

HEARING

Part 2 of 2

by

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Throughout the Baratarian Quarter, Khalians scrambled for battle stations. The Klaxon's braying modulated into words: "Enemy approaching! Enemy penetrating screens! Enemy attack on south pole!"

The quarter rocked at a sudden blast that rang through the hull into every cubicle. The Khalian crewmen stumbled, throwing themselves against walls for support; a few fell to the floor. Then they were up again and running as the Klaxon yammered, "Hull penetrated at cargo hold South 24!"

South 24! Globin had a momentary vision of trade goods spilling out into space by the gross, trade goods fried by energy weapons within the hull, trade goods trampled under... Then he shook it off—if they didn't manage to repel the Ichtos, all the trade goods in the galaxy wouldn't do them a bit of good. He yanked open the cabinet on the wall and pulled out his rifle, then hauled the door open and went into the corridor. At his age, he knew better than to run, and his crew knew better than to let him near danger—but Plasma had dashed off after the attackers, gray muzzle or no, and no one would see Globin coming out to the fight....

He was amazed at himself; his self-image was still fixed at twenty, when he would have shied away from any combat in sheer terror. But a lifetime with Khalian pirates, and Goodheart's careful instruction in unarmed combat, had given him back the courage the boyhood bullies had stolen, and he went toward the sound of battle, not away from it.

Then the deck lifted against his feet, and the walls shuddered. He lurched against a bulkhead, but kept his feet while a chorus of screams broke out behind him. Globin froze, then ran. It was only a few steps to the sickbay....

“Hull holed in Khalian sickbay!” the Klaxon blatted. “Infantry to sickbay!”

Globin swerved into the doorway, remembering to leap aside so other defenders could come in—and they did, in a stream; but a fireball blossomed in the doorway. Khalian screams shrilled; Globin shrank back, turning his face to the wall while the light faded. Then he turned and saw dead Khalians on the floor. His heart wrenched at the sight, but more of his young Weasels were leaping in and dodging to the sides, and there was no time for grief. Globin turned ahead and saw the huge insectoid shapes grabbing at the Family women. They shrank back shrieking, looking about them wildly, clawing at the walls. The oldest one had found a plasma holder and was beating at a carapace; the Ichton tore it out of her hands and turned its rifle toward her, but younger women jammed chairs between them, and their screaming was beginning to be as much in anger as in fear. Lusanne had a bit more presence of mind than he would have expected—she had found a pole lamp and was stabbing the glowing tube at the Ichton’s eyes.

It was valiant, but would do no good. Globin steadied himself, resting his barrel on a bedstead. He aimed for the insect’s eyes and waited for a split second when there would be no human head in the way. Auburn hair swung aside; Globin pressed the trigger. The energy bolt flashed. Women screamed as they leaped aside, giving Globin a clear field of fire. He shot again and again.

The Ichtón's shrilling was at the upper edge of his hearing, tearing through his head, and the monster swung its firearm about, blasting blindly. The women hit the deck. Globin realized, with satisfaction, that he had burned its eyes out. He lowered his aim to the thorax and fired. His bolt smashed in; three more of the Khalian crew joined in, focusing on the thorax. The monster bucked, then fell dead.

Globin looked up and saw that his crew had seen what he had done, and were imitating. Bolts flared at Ichtón eyes; bug rifles spewed in every direction, but hit only the walls. Khalian fire focused on thoraxes and burned through.

Then Plasma leaped in front of him, chittering in rage. "Globin! If you die, we are all lost! Get back, get away!"

A dozen young Khalians leaped in, a living wall between them and the Ichtóns—but the surviving bugs were retreating, firing as they went back out through the hole they had blasted in.

"That is a long tunnel," Globin said to Plasma. "We are nowhere near the hull."

"But there is vacuum somewhere at the other end," Plasma snapped. "They are fainting from loss of air!"

