisoned, and she screamed and screamed and screamed, until the warm fuzzy darkness came back to shield her, and free her from the responsibility of wakefulness.

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Globin looked up at his secretary. “But how would it be if the Gersons had been a sentient race that had nothing in common with us, Plasma? If they had been, let us say, thinking plants—or living stones?”

“Speak only of what is possible, Globin,” Plasma said with a rare show of real anger. “This we know: Giant bugs seek to destroy beings like us, with warm blood, and that is all we need to know.”

“So it comes down to like and unlike,” Globin sighed. “Is there no more to Right and Wrong than that?”

“Of course not, Globin! The Ichtos seek to slay the folk of other races and take their planets, as they slew the Gersons and laid waste their home!”

“That is true,” Globin said, nodding, “and surely it is wrong to steal and murder—but right to defend, and kill in defense of others’ lives.”

He was quite well aware that the Ichtos must surely believe—if they were truly thinking beings, rather than mere biological calculators evolved to solve technological problems of slaughter—believe that their own conquests and genocides were right, and that men of his own species had once believed the same. It did not make the Ichtos any more morally sound, but it did make Globin wonder.

He wondered even more that he should wonder. Who was he to ponder questions of right and wrong—he, Globin, traitor to his own kind, pirate king, space-thief, and murderer, responsible for the deaths of many who had been killed when their ships had been taken by his men—more accidentally than intentionally, true. His orders had always been to take without killing if possible, but to kill if it was necessary, but he was responsible nonetheless. So he was a murderer, yes, and could not deny it. His only justification was loyalty to the Khalian pirates who had adopted him when men of his own kind sought to slay him, and that had always sufficed—till now.

Why did it suddenly bother him? he wondered. Now, when he had lived one hundred years out of a probable hundred thirty—now, when he had turned his pirates into legal merchants and made their peace with the Alliance; now, when he had resigned his place among the Baratarian Khalians and taken a horde of young and

eager volunteers to help defend the weaker races at the Core of the galaxy, against a marauder who annihilated all in its path, without reason or cause save its own greed. Surely there could not be a cause more right, nor a moral issue less ambiguous!

But Globin was keenly aware that the Ichtions, more alien than any species he had yet encountered, could hardly be said to think as human beings did, nor even as mammals did—and he was also aware that learning how they thought was the only real path to stopping them. Defeating them completely was improbable—there were simply too many of them, too many ships, too many conquered planets, and more disappearing into their collective maw all the time. It would be as much a feat of diplomacy as of war to make them stop, as it had always been—as MacArthur had helped the Japanese to realize that commerce was a more certain path to dominion than military conquest, and Gorbachev had played peacemaker between the United States and China.

But when he began to try to learn how the Ichtions thought, he began to wonder about their own ideas of morality—and thus, so late in life, had begun to ponder the issues that had for so long been clear. Oh, they still were—clear for him, clear in terms of what he must immediately do; but on the cosmic scale?

The viewscreen on the wall lit, and an excited Khalian looked out at him, tense with the enthusiasm of youth. “Globin! Plasma, tell Globin at once! There is a life-pod! Our scoutship has caught it!”

Globin was on his feet. He would have to move fast; any such detritus brought in was common property of the whole ship, and the humans of the Fleet would have overheard Platelet’s message. “What is in the life-pod, Platelet?”

“Terrans! Females! Globin, come and see!”

Globin stood stunned. “Terrans? Here? So far from home, from any Terran home? How could they have come? None are being sought by the *Hawking*.”

“Ask it of them yourself!” Plasma was already halfway to the door. “Globin, come quickly!”

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The life-pod was clamped to the underside of the Khalian scoutship, seamed and cratered with the impacts of space junk. But its cargo had already been transferred to the Khalian ship, and were now being carried through the airlock—

On stretchers.

“They screamed when they saw us, Globin.” Platelet looked up, his eyes huge, for a Khalian. “Screamed, and called us monsters, and begged for mercy. They would not be quiet no matter how much we reassured them, so we sedated them. It is best if they see you first, when they waken.”

