

Calose

From the Chronicles of the Hunters

Chapter 1

Calose awakened but remained still as her senses continued to track the new noise. Something heavy was dropped but not from a great height. Without having to strain her hearing, wheezing and a particular mechanical sound came from nearby. It was a Scathion, probably 260 version with the wheezing when one of its functions needed attention. That version of robot was not a threat unless an unauthorized person or something tried to remove from its possession what it was entrusted with. She remained still, knowing it registered her presence and added her in its possible threat list.

The small cry of a baby had Calose almost sitting up. A bundle was tossed landing on her stomach. The S260 twisted around while rising to get a line on its pursuers. Calose's military training had her moving quickly, reflexively grabbing the bundle and scooting between the stacked cargo containers. The noise of shooting and the alarms going off from the security bots had her moving out the area as fast as she could without being seen by the surveillance cameras. Though she had picked this place to sleep and had made sure she had more than one avenue of escape should she be attacked, she didn't expect she would need it since Dysta Space Station was considered a safe place to visit.

There goes my neutrality. All I had was two more days to remain anonymous.

When she made a stop at this remote space station for ship repairs like all remote stations they had their rules of behavior. Consequences of infractions were posted in plain sight. Even now, waiting for running feet to pass her hiding place, her nose was pressed against a warning: Infractions can result in law breakers assigned to work groups and confiscation of property to pay the fine.

The authorities didn't keep the confiscated ships of those that owned one, instead they rented them out to pay off the arrested parties fine. The authorities wanted the law

breaker to leave with all possible speed and to spread the word that their laws were enforced, but that they were fair and it was a safe place to visit.

Obedience collars kept the penitents compliant during their stay and monitored them on their off hours. This too was spread around that there was no brutality or abuse by the overseers of the collars.

It was to be a three-day repair job and she had that long to stay out of trouble. Her credit was good so the repairs started the moment she docked – another advantage of using this station – they were fast and efficient if you paid in advance. Her second order of business was inspecting the station for a place to sleep and stay for her three days. No vacant rooms in a safe part of the station nor were there any available sleeping cubicles. Security bots reminded her to move on if she stayed too long the public spaces. Even in the shops when she spent too much time without buying, a security drone was at her shoulder.

Like most spacers, people who preferred to travel in space rather than settle in one place, she developed self-preservation habits and tools to find alternatives for sleeping safe when visiting the smaller space stations that had no vacant sleep pods. She located four possible sleeping places with more than one exit. But when nightshift descended on the station, other spacers and knock-about had staked out their sleep areas at three of her spots.

Poking her head out of the maintenance tunnel she spotted the security camera. Climbing out of a maintenance tunnel without being authorized to being in it was probably against the rules so she waited for the camera to begin its scan away from her. Moving along the wall with her eyes moving everywhere while her other senses became hyped up, she heard a noise behind her and squeezed into a dark space. Seconds later light footsteps ran by her hiding space.

Calose looked down at the wrapped baby when it made a sound. What was she supposed to do with the baby? There was no dark feeling about the small bundle. Though she couldn't make out the features, reflexively Calose smiled at it. She hated those that used innocents for pawns.

"Don't get any ideas this is a pledge from me to get involved in your business," she whispered. With that said, she moved from one shadow to another, keeping track of the cameras and who was moving around at this early hour. Like all space stations time was divided into four shifts. This was early morning when work crews, usually made up of short term penitents or long time prisoners, robots, shift monitors, and those having business that was not for public knowledge, were active.

For a long moment Calose crouched in a dark space, waiting for what she knew was not a normal shadow. Finally, it moved toward her. Whatever it was made her skin pebble as if a chill passed over her. The baby moved in her arms but made no sound.

"You have something they are looking for," a voice whispered.

"Are *they* who the enfant should be returned to?" Calose asked. A foolish question it would seem but Calose was just curious what kind of information she could get from this stranger who she felt was a neutral party in this hide and seek game.

"That is a fair question but are you ready for the answer?"

"You mean if they aren't, then am I prepared to find the parents of this enfant?"

The darkly dressed person laughed. "What if the parents aren't fit or able to care for this...treasure?"

Calose was about to look down at the enfant when a black gloved hand with fingers splayed covered the infant.

"Best not to gaze at it directly."

Some species had the power to paralyze which was their only protection. Calose took the advice seriously.

"So, who are *they*?" Calose asked.

"Hunters."

"I thought Hunters only looked for relics?"

A sound that could have been a chuckle came from the dark figure. "What does a Hunter define as a relic? How did you come by this?"

"A Scathion 260 tossed it my way before it was blasted to bits, or maybe not. Do you know who its owner is?"

"Yes." Then the dark figure stepped back and melted into the shadows.

All at once, the baby gave a cry, Calose felt something nasty moving toward her faster than she could move, and the metal bulkhead she was leaning against gave way. Falling backwards, her arms wrapped protectively around the baby and rolled until Calose knew she was up against another solid bulkhead.

"Get up and move," hissed a different voice. "I can't cover for you for long. Move!"

"Where?" Calose asked startled.

"Anywhere. I'll find you. Go!"