And indeed, the women who had thrown themselves down were not rising. Here and there, a few Khalians were falling, clawing at their throats. The air being sucked in from the rest of the quarter had sustained them thus far, but it was almost exhausted.

"Lusanne!" Globin cried. "Quickly, Plasma! The oxygen!"

Plasma moved more quickly than his chief, and a few of the youngsters saw what he was up to as he cracked the valve on the oxygen cylinder in the clinic. Some leaped

to help him, finding other green cylinders; others caught up blankets and sheets and slapped up a quick barrier over the hole.

Moving more slowly, Globin brought an oxygen mask to Lusanne—but she was already working her way to her feet, and pushed the mask away. “Selena—my other aunts—they need it more than I.”

Globin sighed and turned to help the Schleins who knew from personal memory what had caused the animosity between them.

* * *

“All told, we got off very lightly,” Brand told the hastily assembled conference. “It was just a raid by a couple of destroyers, backed up by a battlewagon. The big ship sat back and helped pour fire into one point on our shield until it overloaded, causing a sector to collapse. Then they sat back and provided covering fire while the destroyers broke in and started shooting their way toward the sickbay. When they found out they were dying faster than we were, they pulled out. All told, we lost four of the Schlein women and six of our own crew, plus thirty wounded. All things considered, it could have been much worse.”

“Let’s hope they don’t think to try it with a larger force,” someone said grimly.

“We know they will, now,” Brand said, his face heavy. “We’ll just have to start shooting if they come anywhere near. That’s pretty obvious, though. The real question is, why?”

Everyone was silent, avoiding one another's eyes. It was the question they'd been hoping not to have to think about.

Brand turned to Globin, pointing at the cross-sectional map of the ship. "They attacked your quarter, Chairman. That might have been accident, but coming into the hold and blowing their way through wall after wall until they came to the sickbay—that was deliberate, very deliberate. Why?"

He turned back to the assembled officers. They all frowned, looking back; then one voiced the thought that all were thinking: "The women."

Brand sighed. "Good. Then I'm not the only one who sees it. But... why?"

The officers exchanged puzzled glances. Then one said, with an apologetic half laugh, "Because they're beautiful, of course."

The reaction was out of all proportion to the joke—if it was a joke. Everyone took it as such, though, laughing till the tears came. Brand took it well, grinning as he looked about them, stifling a chuckle of his own. After all, it *was* hilarious—giant insectoids thinking human women attractive. It was almost as funny as the notion of one of the bug queens exciting desire in a human male—and every one of them must have thought of that, too, for when the laughter had begun to slacken, it suddenly redoubled in a new wave. When the noise had subsided, though, Brand frowned, serious again. "Okay. What possible interest could they be to the bugs? And how could the swarm have found out about them, anyway?"

There was only muttering for a while; then Globin had a sudden inspiration. "Commander! They could never have seen the women before, or the Schleins would not have lived for us to find them!"

The conversation stilled; everyone turned, amazed. “Why, that’s very true, Chairman,” Brand said slowly. “They could only have seen the Schlein vessel.”

“But they destroyed the ship,” someone else pointed out, “and all the male Schleins aboard.”

“Yes, Commander, that tallies with what the women have told us,” Globin corroborated. “The men ejected them in a life capsule and stayed to fight.”

Someone else said slowly, “Why did the men stay?”

It was a good question, and the apparent answer was so obvious that no one had ever thought of it. They looked at one another in surprise.

“Yes,” Brand said slowly. “Once the women were safe, why didn’t the men escape in the same fashion? Obviously, because they couldn’t.”

“Of course!” cried a captain. “If they all ejected in a life-pod, the bugs would have blasted them out of this space-time! The men had to keep the fight going long enough for the women to get lost in the depths!”

The room was very quiet for a few minutes, as each man contemplated the courage of those Schlein men, fighting to certain death, knowing they stood no chance of winning, but also knowing that each second they bought would give their loved ones a little longer to recede into the dark and cold of interstellar space. Even here near the Core, there was enough room between stars so that one tiny, hundred-foot-long life-pod would be indistinguishable by radar from a thousand other asteroids—if it were beyond the reach of telescopes.