But one last Terran woman came walking, behind the stretchers of her mates. Globin caught his breath; she was beautiful, even under the dirt and caked sweat of a long sojourn in the life-pod, even with the strain ravaging her face, and her golden hair dulled by dirt. But her eyes were huge, and frightened.

Plasma nudged him, and Globin came out of his reverie. He stepped over to her. She looked up, terrified, like a doe about to run at sight of the hunter—then saw a human face, and relaxed.

Almost collapsed.

She sagged against Globin's chest. It was unexpected, and he fell back a step, then braced himself and took her in his arms, making soothing sounds. "There now, the ordeal is over, you have come to safe harbor, you will be all right...."

She seemed to melt against him, but made no reply.

Emboldened, he held her away just a little, and said gravely, "But you must tell me, child. How did you come to be here, so far from human space?"

The girl watched his face intently, with a little frown. There was something odd about that gaze, something troubling, but Globin set it aside for later analysis and said again, "How did you come to be here?"

"Speak more slowly," the girl said in an odd flat voice. Globin would have interpreted that as sarcasm, but the intentness of her gaze made him realize that it wasn't.

"How... did... you... come... to... be... here?" he asked. "What... happened... to... your... ship?"

Then he realized, with a shock, what was odd about her gaze. She wasn't making eye contact. Her gaze was lower, watching his lips. A strange feeling went through Globin, a shivering thrill at the strangeness of it.

"We came to study the Core," she said. "Men and women, many married."

"The *Dunholme* Expedition," Globin breathed. He remembered the story, discovered in the Schlein family archives after the surrender, and released to the media. Even in the Alliance's triumph, the expedition had been heralded as an example of devotion to science. A dozen couples had embarked on a virtual suicide mission, for the Core was so far away, at the speeds attainable a century and a half before, that there was very little chance the people would come back alive. The *ship* would, but they would not. It

was a monumental case of self-sacrifice, choosing to spend virtually their whole lives cooped up in a single ship—never mind that the ship was so large as to be a tiny world in itself—and forswearing having children, for they had no right to commit unborn people to such an existence.

Of course, some of the critics had noted, these were people to whom science was so important, so thrilling, that what they were giving up was balanced by the opportunities they were gaining. Others had noted the psychological profiles of the people aboard: they were mostly misanthropes, who had felt rejected by others, and rejected society in turn (How well Globin had understood that!), though they got along well enough with one another, enjoying the society of fellow rejects; and none of them really wanted to have children. The two qualities seemed to go together, somehow.

But they had never come back. Oh, they hadn't been expected to, not for a hundred years—but they had set out a hundred fifty years before, sent by the wealthy and ambitious Schlein family, striving for more wealth and greater power among the Merchant Families, sent to find some secret of Nature that would give them a huge edge over their rivals. But the long-delayed war had come to the Schleins, and cut them away, and Globin had grown old waiting for the *Dunholme* to come back, grown to the age of eighty yearning for the knowledge they would bring, had set off with the *Hawking* for the very core to which they had gone, fuming at them for not having sent back their data.

But when the *Hawking* had confronted the Ichtons, Globin knew what had happened to the expedition—or guessed. Now he had merely to confirm it.

“The *Dunholme Expedition*?” he asked the girl again, then remembered to say it a third time, slowly. He was beginning to realize what was wrong with her.

She nodded. “We were attacked by the insects, but we escaped—and the FTL drive was damaged. We fled for months, fleeing at light speed, but their pursuit ship finally caught us and disabled our engines completely. The men put all the women in a cryogenic chamber, this life-pod in which you found us, while they worked to make the ship come alive again, knowing they would probably die trying. The last one alive was to release the pod, so that we at least would have some hope of rescue—and praise Heaven it has come!”

“But they were all mature men and women on that expedition,” Globin protested, “in their thirties or forties, and you are scarcely twenty, if that.”

The girl nodded, her eyes huge and luminous—and Globin felt his heart twist. He berated it silently, and himself for an old fool, and made a conscious effort to focus on her words, not her face alone.

“They had agreed not to reproduce,” the girl said, “but had not forsworn lovemaking, and most of them were married. What went wrong with the contraceptives, I do not know—but there was an accident, and I was born.”

Globin frowned. “That was dangerous. With so little space, if others had followed your mother’s example...”