Calose dashed down the corridor, found a stairwell and went down to the next deck with the intention of working her way back up to the public upper decks. Instead, at each opportunity she kept taking the options to move further below decks of the space station. Being in the bowels of a space ship was nothing like being this deep inside of a space station. The smells and closeness of everything had her furtively looking for another opportunity that she could start moving back up.

"You will not get claustrophobic," she told herself firmly. In a corner, she spotted something another place to hide and catch her breath and wits.

Hunters? She liked to stay away from them. Too many different species with one agenda – grab the prize at all costs. Some did it for their group, some for themselves and some for an employer. She didn't think she could tell what type of Hunter she was going to run into; from one extreme to the other. For example, one may ask before shooting her or she may end up facing one that shot first and didn't look back.

The shimmering surface was a hydroponic liquid bed. It smelled funny – like unnatural decay. Curious, Calose held the tips of her fingers just above the surface to get a feel for what the liquid was. It was interesting to see tiny sparks from her fingers set the entire top layer to a purple hue, then blue, green and finally to a colorless liquid mass.

Oh, oh. She sniffed the air. *Well at least that bad smell is gone.*

"What are you doing?" hissed the voice that had told her to run.

Calose prided herself in not jumping at the sudden appearance of her rescuer. "Is this kid yours?" she demanded instead.

The woman laughed. "Kid? It's a relic."

Calose was going to look down at the bundle but remembered the dark figure's advice.

"What relic cries like a baby?" Calose asked cynically.

"I'm not being paid to know it's entire story. I can see you know not to look at it directly. That's saying something for you. So, how did you get it away from my S260?"

"It tossed it to me and got involved in a shoot out."

"Hm." She sounded pleased. "Well, looks like it was a good purchase after all. Look, I'm not usually into taking on partners but I don't have time to get another robotic helper. I can pay you 500 credits if you help me keep it from those Hunters until my employer arrives to collect it."

That was a lot of credits but it wasn't unheard of. That's why most Hunters were in the business.

"Just how long is that? I'm due to leave hopefully in two days, maybe less."

"That's good enough. I'll let you know where to deliver it when it time. Are you up to it?"

"As long as I don't have to break any rules of the station, I can handle it." She had to be bored to take on this challenge or a fool if not due to the credits. "This isn't to the death, is it?"

"It's my job to see you don't get into that type of trouble." The woman stuck her arm out for the typical forearm grasp of agreement similar species used. "If you're interested – I'm Diana."

"I'm Calose. I accept." Calose grasped her arm and twisted it to see better what the dark shadow was below Diana's short sleeved tunic line. "You're mortleige," she confirmed. "Since when does a mortleige get involved with Hunters?"

"It's what the contract calls for. Do you think death is the only thing we deliver?"

Calose laughed nervously. "I hope not in my case. I don't want to be left behind here holding the consequences of your business."

"Well that's up to you on how you're going to keep the relic from those Hunters. I trust that you have instincts that will make you a good rabbit. Do you trust me to keep the dogs from catching you?"

Calose opened her mouth to reply but she could feel something with ill intentions directed at her was approaching. The baby or relic let out a cry just as both women darted in opposite directions. Calose ducked behind a hydroponic pump and then under it to where there was enough space to drop to the next deck.

I've got to get back to the upper decks.

Dropping to the next deck Calose slipped the relic into her coat and fastened the waist belt tighter. Now it didn't feel like an infant. Why did she think it was? How did it do that?

Calose halted. This deck felt different. Slowly she moved along the darkened corridor and around a corner where there was plenty of light. Hatch covers with names and dates were on them. This was where the penitents slept. Date of release was next to the name. Her eyes moved back and forth along the corridor noting another mark on the doors. Colored dots. There were four different colors and four different shifts so Calose supposed it was an indication of the work shifts each person worked.

Calose hurriedly turned down another corridor, hoping to find a stairway. She didn't trust elevators.

"Lose? What are you doing here?"



Chapter 2

Calose turned quickly. "Belig! I've been looking..."

Belig silenced her with a shush then gestured to a hatch cover with her name on it. Belig blocked the date of her release, maybe intentionally.

Calose stepped into the small space meant for one person. To allow space for two, Calose sat on the cot that was still down.

"I did something stupid. But, forget about me. What are you doing down here? You're a sight for sore eyes!"

"I was in the area and needed some ship repair. Colet and Mimie have been looking everywhere for you. Your parents died a month ago and your family wants to settle the estate so they can move on. Gods, no wonder you didn't want to go visit your family."

"You met my family?" Belig laughed bitterly. "They're not to be trusted, that's for sure. They left home as soon as they could and visited only when they needed credits to bail them out of trouble."

"*You* aren't like that," Calose said, dismayed at how unhappy her once buoyantly funny friend sounded.

"Not in actuality, but if my pride wasn't so strong, I would have been there more often than the others after I got out of the service."

"So, your stubbornness kept you self-reliant. What's the big deal? How did you end up here?"

Belig sighed. "I got involved in a con game of bag switching. Just this once, I thought. Well, I was conned by the con and was left holding the empty bag. I admitted to being part of the theft."

"Belig, you're too kind to be a successful thief. The first needy person you would come upon and you'd give what you stole to them. Just how much is it that you owe?"