“So the bugs knew someone had escaped,” Brand summarized, “but they couldn’t find them. Why would they be so fanatical about killing them, though, once they’d been found?”

“The Ichtons are fanatical about everything,” someone said.

“Sheer cussedness,” someone else suggested. “They hate not finishing something they’ve started.”

“No.” Brand shook his head. “They’ve always been very logical—we’ve seen the records, we know they’ve gone past hard targets to find easy ones, and not come back until they had so much strength massed that the hard targets had become pushovers. It’s not like them to take a risk of any kind, let alone what amounts to a commando action against overwhelming odds. They had something to gain from this, more than just a sixty-year-old grudge.”

“More to the point,” someone else said, “they must have had something to lose.”

“Of course!” Globin was on his feet, eyes wide with sudden understanding. “That’s been bothering me for a while—why would they have taken the trouble to eliminate a single ship, one that didn’t even bear enough armament to be a military vessel? Why bother swatting a fly?”

“Unless,” Brand said slowly, “the fly has come too close to your lunch.”

“Or your heart,” Globin said grimly.

Brand’s eyes glowed. “Yes! They saw something, Chairman. They saw something on their viewscreens that they shouldn’t have seen—and the bugs have to make sure they don’t tell anybody. When your men found the life-pod, the bugs must have picked up the radio transmissions—we know they have some kind of intelligence service. They

wouldn't have had to understand very much to know that your people had found something. A little thought, and a bit of record-checking, could have told them what."

"Seems kind of farfetched," an officer said slowly, "for them to find out that much just from some half-understood radio transmissions."

"I don't like to think of the alternative," Brand said grimly.

Neither did anyone else—that there was a traitor aboard or some kind of listening device. The atmosphere grew strained; they knew that Brand couldn't discount the possibility, now that he'd thought of it, and that Internal Intelligence would be very alert for any signs of treachery from now on.

"Still, it seems possible," Globin said slowly. "A lone picket who picks up a sudden flurry of language-noise, then gets close enough for his long-range sensors to see something heavy being towed in.... Of course, he wouldn't attack himself, not if there was a chance he'd be shot down instead of bringing back important information. No, I don't think it requires a spy."

"Maybe not," Brand conceded, "but it does require the Schlein women being a lot more important than we thought they were. Chairman, I really must insist they be moved into the Fleet sickbay, where they can be guarded more securely."

Globin bridled, but kept his tone soft. "I beg to differ, Commander. This incident has set back their convalescence by several weeks; it is very important that they not be moved."

"But your sickbay's shot to pieces, Globin! You can't take care of them anymore!"

“Repairs on the sickbay are almost complete,” Globin demurred. “The survivors are comfortable in the recreation room in the meantime—and your counselors are helping them to cope with the shock of the invasion.”

“We must have them submit to hypnosis and memory scan, Chairman! It’s absolutely vital!”

“Agreed,” Globin said easily, “but they cannot be subjected to any such exertion until they are fully recovered. You know that, Commander. Ask your own physicians. What good is a dead source? How much water can you draw from a dry well?”

Brand was still a moment; his eyes narrowed. “There is one among them who is fully recovered, Chairman. I have seen her walking in your company.”

“What, Lusanne?” Globin shrugged impatiently. “She is scarcely more than a child, Commander. What could she know? What could she have understood from what she had seen?”

“Her information is vital, Chairman!”

“But it cannot be gained without her consent,” Globin said, his voice iron. “Hypnosis will not work on an unwilling subject. There is no point in the scan unless it is voluntary.”

“Then ask her, Chairman!”

Globin sighed. “Very well, Commander. I shall ask.”

* * *

Lusanne drew in upon herself, her eyes wide. “Must I, Globin?” Then she answered herself. “Yes, of course I must. If it might save lives...”