“But they did not,” the young woman said firmly. “Everyone deplored the bad luck, my mother most of all—but with every breath of condemnation, she smiled with secret delight. At least, that is what my father said, as well as all my aunts, with a touch of

envy. You see, they had all reared families already, but they tell me that nothing raises the desire for one last child so much as seeing someone else pregnant.”

“So you grew up aboard ship,” Globin said, frowning, “and never knew what it was to live on a planet.”

“Never,” she said, “until now.”

Globin resisted the smile of amusement that pushed at his lips. “This is no planet, child, but only a ship, albeit a very large one.”

“And I am no child,” she said firmly, “albeit I am much younger than you.”

Globin gazed at her a moment, then inclined his head. “Your pardon, fair lady.”

“Of course.” She smiled, and her face was a sun.

Globin held his gaze on her while he waited for his blood to stop effervescing. Then he said, “So you never knew of the Khalian War.”

“They have told me of it,” she said evenly, “and have shown me the holocines shot during the worst of the battles. The Khalianians looked terrible, then. They do not look so monstrous now.”

“You are not seeing them in combat,” Globin pointed out. “Did your parents not tell you of the horrible things they had done?”

“Yes, but I could understand only the broad outline.” The girl tapped her ear with a forefinger. “I am deaf, you see.”

She said it matter-of-factly, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Globin sat immobile as his hardened old heart softened amazingly with pity; she had adjusted admirably, or developed iron-hard emotional defenses.

Unless...

Unless it *were* the most natural thing in the world.

“Deaf from birth?” he asked.

The young woman nodded. “Cosmic radiation, we think—the ship was not entirely proof against it. Though Heaven knows, there were enough other sources available. It took them a year to understand why I did not respond to sounds, but only moved my lips. Then, slowly and painfully, they taught me to speak—but by the time I could understand a large enough vocabulary to comprehend the accounts of Khalian atrocities, I was old enough to be skeptical, too, and to think that no living being is inherently evil.”

So that was why she had been afraid, but not terrified. What the other women knew as contemporary terror, she had known only as history—and could not have been raised with species hatred, for she had not comprehended the gory details.

“I would have said so, too, at one time,” Globin said grimly. He was thinking of some of the more unpleasant examples of his own species.

The young woman misunderstood. She frowned. “Do you speak of the insects?”

Globin had to consider that before he answered. “I do not think they are evil in their own minds,” he said, “assuming they have minds, as we know them. But as a species, they are as evil as a cancer.”

“But no more than a cancer,” she pointed out. “After all, a cancer has no mind, no will; it does not intend to cause pain.”

Admiration for her mind kindled in Globin now, and he warned himself to beware. “Exactly. It *does* evil, but it may not *be* evil. As with the Ichtions—that is what we call these marauding insectoids. For now, though, we must fight them.”

“Of course,” she said with perfect composure.

“And that is all you knew of your parents’ universe?” Globin asked. “Only the broad outlines of the war?”

“Oh, I learned the details when I was in my teens,” she said. “It all seems like a story in a book, though, for that is what it was to me.”

Globin held her gaze while something shiveled inside him, at the thought that he was history to her. “What of the Khalians after their war with the Fleet?”

“I was told that the war was ended,” she said, studying his face, “ended many years ago, and that most of the Khalians had joined with the Alliance. Some, though, would not be appeased, would not stop fighting, but became pirates, so that they could continue to prey upon the ships of the Alliance. They told me also that a human renegade had clawed his way to command of all the pirates—a misshapen creature called ‘the Goblin’.”

“Globin,” he corrected her gently.

“‘Globin’,” she acknowledged, then shrugged. “Surely he could not have endured long—a lone human among his blood enemies.”

Globin took a deep breath, turning away, then remembered that he had to face her while he talked, or she would not be able to understand him. “That one human did survive—due to a Captain Goodheart. Unfortunately, his ship was blown up by a Family squadron.”

She frowned. “They told me of Captain Goodheart—scary tales for darkness. Was not this ‘Globin’ his assistant?”

Globin nodded. “He led the search for Goodheart’s killers. He found them, though it took years—and found all the Families with them.”

She stood rod-still, galvanized, eyes wide. “What happened then?”