"Two hundred credits originally. That's how the financial auditor broke the percentage down. They know who all the players were and their history. Like I said, I was stupid. And don't you even think of paying any of it, Lose. It's my mistake and I'll pay it."

"What about what you stand to inherit?"

"My parents won't have anything that even comes to a fourth of what I owe especially after its divided between us all. They've always lived frugal with what little they had."

"You don't know that. Let me find out for you. Surely some dent in your bill would be good."

"I don't need you to keep digging me out of my messes," Belig told her hotly.

Calose laughed. "Oy, but you do. Just like you watched my back in some of those dumps we ended up on. Do you have transplanet call privileges?"

"If it's for the possibility of paying off my debt to this society, of course. Why?" she asked sounding more hopeful.

"It's to the law office that's handling your parent's estate."

Calose gave her the number she had been given and waited while Belig completed her call.

"Hey, wake up," Belig told her later. "I have to get to work in a while or I would let you sleep. The rules won't let me give you a place to sleep unless we're...well, you know."

Calose rose from the cot. She hadn't realized she fell asleep. "Right." Her stomach growled.

"Wait here and I'll get breakfast. We'll share a meal then I'll show you how to get back to the upper decks. Gods, I wouldn't have thought you would be this far below deck."

"Don't talk about it."

Belig laughed, feeling and sounding lighter.

The call must have helped, Calose thought. Tightening her lips, she made her decision to help Belig pay off her debt. First, she needed to find out just how much that was. While Belig was gone, Calose removed her coat and the artifact. She needed to make it more secure under her coat, yet not so that she couldn't remove it with too much difficulty if she had to. Calose stowed the cot away, giving her more room and access to the toilet. Using a mirror, she studied the artifact's reflection and wondered just who made it so that it sounded like a baby and felt like one. The reflection didn't resemble any species she had ever seen.

Using a scarf, she wound it around her waist and tucked the artifact in it, resting it against her heart. Putting her coat back on she examined how it looked. A tap on the privacy door let her know someone had returned, but the cry against her wasn't all that let her know it wasn't Belig.

"Hey! What are you doing in my quarters! Security! Sec..." Belig's voice was cut off as sounds of a struggle came to Calose. Pushing against the door she realized she couldn't get out. Outside an alarm was sounding.

Gods I hope I didn't get her and I into trouble with the authorities.

The alarms stopped, letting her know all was in hand with security. Not wanting to let her friend get into trouble for something of her doing she tried the door again and found it unlocked. The door to the sleep cubicle was also closed but from the voices on the other side there was a heated discussion going on with Belig's voice rising above them all.

Calose pushed the door open and stepped out. "What's going on? Who locked me in the toilet?"

By Belig rolling all of her six eyes, Calose was stepping in the center of another mess, but this time, Calose knew it was of her doing.

"Who are you?" a uniformed chief of security demanded.

"Calose. I'm having my ship repaired at your docks."

"What are you doing below decks?"

"I've been looking for my friend, Belig. Her folks died and she has an inheritance to collect."

"Indeed?" The officer looked Belig over with a different attitude. For a few moments he was quiet as he mentally accessed information on her and Belig. A blink of his eyes meant the end of the communication. He turned to the four Hunters. "I will ask you again, Hunters..." his voice oozed with contempt, "what is your business down here?"

"We believe she..." and he pointed at Calose with a long-pointed nail, "has our relic! She must give it back."

Belig's eyes opened wide and then fluttered closed as she let out a little sigh. Calose thought for sure Belig thought she had become a Hunter. Not hardly.

The official laughed. "If it is in her possession than she is the legal owner. Even I know the rules of your game. I have no problem with your business as long as you don't break any of the station rules. Security is in need of a bit of excitement."

Calose looked at him unbelievably. He just gave them all the go for the game to continue. Was he bored too?

"Just what rules are those?" one of the Hunters asked.

"I'll take you to the police station where you can read up on them." He turned to Belig. "So, do you have something to arrange with the paymaster?"

Belig gave an unhappy look at Calose and then nodded. "After shift, I'll go have a talk."

"Do it now. We like to settle accounts as quick as possible. Your ship has been leased out and I'll need to know just what needs to be done about that." He turned to the Hunters. "You have broken one of the rules of the station and will have to appear before the magistrate for judgment and get your chance to read the rules."

"We didn't touch anything!"

"You opened and stepped into the quarters unasked of a station employee." He gestured to the Hunters to follow his security robot. "Follow the leader," he mocked. "And there will be silence in the ranks until you've been processed."

Belig and Calose watched the group move away.

"Are you a Hunter now?" Belig sounded so disappointed in her.

"For 500 credits, I'm the bait for their game and it's only for two days. What trouble can I get into?"

"Gods, but you're sinking low in your boredom...how much did you say again? Are you sure it's legitimate?"

Calose smiled. "I owe you some of it for getting them off my back... How much do you owe here?" She glanced back down the corridor, feeling as if she was being watched. "I have to go."