“But you are afraid,” Globin interpreted. “It will do no good if you are afraid, Lusanne. You would be too tense to achieve the trance. Even if you did, it could not be deep enough.”

“What could I have seen that the Ichtons would care about?”

“Nothing, probably,” Globin said, “unless everyone on your ship saw it, too. But in all probability, they did not—only those who were on duty on the bridge at the time would have had the chance.”

Lusanne nodded slowly, frowning. “That would make sense....”

“Who was on the bridge?” Globin asked softly.

“Of my aunts? Only Selena, and Maude and Mirabile—they were the only ones of command rank. The rest of us couldn’t have cared less. There were only a few of the men, too—no one wanted to take time away from their experiments to do it. Someone said it was like having to be chairman of a mathematics department.”

“Perfect irony,” Globin said, and reported it that way to Brand. “They may be trying to kill people who do not have the information they fear, Commander. The ones who did know, they have done in already.”

“It’s possible,” Brand admitted, “but we must be sure. Can’t you persuade her, Chairman?”

“I probably could,” Globin said slowly, “but she is afraid of the Fleet, Commander. Your doctors have not hidden their hostility very well.”

“And the scan would be unsuccessful, if she’s so fearful,” Brand sighed, sitting back. “Very well, Globin. We’ll work at creating an atmosphere of trust. Let’s just hope that the Ichtons don’t manage to rob us of all atmosphere of any kind, first.”

* * *

But Brand couldn't be stalled forever. A good long time, true—his own doctors admitted that the women were thoroughly depleted by their long sleep; muscle tone was gone, digestion was delicate, and nervous systems were recovering rather slowly from thirty years of dormancy. Still, even Globin couldn't delay physical therapy with any good conscience—the women's lives depended as much on their physical fitness, as on their dwelling place. So the day came when Brand invited Globin to a conference again, and demanded, "They are restored to health. We want them."

And Globin, with the utmost courtesy, replied, "Your pardon, Commander, but they wish to remain my guests."

"The war may be over, Globin, but those women were not residing on any of the planets that surrendered and are not yet included under the terms of that treaty. They may have information about the Core that we need, and may not wish to accept the armistice."

Globin stood rigid, hoping he was mistaken about what the commander had not said. "Just how strong an interrogation do you intend?"

"What?" Brand stared, taken aback as much by the iron tone as by the words themselves. Then he realized Globin's meaning and leaned back with a long whistle. "Oh, no, Globin, what do you take me for? Of course we don't intend torture! But the women are human, and must reside among their own kind!"

Globin relaxed, but only a little. “I would send them in an instant if they wished to go, Commander, but they are... apprehensive.”

“Apprehensive? About what?”

“About their reception among Fleet personnel, Commander. Even their doctors treated them with a contempt that was only slightly veiled.”

“We are only human, Globin. You can’t be surprised if the presence of Schlein family members straight from the middle of the war brings back old... antagonisms.”

“Not surprised at all,” Globin said dryly. “Under those circumstances, *you* should not be surprised if they find the company of my young warriors more congenial.”

“We must have them, Globin!”

“They are my guests, Commander. I shall not ask them to leave.”

Brand slammed a fist down on his desk like a gavel. “You are bound by the regulations of the *Hawking!*”

“As you are bound by the terms of our contract,” Globin returned.

Brand’s face turned stony. “I will convene a formal hearing. The arbitrators shall decide the issue, and their judgment shall be binding upon both parties—as is stipulated in your contract!”

“To arbitration I shall submit.” Globin’s tone made it quite clear that he would not submit to Brand.

* * *

The hearing chamber, somewhat ominously, was also the room intended for court-martials and any other legal proceedings that might have arisen during the voyage. However, its architecture didn't suggest the majesty of the law—more the boardroom of a corporation. There were three tables, joined to form an "I"; the stem, the longest table, was taken up by a double row of officers, corporation executives, and a few high-ranking civilians, such as scientists and doctors. Two of the faces there were Khalian; only one was Baratarian.