“War,” Globin told her, “between the Alliance and the Families. The Khalians, learning that they had been used as the Families’ tool, screamed betrayal and allied with the Fleet, seeking revenge.”

Her face was ashen; she had to moisten her lips with her tongue. “And the end of that war?”

“The Fleet and its Khalian allies defeated the Families. Their worlds were occupied; they paid reparations.”

“They were conquered,” she whispered. “All because this Globin found them?”

He could see from her face that she knew the fate of those who were conquered, but he found he could not lie. He nodded, and felt his heart plummet.

But it revived at her next words. “I cannot believe that he was so thorough a villain—that he must have had reasons for what he did, other than money.”

Globin nodded, with relief. “You are right.” But he was annoyed with himself, too; her opinion of him should not matter so much. “What is your name?”

“Lusanne,” she said. “What is yours?”

“People call me ‘Globin,’ ” he answered.

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She would not scare. No matter what he told her, no matter how much of the gritty truth, she would not scare. She was only interested—perhaps “fascinated” would be a better word—for she was confronting a living legend, a character from the pages of history.

And she was very curious. Globin decided she must be a natural historian.

But while he discussed history with her, he had to manage the present, with an eye to the future. Both were summed up in one name: Brand.

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Commander Brand had raised the roof, or at least the ceiling; his voice almost shook the speaker off the wall. “Globin, what the hell do you think you’re doing holding human prisoners?”

“None more human than I, Commander,” Globin told the image on the screen, “though you may find that hard to believe.”

“Any prisoners taken are under the authority of the Fleet, Chairman! Any shipwreck survivors rescued are under my jurisdiction!”

“With the commander’s pardon,” Globin said, his old tone of authority reasserting itself, “the survivors were rescued by a Baratarian corporate vessel, taken to the Baratarian sector, and are currently the guests of the Baratarian Corporation.”

“Damn it, Globin, they’re Schleins!”

“And very sick ones, too,” Globin said, authority turning into iron. He reflected that Brand’s intelligence network was, as always, excellent. “It would be very dangerous for them to be moved just now, Commander. With all due respect, in consideration of the

survivors' welfare, I must respectfully decline to allow them to leave the Baratarian sickbay until they are restored to full health."

"They're human *women*, Globin! And you've got 'em being nursemaided by a bunch of Wea... Khalians!"

"Khalian doctors," Globin snapped, the iron transmuting into steel, "under the direction of my personal physician, Dr. Arterial—who is a graduate of Camford University on Terra, I might remind you, as well as of the College of Physicians of Khalia."

"But he's not human, Globin!" Brand took a long breath, then said, "My quarters, Chairman. Right away—if you please." The last was very grudging, but Brand knew the contract—and the laws to which he would answer if the *Hawking* returned to Terra—and, moreover, knew that Globin knew them, too.

"It is always a pleasure to accept your kind invitations, Commander," Globin returned evenly, then rose with a satisfied smile. "Plasma, if you would join me?"

The *Hawking* was a huge ship, so by the time Globin and Plasma arrived at the commander's office, Brand had had enough time to both calm down and think things through—so, as Globin came through the door, he was all sweetness and light. "Now see here, Globin. I think we can both agree that the ladies' welfare is foremost."

Globin breathed a secret sigh of relief. He was more than halfway home free. "Yes, Commander, I can agree with that."

"Well, these women are Schlein family. How do you think they're going to feel if the first thing they see when they wake up is a Khalian muzzle?"

Globin remembered how some of the women had reacted already, and said slowly, “Your point is well taken, Commander.” Of course, Brand knew just exactly how well taken it was; Globin didn’t doubt for a second that the commander knew about the women who had half waked, screamed, and lapsed back into unconsciousness.

“Well, that’s all I’m asking—just to have Terran doctors treat them.” Brand held up a hand. “No, I’m not asking for your Dr. Arterial to be excluded from his own sickbay, or for any of his assistants to be kicked out—I’m just asking that human doctors be allowed in there, too.”

“And that they be the first one the revivees see.” Globin nodded slowly. “I’m afraid I cannot disagree with you in any degree, Commander—as long as we are only speaking of five or six doctors, and they are coming to our sickbay, not the other way around.”