"I don't know...bye. See you around," Belig said to empty space. "Hm. Hide and seek for two days and she gets 500 credits? I better get to the paymaster." She turned and started toward the upper decks. Her friend Lose sure had changed in her aversion to being in the center of a large station, because she took the corridor that went further into it. She didn't have the nerve to go that deep inside a space station. There were places that had no light source of its own due to the sensitivity of the equipment. How would anyone find their way back if her lamp went out?

Nonresidents of the space stations rushed to squeeze passed by her.

"Hey, take it easy," she said. Something traveled above her unimpeded but the corridor was not that wide to allow two abreast. It was for crowd control in the penitents' area in case there was a riot, though to her way of thinking, that wouldn't happen under the present management.

Aggravated hisses hurried her to let them by. Since they were not roughing her up to get by, the security bots would raise an alarm.

I didn't think Lose would be into something like this, but it's not like I know a lot about her since we parted ways, Belig thought. I mean, look at me.



Chapter 3

"I can't believe this. I'm getting further from the main deck." Calose knew she was going further into the space station because there was less light in the area. Dark shadows of hulking machines, humming their business were all around her.

"Do you have a reason for being here?" Diana asked.

Calose stifled her yell. "You're scaring my heart out of me," Calose complained. "I hate being this far from an exit."

"We need a plan. Very clever of you to take out five of them in one swoop. But the others are smarter."

"A plan. I could do with one of those. How long more of this?"

Diana laughed. "Aren't you having fun?"

Calose looked at Diana as if she was kidding, then realized, if she hadn't gotten involved, there was no telling how long it would have taken her to have realized her friend was on this space station. "It has it's moments."

"You'll find all sorts of advantages coming your way as long as you're in possession of that relic. Just make sure you chose with the best intentions, and remember not to look at it directly. And another thing, don't rely on it getting you out of predicaments. It's out for itself. It's easy to become addictive to the idea that what you wish may come to be as long as you have it in your possession. If it should decide suddenly you're not to its advantage, you'll find yourself facing your worst enemy alone."

"Why are you involved?"

"My contract is to deliver it to someone. Unlike most messengers, I was smart not to come in contact with it."

"That's why the bot. Is it going to hurt me?"

"Only if you don't have self-discipline and good intentions. Listen, down here is a nice place to hide but to tell you the truth, the security guards aren't going to like a game of hide and seek in a place they consider vulnerable to their stations operations."

"It wasn't my intention to be where I don't belong."

"Yet, you found your friend." The amusement was unmistakable to hear. "Remember. Good intentions. Nice surprises. See that green light that blinks on every now and again?" Diana asked her.

"Gods, stop my wistful daydreams," Calose mocked. Her daydreams were too fanciful to be practical, besides if she wanted a dream to come to be then she would be the one to make it happen, not use some relic that will take it all away. She heard enough child tales not to trust the guy under the bridge who promises a pot of gold. "I see the light."

"Green is down, and red is up."

"We need to move," Calose told her.

"I smell it to. Keep this in mind, they may be using that smell to drive you somewhere. Don't go blindly."

"What a joke. It's so dark down here I can barely see." Calose finished that to empty space. Taking her own advice, she moved back the way she thought she had come, using her other senses to tell her what she was passing – something solid or something she could hide behind.

The space she took refuge between was warm. It was between a hydroponics pool and a regulator unit. Calose pressed against the pool wall as hard as she could, with hope that her bios blended in with the chemicals that leaked over the pool wall.

Someone should see about adjusting the reservoir. Eventually they're going to have rot covering the deck. She wrinkled her nose. The stink alone should tell the maintenance people something's wrong.

Above her she could hear movement and slowly she raised her eyes to see if there was anything she needed to worry about. Something was getting ready to drop on her.

Calose jumped away. Under a set of steps near the pool she took refuge under. Whatever it was she could hear it move away.

A door opened with voices and lights filling the area. A humming had her covering her ears. Security was activated when the main door opened. She needed to see just where the door was.

"I tell you, you can't have one hydro change and not adjust the others when the change is so great! Whatever changed the tank on deck seven is...there you see? They're all connected."

"Yeah, yeah. Let's just get the adjustments done and get out of here. I hate being so deep in this prison."

"Prison? They're training us for honest jobs. Speak for yourself. Where else can you pay off your debt, get trained for an honest and modern job as well as tasty meals and a safe place to sleep as well? No where."

"You can talk. Your time is up in three weeks. I've got ten more years."

"Hold on. Read the temperature before you change it. You're going to tilt it in the wrong direction."

"Okay, okay. Get over it."

"Alright. Let me check the other side. 10 dashes to T," he muttered.

From where she was, Calose could see the boots of each person. The one more worn but better cared for moved off. After a second delay the other boots moved to where his coworker was and then moved off. His chuckling to himself didn't make Calose feel he was a trusting soul to work with.

"Where you going now, Bettle? Yer finished with the tinkering, now let's get."

"I want to recheck...."

"Dam it, Bettle. You've done yer fiddling. Let's get out of here."

Don't trust him, Bettle. He's not your friend.

"If you want to go, go. *My* job is to balance these pools." He started back toward the pool when Calose heard quick movement.

"Behind you!" Calose yelled and jumped up to tackle the legs of whoever was near her.

"Hey!"