At the head of the "I" were Brand and his counselors; it was the head because that was where Brand was sitting. However, an enlargement of the Alliance seal took up most of the wall behind him, whereas the wall at the foot was blank, with a paleness that suggested the holotank it truly was—invaluable for the conferences for which this room doubled. Even in so large a ship as the *Hawking*, every space had to be used for at least two functions.

Globin sat at the foot of the table, with Selena Schlein, Lusanne, and Plasma, who was surrounded by a reader and its recordspheres.

Brand brought down a gavel. "This hearing may begin. Let the record show that on this date, the Fleet invoked its authority to take into its care any distressed space travelers taken aboard the *Stephen Hawking*, and that the Baratarian Corporation has refused to surrender its prisoners."

"We are not prisoners," Selena Schlein snapped.

"Objection," said the military attorney next to Brand, and the commander said, "Sustained." Then, to Selena, "Please do not speak unless you are recognized. For the record, please tell us your name and—"

The alarm blared.

Everyone sat bolt upright.

“Battle stations!” a voice snapped over the sound of the Klaxon.

“Ichton ship has penetrated inner defenses! Commander Brand to the bridge, please! All personnel to battle stations! Enemy is within range, but his shields are holding, and his fire is concentrated on a single zone of ours! All personnel to battle stations! Conflict is imminent!”

“Adjourned!” Brand struck the gavel down one more time, even as he rose and turned from his seat.

“Back to our quarters,” Globin snapped, and they rose, he and Plasma to either side of the ladies. Dr. Arterial stepped up from the witnesses’ seats to stand in front of them, and the single Baratarian officer fell in behind. In formation, they went out the door and toward the drop tube.

“They cannot really manage to board so huge a ship as this!” Selena protested.

“The *Hawking* is big, but that only gives it a greater area to defend,” Globin returned, “and the Ichton ships are big, hard, and mean. They have probably spent a dozen ships and all the lives on them already, just to bring a single cruiser so close—but there are as likely to be three as one, and—”

The floor lurched out from under them.

Howls of anger split the air, and smoke filled the hallway. A huge insectoid form came looming out of that smoke, fire spearing from it.

Their little formation wheeled about; the young Khalian who had been the rear guard was suddenly the point. He drew his weapon in a single clean motion....

A piercing, high-pitched tone stabbed their ears, so loud that it sent a singing pain right through their brains. The young Khalian dropped his weapon, clutching his ears and rolling on the floor in agony. So did Globin, Selena, Dr. Arterial; Globin fought to pull his hands away from his ears, but found he couldn't bear the shriek emanating from the Ichtion.

Lusanne scooped up the young Khalian's fallen weapon, aimed, and fired. A small box on the Ichtion's front blew into bits.

The shrieking tone stopped.

Lusanne's fire tore at the Ichtion. Terran shouts and Khalian shrilling echoed down the hall, triumphant; a fallen weapon came skidding toward them. Selena pounced on it and opened fire on the Ichtion, but it kept coming, looming closer and closer. The fire from its weapon was a mad spray now, tearing at the walls and the floor, battering all about them, but not hitting.

Globin finally managed to draw and fire.

The addition of his weapon was enough; the Ichtion dropped. Its body jerked as fire tore it apart. Finally, the pieces lay still.

Another loomed through the smoke behind it.

Their fire tore it to shreds.

That wasn't all there was to the fight, of course. It raged on for hours, and for the first time in decades, Globin was in the thick of it, trying desperately to protect the women, who were trying desperately to protect him. The other Schlein women caught up discarded weapons and remembered childhood training; they became a battle unit. Decades of daily exercise paid off; Globin's old heart labored; but it did not fail him.

Lusanne, Selena, and the other Schleins fought on by his side with their scavenged weapons, snatching up charge packs from dead soldiers as they came upon them.