“Done!” Brand grinned like a shark. “I’ll have them down there in five minutes, Chairman!”

Globin decided that Brand would pay for that grin.

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But it would take time to decide how to exact that penalty. Oh, Globin knew what it would be—he would keep the women in the Baratarian Quarter. But how to achieve it would take long days of thought, and nights of letting the elements of the problem link themselves up while he slept.

While the problem stirred itself around in the back of his mind, and the physicians labored over the other survivors, Globin allowed himself the luxury of the company of the youngest Schlein.

And a pleasure it was, for she showed not the slightest distaste at his presence. He took her for a tour of his domain, the Baratarian Quarter of the ship. They visited the workshops, the mess hall, the lounge, and ended by strolling through the park. Lusanne looked about her with bright and eager interest at all the strange sights. "So vast," she whispered.

It was only five hundred meters in diameter, and fifty high, but the walls and ceiling were painted to give the illusion of a limitless expanse of plain rolling away to an imaginary horizon, to fulfill the need of shipbound creatures for open spaces. Globin realized with a shock that the poor child had never seen open fields or sky, any sky but the star-strewn night of the Core. She might have been afraid, but instead she was eager, and his admiration for her, already high due to the courage he perceived in her, rose still more.

She would far more likely have been afraid of the Khalians who rose from the long grass now and then, bounding away in frenetic joy at escaping the close confinement of their quarters for a few hours, or strolling slowly by, chatting. Always Khalians, always fur and leather, never human skin and clothing. Raised to fear Khalians as other children feared bogeymen, Lusanne might have shrunk gibbering in terror—but she greeted every encounter with the fresh enthusiasm of a child let loose to discover its world—or a scientist given free rein to examine whatever she wished.

"So I am a pirates' prisoner?" she asked in her oddly uninflected diction.

“Scarcely!” Globin stifled a chuckle. “You are a guest, Lusanne, and we are no longer pirates. I guided the Khalians of Barataria into legitimate commerce forty years ago. They are a legal merchant corporation now and obey all laws.”

“Forty?” She looked up, startled. “But our ship departed on its expedition only thirty years ago!”

Globin stared at her, amazed, realizing just how long she and her shipmates must have been drifting in that capsule. He said gently, “It has been one hundred fifty years since your parents began their quest, Lusanne.”

She stared. “Can we have been in that life-pod for so long?”

“Perhaps not,” Globin said slowly. “You said that the Ichtos—excuse me; that is what we call the insectoid race that attacked the *Dunholme*—you said that your ship fled for several weeks, at nearly the speed of light?” She nodded, and Globin said, his suspicion strengthened, “There is a time-squeeze effect; for each week that passes near the speed of light, years pass on the surface of a planet. So you may not have been in the capsule longer than a decade or so—but between your long sleep and your long escape, twelve decades have passed.”

Tears formed at the corners of her eyes. “Alas! For my father and the brave men who died with him! For even if they escaped the Ichtos, they must be dead by now!”

Globin remembered that she had said the last man alive had released the pod, and knew that the men for whom she mourned had almost certainly died. “They died that you might live, Lusanne,” he said softly. “Surely there can be no greater mark of a man’s love than that. Let the tears flow, Lusanne, for they must fall sometime. Let them fall.”

Her face reddened, her fists clenched, but the tears began to flow in earnest.

Globin felt his heart twist, and held out his arms. Lusanne came into them like a child to be comforted. He folded his arms around her and patted her back gently as the sobs racked her body and she clung to him as though to a life ring in a turbulent sea. Globin rested his cheek against her head, savoring the warmth and the sensation of her body pressed against his, concentrating on every touch, every pressure, to be sure he would remember every detail, for he had never held a woman in his arms before and knew he probably never would again.

Finally, the tears slackened, and Lusanne pulled away from him, eyes downcast. Globin's handkerchief was instantly in her hand; she dabbed at her eyes, then blinked up at him with a tremulous smile, and he felt his vitals turn to water. "Thank you," she said. "I had not known..." Her voice trailed off.

"Emotional shock," Globin explained, and wondered if it was true of himself, too. "You've had a traumatic experience"—he managed a sardonic smile—"culminating in rescue by a pirate."