"Artie, put that tool down!" Bettie warned him as he hurriedly untangled himself from Calose.

"She doesn't belong down here. We found her," and by the crazy look in his eyes that was not good, "and she...killed you...and I killed her." Artie pulled a tool from his belt that looked more like a dangerous object.

"Just what are you in prison for?" Calose asked.

"Murder," Artie said. "Do you feel safe?" he mocked.

"You said yourself you only have ten more years. You attack us and you'll be here longer and chances are working someplace you won't be happy at."

Calose could feel the heat around her increase triple fold.

"You've changed the settings!" Bettie said. He craned his neck to see what it was set to. "You crazy mongrel! It will explode the hydroponic pools on all levels."

"I guess I'll just have to save the world and get time off for good behavior." The tool was thrown with good accuracy and straight for Calose, hitting her in the heart and causing her to hit the pool wall with so much force she was knocked to the ground stunned. The tool fell to the floor next to her face, bent to an unrecognizable shape.

She was aware that Bettie jumped at Artie to prevent him from throwing another tool at him with the same accuracy. Amid the shouts and rolling around, Calose noted that none of the Hunters were taking the opportunity to overpower her and take the artifact. Maybe they didn't want to get arrested for abetting a killer.

Rolling to her hands and knees Calose struggled to get her sense of balance back. The heat at her side told her the pool was getting too hot. Calose dragged herself onto the

stairs and tried to determine what dials the two men had been adjusting. Everything was blurry.

Bettle and Artie were grunting and wrestling.

"Ten dashes to T!" shouted Bettle and his sacrifice was a missed block of Artie's fist that sent Bettle to the ground.

"Don't touch it or I'll kill him," Artie said triumphantly. "Get down from there and get over here."

"He's going to kill us anyway. Change it back!" Bettle shouted.

Artie shouted in rage and lifted his arm only to have it held in place.

Much to Calose's embarrassment, it was the same security chief officer.

"Bettle."

Bettle staggered to his feet and up the stairs. "Why, it's not reading right at all. The other pool needs to be brought to another temp to adjust. When I tell you, can you move this here?" he asked Calose.

"Sure, sure," Calose agreed feeling her face heat up from the look the security chief was giving her. Calose hoped Bettle would hurry up so she could take her consequences and move on. How much time did she have to go?

"Go ahead, make the change," Bettle yelled.

The heat from the pool didn't seem to change with her moving the dial. Worried, Calose held her palm over the liquid. Again, small sparks from her hand went into the liquid and settled the contents of the hydroponic pool down quickly.

"A healer's hands, aye?" Bettle asked.

Guiltily, Calose shoved her hands into her pockets. "No." She hoped her tone of voice was a strong enough indication that it was a preposterous idea.

"Bettle, go on up to med and have yourself looked at."

"I'm okay, Chief. He just knocked the wind out of me. I can finish my shift. Or she can give me a touch and for sure I'll be cranking it."

"I'm ordering you to see the doc to clear you. It won't be counted against your hours, Bettle. Go on now. Security bot escort prisoner Artie to the brig. Notify the court of his sabotage of the hydroponic pools and attempt at murdering an employee of Dysta Space Station and a visitor."

When the chief and her were alone, he chuckled. "You're shaking up this station, you are. It's been nagging my staff for about a year now because we haven't been able to catch our saboteur. We have too many suspects, with members of my staff included."

Calose waited, wondering if he had something more to say. Then impulsively said, "There's fifteen of them." Her face became so heated that she truly knew that wasn't from her.

The chief grinned. "A relic, aye? Something that causes you to go against your natural ways is not something to keep around long." He shrewdly guessed. "Anything else you want to add?"

"I don't know anything more." She waited a moment to be sure something didn't occur to her and shook her head. "Nothing more."

He gestured to the exit. "Want to go up to the upper decks in a normal way, or stick to back ways?"

Calose let out a sigh of relief. "I'd love to go up..." Then the lights went out and the chief cursed when they heard a weapon being fired. The lights came back on briefly as the exit opened, giving her a good view of where she wanted to go. As it closed she crawled in the corridor catching someone's heels and down he went. More weapons fire in the corridor.

The chief grabbed Calose by the arm and pulled her into a doorway that closed behind them.

Calose huffed trying to catch her breath.

"You okay? Good. I haven't had such a good opportunity to check to see if the higher end security is working. You can take that exit, it'll lead upward."

"What about that one?"

"Stays on this deck. By the time your ship is ready your friend will be free to leave. Her lawyer contacted the office and the head of the work labor force said her bills paid in full."

"Really?"

Calose was surprised and knew it wasn't something she had done, or had she? Another thing the relic was responsible for? She really needed to watch her wishes. What happens when she gives the relic back? Would Belig be hauled back to Dysta to serve additional time? Would Belig lose her inheritance?

"Thanks for your help."

The chief chuckled. "You just don't know how much help you're giving me and for free."

"What if it all turns rotten when I leave?"