The new noise boxes were in constant use; it was an experiment, but more than a dozen Ichtos had them. Globin would hear the shrill screech and urge his little squadron toward it—after all, any direction was as likely to bring the ladies to safety as any other. As they came closer, they were disabled by the piercing tone, but Lusanne, with unerring accuracy, exploded box after box. Globin began to wonder about her hobbies.

Finally they linked up with a squadron of Marines, who formed a circle around them, and Globin and Plasma gratefully let the younger generation take the brunt of the fighting. His young Khalian fell, and until another squadron of soldiers joined them, Lusanne filled his place in the circle, side by side with a young blond giant who fought like a very demon and cheered her on to victory. “After them, woman! Oh, what a lass! Kill every last one of the stinking bugs! Don’t even *think* about mercy—’cause *they* won’t! By the stars, I’ve never seen such a woman as you!”

He couldn’t know that the object of his admiration couldn’t hear his praises; she fought shoulder to shoulder, and could not see his lips. She could only sneak quick glances at him as he fought—but that she did often, her glances became longer and longer, almost gazes of awe.

When the battle was over, and the amplified voice of Brand told them that surviving enemies had retreated, that all other hostiles were dead, and that the hull was sealed—then, finally, Lusanne could look up in admiration at the big soldier who towered over

her and was amazed to see him gazing raptly down at her and breathing, “You are the most remarkable woman who ever lived!”

“But—I am deaf,” she protested.

That rocked him for a second, but only a second. Then he said, “Thank Heaven you are, or we’d all be dead this minute!” And he seized her and kissed her.

They froze, lip to lip, for what seemed an unconscionably long time, and something seemed to unknot and flow inside Globin’s chest as he watched—but he smiled sadly, and nodded, for yes, this was how it should be, youth to youth, without some dried-up old misshapen man in between.

* * *

Love inspires trust—and Lusanne was willing to undergo the memory scan, if her Sergeant Barkis was there to hold her hand. Of course, the psychiatrist and the interrogation specialist were much warmer toward her now, and made no secret of their admiration for her courage under fire; that did no harm, either.

Her three aunts who had been on the bridge were interrogated, too, about the few days preceding the attack sixty years before. All their testimony agreed they had discovered a new planet; everyone on the ship had been very excited about it, so the bridge had relayed the pictures from the visual sensors to the big screen in the lounge. They had gone considerably closer to try to determine if the planet could support life. It could; they had come too close, and Ichtion ships had boiled out into space to attack them.

That was all the three aunts remembered. But Lusanne's memory held an extremely clear picture of the viewscreen when the planet was first identified—and the astronomers were able to identify the stars at the outer edge of the screen. From that, they could make an excellent guess at the location of the planet.

“A home world,” Brand said with immense satisfaction. “Maybe not *the* Ichtton home world, but certainly an Ichtton home world. Young lady, you have done us an invaluable service.”

“But how?” Lusanne protested, eyes wide in bewilderment. “How can I, when all of us saw it on the big viewscreen in the lounge? Why could I, when my aunts couldn't?”

“Because they use all their senses, Lusanne,” her sergeant said. He pressed her hand, and she turned to watch his lips. “They don't emphasize what they see as much as you do,” he explained, “so your visual memories are much sharper, much more detailed.”

Lusanne stared at him, startled. “I held the clue because I'm deaf?”

“Sergeant Barkis may have found the answer,” the psychiatrist agreed.

Globin could see the fear in her eyes, so he hastened to reassure her. “Yes, I know—that makes you an even more vital target for them—you, and you alone. But not if they or their spies discover that your secret is out, and that we all know of the home world now.”

“How can we tell them that, though?” she asked in consternation.

“By the most direct message possible,” Brand said, and keyed his intercom. “Bridge! Astronomy is sending up a set of coordinates they got from Psych. Set a course for the Ichtton home world!”

“Aye, Commander,” the bridge responded.

Brand sat back, gaze glittering.

THE END