"But you said you are no longer a pirate." Her eyes were wide and very blue.

"I am not," he told her. "The Khaliens elected me their leader, and over a decade, I managed to move them more and more into legitimate trade. Finally, our commercial ties were so strong that the Alliance virtually had to offer us membership, or lose too much gold to us in trade. As part of the treaty, and to save their collective face, we agreed to cease piracy, which we had almost eliminated anyway."

She stared, horrified. "You are of the Alliance now?"

"We are," he said gently, "and the war with the Families is over."

She began to tremble. “Yes—the war with the Families. Will not your Khalians hate we Schleins?”

Globin bit his lip. He said gently, “The Khalians realized they had been used by the Syndicate, betrayed, so they joined with the Alliance. The result was foregone, but tedious.”

Her face was pale. “What is left of our homeland?”

“Your homeland is intact.” Globin was terse. “But its armaments, and the factories that built them, are gone.”

“They are defenseless, then,” she whispered.

“The reparations are paid,” Globin told her, “and they have nothing more to fear from the Fleet. Oh, there were atrocities, yes, but as few as the command could manage. Your countrymen are humbled, and many died in the war, but they are by and large intact. They could have fared much worse—and the Fleet that fought them now protects them.”

Lusanne watched out of the corners of her eyes, uncertain. “Will the Fleet not seek to revenge itself on us women, if they find us?”

“They have found you,” Globin said gently, and waited for it to sink in.

It did, and she pulled back with a gasp. “Not you!”

“Not really,” Globin said. “There are only a few Fleet personnel in Baratara’s decks—but those decks are leased from a Fleet battlestation, and the overall command of the ship is Fleet.”

“Then we are lost,” she whispered.

“No,” Globin said, “you are saved. The men of the Fleet might still harbor hatred for the Schlein family, but even they will certainly be courteous to civilians—which you are, especially since the war is long gone.”

“Only courtesy,” she whispered.

“Only that,” he agreed. “But you are in the midst of Khalians here, and young Khalians at that, to whom your government’s treachery is only a tale from a history book, and whose fathers’ desire for revenge has been slaked, and forgotten—for that is how the Khalians are. You are safe among these, my adopted children.”

She darted a curious glance at him, but all she said was, “I must tell all my aunts about this.”

Globin nodded. “Come—let us see how well they have recovered.”

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Behind the glass wall, the women were sitting, still dazed and groggy. The Fleet doctors moved among them, their faces masks of impervious politeness—though now and again, one slipped, and the contempt showed through.

Lusanne shuddered. “Must we be left to the cold care of such strangers as these?”

“Only until your aunts are restored to full consciousness and mobility,” Globin assured her. “That has been the subject of some spirited discussion between the commander of this battlestation and myself.”

That was a huge understatement, he reflected as he thought of Brand’s fury over the intercom, and the hatred that still seemed to echo in his voice when he said the

name “Schlein.” So now, as Globin stood with Lusanne gazing at the groggy women sitting upright in their flimsy hospital gowns, supported by their raised mattresses, watching their human and Khalian physicians with fearful eyes, Globin deliberated about the next phase in his campaign against Brand.

He was certain that he was right to want to keep the Schlein women in his own bailiwick. These were not women who had undergone the defeat of their home planet, and been chastened by it and come to be grateful for Alliance clemency, but women who were still mentally at the height of deceptive war, regarding the Fleet doctors as their captors and hated enemies, and the Khalians as their despised but lethal pawns. In Brand’s territory, the best they could expect would be ostracism; at worst, they would be targets for the long-buried vengefulness that they themselves would reawaken.

Globin’s recruits, on the other hand, were all young Khalians, who would not really think about the Schleins having been traitors to either race, for to them, the war was only a tale told by their elders, albeit a very vivid one. Like Lusanne, they would be more curious than vengeful, and willing to be patient, coaxing their prisoners ahead into the modern day, and waiting patiently for friendship.

There was no question—the women had to stay in Barataria.

But how?

“Let us go in,” Lusanne said. “I can see what they are saying to one another, when the doctors’ backs are turned.”

*See what they say?* Globin frowned down at her, then remembered that she was reading lips. “Yes, of course. Let us go in.”