"You mean filling in a void? Before I took up this job, I was a Spiritualist. I started out with the best intentions but I got too good at collecting credits and living a high-end life. I became a fraud and didn't want to give up the game. One day I forced someone to part with something I desired...something inconsequential. I did it because I could. I was a penitent here for three years and after serving my time I stayed on. I was blessed with a good mentor. I am proud to say, I feel no compulsion to go back into the con game. I also know the feel of a powerful talisman when it's near. Be careful what you ask for."

Calose understood. There were some lessons she learned so well that the temptation to fall back wasn't there. Her method of staying ahead of boredom and lethargy was to do something new every three months as long as it was legal. Hanging onto a relic with people hunting her down, wasn't the type of excitement she needed in her life.



Chapter 4

In the shadow of a doorway Calose regarded the exit that would take her to the upper decks or further down. She didn't know how much time had passed. She had been able to grab short naps but the relic would wake her and she would move on. It seemed like a long time since she had real sleep. The last time she had done something like this was during her trainee years as a starfighter pilot. Though it turned out that she didn't have the killer instinct necessary to fit the fighter pilot profile she did have the right instinct for taking a ship through its paces. Her CO had moved her to testing repaired ships before passing them off to the *real* pilots. There were no regrets for spending six years in service. It got her a ship of her own modifications and a desire to become a spacer. Her only worry was how to pay for some of her supplies. Her ship couldn't manufacture everything, though she had a good transformer.

Her eyes moved to another doorway in the shadows and it bothered her not to be able to see the outline of a door. Footsteps from around the bend could be heard. Relief at seeing Belig had her almost stepping out of her hiding but her hesitation paid off.

"Hey, Mema," the Belig look alike said to the shadowed doorway. "Anything?"

"Not if you come walking down here and blow my cover," Mema snarled.

"I'm going on top deck and give it a test. Do I look real enough?" She turned around and as her eyes turned Calose's way, she thought she may have been seen.

"It'll do. Let Aldo know that you're taking the top deck." When the door was opened and Belig's look alike passed she glanced her way, and before she could react, Calose slammed the door behind Belig.

"Argggggh!" Mema leaped from the shadowed doorway taking a slash at her. Calose slammed her fist into his face and she ran.

"Are you stupid or what?" Belig's voice could faintly be heard. "We could have had her without fuss. You don't look too good. What did she hit you with?"

Calose took in her surroundings. What did she step into? All spaces had more than one entrance/exit. The overhead vent in this case. She was small enough to fit. Carefully she unlatched the cover, and pulled herself up. For a few moments she crouched in the vent then backed out. Her scent would spread through the connecting

vents and confuse anyone looking for her. Dropping back to the ground she didn't bother reattaching the vent cover. Going back to the door she peeked out. Apparently Mema had been injured and left his post. Calose darted out and flung the exit open.

"Hey! Lose!" Belig's voice called. "Hold up!"

Ignoring her Calose sprinted across the open common area until she spotted ten Beligs encircling her. She came to a sliding stop.

"Lose, listen... Oh, gods," Belig muttered behind her. "If they're going to look like me, they could at least dress right."

Calose frantically looked around for an escape or something to serve as a distraction. A maintenance worker was two steps from her, holding his cleaning pole, his mouth and eyes gaping at the charging Beligs. Grabbing his pole Calose used it to tap a security camera, out of normal reach, disabling it, which sent out an alarm to the others. The automatic crowd control spotted the charging Beligs, read the bio of the entities and paralyzed them. It then searched for the offending weapon, which Calose tossed behind her. Someone must have caught it because she heard a cry and the clatter of the pole. Calose ran through the corridor that led to the next common area where a crowd was gathering as second shift was getting off.

Calose ducked into a traveler's lounge. In one of the privacy queues Calose worked on changing her appearance. It wasn't that difficult with what the traveler's refresh queues offered. Makeup and changing her dress style gave her a modish look. As she stepped out of the queue Belig was standing outside. She grabbed Calose and pulled her back in.

"You're not as difficult to find as you think," Belig hissed. "What you need is to fatten up those cheeks and your shoulders need filling to change your body type." She began to make further changes to Calose's appearance.

"You're not wearing the prison collar," Calose mentioned.

"Thanks to your standing up for me. From what the family attorney said, I inherited three hundred credits, but by the time it gets to Dysta it's two hundred and fifty. It was 10 credits more than what I owed on my fine They leased out my ship and it was

last docked at Earl's Folley. Some blasted gambler lost it to another blasted gambler. He lost *my* ship!"

"So, you want a ride there?" Calose asked.

"If that's where it really is. How many hours more do you have here?"

"I need to check and see how long more till my ship's ready."

"You can dial in at one of the kiosks. So, can you tell who I am?"

"No. You did good with your disguise. Do you have any luggage?"

"Our work uniform is all we're allowed to wear. Personal property that wasn't sold for paying off some of my debt was stored on my ship. What you see is what I was arrested in."

Once back in the common area they walked abreast but Calose wasn't ready to accept the person next to her as Belig.

"When we last parted, you were going to taxi a pair of business managers that missed their flight to a business meeting on a nearby planet. What happened?" Calose asked.

"Didn't pan out. They were supposed to pay me in advance and kept telling me the credits were being transferred as they boarded. By the time I was ready for departure, I still didn't see anything in my account so I told them they won't be going anywhere on my ship. Next thing I know my ship and I are out in the middle of nowhere. They hijacked me!"