They came into the recovery room, and every woman instantly locked her gaze on to Globin, apprehension deepening at the sight of one more strange male. Then Lusanne's presence beside him registered, and they relaxed—a little.

“Thank heavens, child!” Selena croaked. “We were afraid you were dead!”

“Very much alive, Aunt Selena,” Lusanne assured her. “Our rescuers have been very courteous and gentle with me. I would like to introduce you to our host, the chief executive of the Baratarian Corporation.”

“Thank Heaven!” breathed the tallest, a woman in her fifties with tousled, auburn hair, still beautiful even though she was drawn and wan with the strain of her long coma. “A man who isn't a Fleet officer!”

“Be quiet, you fool!” snapped an aging matron. “That's not a man, it's the Goblin!”

The auburn woman stared, horror coming into her eyes.

The women all shrank back against their mattresses in alarm. “The Goblin!”

“Am I so notorious as that?” Globin blinked around at them in mild amusement. “I had not thought that my reputation would reach all the way to your home world!”

“We have heard,” Selena said, her mouth dry. “We have also heard that you treat your captives well, because you expect their governments to ransom them.”

Globin nodded gravely. “But I am no longer a pirate, madam, nor are my Khalians—and Barataria is no longer a pirates' nest, but the home world of a commercial conglomerate.”

There was a stir among the women, and Selena glanced at Lusanne for confirmation. Lusanne nodded ever so slightly, and hope lighted Selena's face. “You have become legitimate, then!”

“We have,” Globin acknowledged. “But we will still extend every courtesy to our guests. Indeed, the Distressed Spacefarer’s Law allows no less.”

“It does not require ‘every courtesy,’ ” Selena said with irony, “but we are grateful for all that you have given us thus far.” She had rallied; pirates might be dangerous, but businessmen would strike a deal, and Selena, scientist or not, had been raised to business. “We are, then, aboard one of your Baratarian ships?”

“I fear not, madam. You are aboard the *Stephen Hawking*, an Alliance battlestation operated by the Fleet.”

Instant consternation spread throughout the recovery room—consternation verging on panic. “So that is why those doctors were so cold, so hostile!” the auburn woman cried, and Selena snapped, “You cannot surrender us to them, sir! You must not!”

“Peace, peace, Aunt,” Lusanne said. “The war has been over for years!”

The women stilled, staring at her, huge-eyed.

“What war?” Selena whispered. “The Khalians were defeated three years before we left!”

“The war between the Fleet and our Families.” To Lusanne, a whisper was as good as a shout. “The war is history, and the wounds have healed.”

“But how can so much have happened in so short a time! You were not even born when we left! Only twenty-six years ago! Could our home world have fallen so quickly?”

“Madam,” said Globin, “how old am I?”

Selena turned and stared, suddenly registering the lines, the wrinkles. “I had thought it was only space tan,” she whispered.

“I fear it is more,” Globin said. “In fact, I have been told that I am uncommonly well preserved for my years, especially in view of the strains of my life in administration.”

Selena’s lips parted, but her voice was a bare whisper. “How... how long?”

“You have been in cold sleep for several decades,” Globin said gently.

“Several?” Selena licked dry lips, swallowed, and asked, “How long?”

“Many years,” Globin answered, and Lusanne said, “We have been on our journey for a hundred fifty years, Aunt.”

Selena reeled, squeezing her eyes shut. Lusanne was at her side in a second.

“No, no, child, I am not going to faint,” Selena muttered. She recovered her poise, pushed Lusanne away, and said, “So the battle is lost, and the rancor has cooled—but not completely, as we have seen from our doctors.” She glanced nervously at the medical team who hovered behind Globin. “All in all, I think we might be safer here.”

“You are my guests for as long as you wish to remain.” Globin inclined his head graciously. “Or at least for as long as I can stall off Commander Brand.”

“And how long will that be?”

“At the least, until you are completely restored to fitness and peak physical condition. How did you say you felt, madam?”

The Klaxon sounded.

Then the siren’s braying modulated into words: “Enemy approaching! Enemy penetrating screens! Enemy attack on south pole!”

**TO BE CONTINUED...**