"They didn't do something illegal with your ship, did they?"

"I put in a complaint the first space kiosk I came to. I had to wait a few days before an enforcer could take my face-to-face report. It seems one of the people I ID'd is a very famous person and he had an alibi; therefore, *I* was suspect. I lucked out that I didn't keep the transaction information on my ship which proved his word was untrue. They had wiped all evidence of their presence and where they went on my ship." She sighed. "Things started to go down hill from there. Hey, isn't that one of them Hunters?"

"Where there's one there's others. How about the kiosk?"

Belig led her to a kiosk with few people about. While Belig kept an eye out for any suspicious lingers Calose tapped in an inquiry. Instead of placing her palm on the bioreader she tapped in a code.

"Delayed?" Calose sighed. "We're going to have to split up. Meet me at the slip. Chances are they won't follow you."

"What do you mean split up?"

"Belig, these are Hunters, they're not interested in you. They're interested in the relic."

"Then why are they posing as me? That wasn't a mind control thing because even the security bots noticed."

Calose shook her head, patted Belig on the arm, and then headed to a crowd that was forming around a performing artist. His hat to accept promises of credit with a license to perform was before him. Calose moved through the crowd then paused at the edge.

"You hang around some strange characters," Diana's voice said.

Calose didn't react to the spectator that was dressed in traveler's garb that stood a respectable distance from her. "I'm working with what I have at hand. I need to find a kiosk and check my repair time."

"You should be ready soon. There's a push to get your repairs done. That's a good sign."

"You don't mind if I find out for myself do you?" she asked irritably.

"Not at all," Diana said with amusement. "Try the port harbor masters office."

Diana's presence was gone, replaced by an annoyed Belig who elbowed her way to Calose's side.

"I think we're better off together," she insisted. "I don't want to be stuck here any longer than necessary."

"They see me." Calose had her escape already marked. Without trying to hide Calose ran to an exit and down a corridor. She could hear Belig running after her.

As Calose clambered up the stairs something hit her hard in the back and rather than collapsing on the stairs and maybe breaking a bone if not her head sliding down the metal stairs, she leaned just far enough to fall over the railing. Typically, stairways had a tube of energy surrounding them to prevent anyone from falling over the railing to their death at the bottom of a long drop. It was with the strength of will that she called for a stop, barely getting a sound out from the wind knocked out of her lungs. Gently the energy held her until she could pull herself back onto the stairs. Focused on one step at a time, Calose moved up to deck five's platform. The door opened for her and she fell through.



Chapter 5

Calose blinked her eyes opened. It was no longer so amazing to find herself not exhausted, and not physically hurting from taking a shot that should have slowed her down a few days. What was amazing was to find a weapon that would wipe her brain for weeks pointed right at her temple. Would the relic protect her from that?

The Mison, white skinned, short and thin, gestured for her to stand. His fingertips were suction cups and they reached out to her. His speech was whistles with punctuations of hoots. He wanted Calose to hand the relic to him or else.

"Or else what?" she asked.

"Or else we dump your friend's brains," he hooted and dragged Belig forward. Her lips were bleeding and two of her eyes were bruised closed.

"After so many look a likes showing up not too long ago, how do I know this one isn't one of them? And if that weapon is for real, you know you'll be looking at a long time in prison just for having it."

The Mison fired and Belig shuddered then went totally limp.

"You don't impress me," Calose said. "You're just showing me what this relic's about."

"About?" whistled the Mison and then was hooting so hard Calose considered knocking him down.

What would happen if he looked it in the eye? I can use it as a defense.

"You obviously don't know anything about it. Let me educate you," and he leaned forward quickly as if to put one of his fingertips on her, which could infect her with whatever chemical he desired.

Calose knocked his hand away and stumbled over the downed figure of Belig. No matter that she didn't believe it was the real Belig, or that no self-respecting person would carry a Mind Scambler, it was the idea that he did it. The after effects were said to be devastating to some. Calose didn't believe all she heard but in her travels she met someone that had been a victim of the MS. Whether it was just a line he was running on her, the point was, he was an emotional mess. It was frightening that a once powerful man could be brought down so easily.

Her stumble landed her on her back trying to stay away from the Mison's reaching fingers. Where was her backup? Calose rolled to her feet and ran down the corridor. This was not where she wanted to be running. The corridor had too many doorways that required a key code to open.

She was being herded.

Calose came to an abrupt stop and turned to face the Mison and Belig that didn't have time to stop their full out run to catch up with her. Stepping toward Belig, she shouldered her into the Mison. However, this Belig got a hand around her arm and would not let go. Calose stepped into her space and dropped to her knee and pushed up and toward the Mison that was quickly back on his feet. Belig's form changed quickly to another species that nearly had Calose screaming in terror.

"Down!" Diana shouted and Calose threw herself on her stomach and rolled so her back was against the wall. "Yeaaaaaa." And Diana came flying down the corridor and

slid next to Calose. Calose didn't think that was what Diana had in mind but she recovered quickly and had pulled Calose to the side when a shot was fired at her.

Calose's hand went into her jacket, "Close your eyes," she told Diana and she pulled out the relic and held it up. There was an intake of breath.

"Go, go," Diana encouraged her. "Don't look back." Both got up and ran back down the corridor and through the doorway that would take them to the docks. Diana stopped at the entrance and pushed Calose on. "Get off the station if you can. Leave it where you think it will be safe. My client is here and will find it."

Calose nodded and hurried to the dockmaster's hut. Climbing the stairs she tapped on the door, which opened as she rapped on it.

"Hi," she greeted a man who was looking at a screen. "Can you tell me if my ship is about ready?"

"Hold on and let me see." Leaning over he picked up his communication unit and rang. "They're not answering. Probably busy. I'll go take a ride and see. Wait here in the office for my return. I can't have you wandering around."

He moved past Calose and drove off in a cart that was parked below the office.

"What dockmaster would leave a stranger in their office without a chaperon?" While he was gone, she looked around his office. There was a door that led to a storage room that held the belongings of penitents until they were released. The door was open and from what she could see, it was a deep cavernous room. She walked over to get a better look.

"How many penitents are there here?" she asked.

"One thousand and fifty-five," was the answer from a computer monitor.

Calose looked around her guiltily and not seeing anyone went on to ask, "Does Belig have a storage bin?"

"Account has been closed and dues paid. One travel bag delivered to individual ten minutes ago," the computer said.

"Do you have an image of the dockmaster?"

Five images of different people came up on the screen before her and none looking like the person that ran out of the office.

"Where is the dockmaster that is on duty now?"

"Delivering Belig to pier seven."

Calose was left wondering if she should go looking for Belig and her ship or wait. Unauthorized persons on the dock were discouraged, though not considered unlawful. The sound of a cart could be heard and Calose stepped out onto the stairwell in view of whoever arrived.

"Is there something you need?" a gruff voice asked behind her. It was one of the faces the computer had shown as a dockmaster.

"I was wondering if you could tell me if my ship is ready. The *Glass Eye II*."

"You must be Calose. Welcome." He smiled warmly at her. "I just dropped Liggie off at your ship. She said you were giving her a ride to pick up her ship, *Glass Eye I*." He chuckled. "Come on and I'll take you over to your slip."

"When I came here looking for you, there was a guy in here that I thought was you."

He made a disagreeable noise in his throat. "The replacement for Liggie from the penitent pool. He's not as promising as Liggie. We're going to miss her."

"Belig worked on the docks?" That was interesting because she swore she would never work on another spaceship when she left the service. She was a mechanic and working on star fighters was a pressure job.

"Aye. She was mediocre when she came to us, but was determined to pay off her debt. Worked overtime when we fell behind. Darn good worker. Said it reminded her of her time when she was in the service. You must be the hot shot pilot that hates to kill."

Calose's face reddened.

"Said you were a toughie. Took the mechanics out to get them to feel and hear what effect they had on the ships they repaired."

Calose's face further reddened.

He laughed. "She also said, until you arrived, their shop wasn't rated too high in repair work and getting ships out on time. You think you scared them to death in flying in something they were supposed to have repaired?"

"It was my job."

As they approached her dock there was a Belig talking to one of the harbormaster's workers. She had a bag at her feet.

The cart came to a stop along side of the pair.

"Alban's Waystation. My ship is docked there. The gambler that won it in a game was trying to cash in on it. Can you give me a lift there?"

"All right." Calose caught the sight of five figures hurrying toward them. "We have to go."

Calose ran up the ramp hearing Belig close behind her. The exit hatch closed and locked.

"Is this still about that relic?" Belig demanded.

"Not for long."

Calose dialed in for a take off time and put it on automatic pilot while she went to make sure there would be no tagging her ship.

The ship powered up quickly and moved out of its slip. "I wonder how long this nice service is going to last," Calose muttered. She had left the relic hidden in the harbormaster's office.

"With the A1 upgrade, it's guaranteed to last until the next scheduled upgrade. Believe me, this shipyard does quality work," Belig said.

I asked for a repair not an upgrade. I'll bet that put a hole in my credit line. I'll have to check it out later.

The lights dimmed for a moment. "What was that?" Calose asked.

Belig was grinning. "That's the new protection against taggers. It emits a vibration that doesn't allow anything to attach to your outer hull. I can't wait to get my ship back. From what I learned here, I'm going to be upgrading my own. I'll have one slick ship. There's been a lot of advancements in ship mechanics since we left the service."

"So, what do you intend on doing now?"

"The camaraderie was great here, like in the service, but it was driving me crazy all that closeness. So, what are you going to do now that you found me?"

"Drop you off at your ship and see what's what."

Belig smiled. "Four days from here. What about the relic?"

"Ah." Calose sent a transmission to see what her balance was. "There's the 500 credits. What's your account? Since you helped I can spread the wealth around."

"Now that would help out. I don't have one at the moment. To leave with you and get my ship back, I cleaned out everything. I'm glad you're finished with the relic. Hunters make my skin crawl."

"When have you ever run across them except for back there?" Calose asked.

"I hear stories. Like all space stations they're great resources for gossip around the galaxies."

"So, tell me about Hunters."

End of this tale.