

The Bounty Hunter

Tanya glared at the man sitting complacently behind the desk. "This is unacceptable, Commander," she said coldly, rising out of her chair. He blinked in surprise and hastily rose from his chair as she turned to leave, trying to smooth down unruly brown hair that would not stay slicked down.

"I am sorry, Citizen! This is out of my hands. Station regulations ..."

She whirled back, seething inwardly. "Are you or are you not the commander of the Fleet Installation here?" she snapped.

"Well, yes, but it's not as if this was Delta Station. This station is completely autonomous. The presence here of the Stellar Navy Fleet is merely because of the proximity to Shymmerian space. Director Regis has..."

"Yes. I know. The Director has full and total authority here. You are merely a token presence of Central Authority."

The commander smiled so hard he was beaming. "Yes, that's right. You'll have to take this matter up with Director Regis."

"I've tried!" she said, barely able to keep from snarling. "I am a duly registered Hunter, complying with all the rules and regulations regarding my profession. As those regulations require, I informed this station's administration of my arrival, and of the confirmed presence of my quarry on Omicron. And have I been granted a meeting with Director Regis? No. I have not. It seems," she said through clenched teeth. "He is unavailable. Family commitments. Apparently."

The commander continued to beam. "Well, yes! Regis is well known..."

That was about all she could take. "I do not care about the Director's personal life. The only thing that concerns me is being able to carry out my contract to retrieve my target and turn him over for further processing. Which I can't do without the signed approval of the Director. Who refuses to see me. Meanwhile," she said, her voice rising. "A man who has been on the run from the proper authorities for two standard years, and who may very well have added murder to his list of crimes, could, at this moment, be boarding a shuttle off station."

"Oh. Dear me. Why would he do that?"

"He has done it before. Whichever station he's on, I believe he hacks into the online security system to get access to the passenger lists for the incoming ships. And using that, could figure out when I was arriving."

"Uh, hacks? I don't think I'm familiar with..."

"Splicing," she said wearily. "He hooks up an illegal and unregistered computer terminal onto the station's network and ... oh, never mind. Do you have any idea when I'll be able to see the Director?"

"Regis? Well, I'll call his assistant and get you an appointment. In the meantime, I would like to offer you the hospitality of Omicron Station, on his behalf. I'll have someone get you some quarters ... do you prefer one of the commercial hotels or would station digs be fine with you?"

"I don't need any quarters! I just need to get this damn thing signed so I can collect my target!"

He blinked at her again, looking just like a fuzzy owl to her. All he needed was a pair of glasses to complete the image. But no one wore glasses in this century, not when surgery to correct the condition was such a simple thing. It was one of the first things she'd had done when she'd completed assimilation.

"Look," she said, forcing herself to sound patient. And calm. "Just have me buzzed when the Director is available. In the meantime, with your permission, I would like to see about locating my target. This is a big station, after all. You can authorize that much, can't you?"

"What? Oh, of course. I'll just call someone to escort you. Show you around a little. Have you ever been to Omicron before? We're very proud of our station, you know. Are you sure I can't interest you in a room?"

"No, thank you," she said. What was with the man? Was he a military commander or an hotelier? This century had its share of idiots, but he was fast becoming one of the most annoying and frustrating examples yet. How on Earth, or wherever, could he have risen as far as commander in even this century's military? Well, what passed for a military, these days. She hoped this Director Regis was more competent at his job, or the Shymmerians would have this place for breakfast. From what she'd heard of the Shymmerians, they had the predatory and violent instincts that they often accused people from her own century of.

A guard was standing in the waiting area just outside the commander's office, wearing the Station's dark blue uniform rather than the dark grey of Fleet. A red stripe on his sleeves and around his chest proclaimed him to be in Security. Wonderful. Her babysitter.

She brushed passed him with a curt nod of acknowledgement and headed for the outer door. He fell into step beside her, even reached the door before her to open it, an annoyance that made her teeth ache every time she encountered the practice.

"The Commander said you'll need a guide around the place," he said, his long legs easily matching her stride. "Any place you want to start in particular, Hunter Baronn? It's Tanya Barron, isn't it?"

She looked up at him, her eyes narrowing. "Do I know you?"

He smiled casually. "Well, you look familiar. What ship were you off?" She glared at him pointedly, and he swallowed and looked away quickly. "Right. Gotcha. You don't talk about it. Myself, I was off the *Culpepper*. Daryl Ridgeway's my name. The *Culpepper* was one of the first ones they found. Adjusting sure wasn't easy. But what the hey! I like this time. At least I don't have to worry about some frackin corporation using my blood and sweat to make them rich anymore. And I'm sure glad I don't have to worry about being drafted to fight in the wars either. They treat you right, in this century."

"If you say so," she said coldly. They continued walking down the corridor, heading for the elevators. People passed them, sometimes nodding or smiling a greeting, all looking pleasantly busy and wearing a variety of different uniforms and business attire. The station had several variations of its uniform, depending on what area of service the individual worked in. The other uniforms represented Fleet and other different branches of the Bureau. This was, after all, the administration quarter of the station. On other levels, the uniforms and business suits gave way to more civilian style of clothes. But she felt more comfortable here, even though she didn't wear a uniform herself. The crisp sameness reminded

her of her own time. She glanced over at the security guard. Security Officer, rather. Tall, with dark hair and a dark complexion. A nose broken at least once, back Before. You didn't see bumps like that on people of this century. Hair not as short as a good military haircut, but not what she could call long. It was a decent-enough face. And he was from home. Sort of.

"The *Worthington*," she said as they reached the elevators. Only the sign said "Lift Tube".

"What was that?" he said, pushing the button to signal it. "The *Worthington*? I don't think I've heard of her."

"Very small. A privately funded surveyor. Crew of thirty."

He nodded, understanding. There were quite a few of those little ships zipping about back then, mapping and surveying areas just off the intersection points of the starweb. Looking for planets, always. And suitable sites for the Web stations. Like Omicron.

"Do you see any of the others from your ship these days?" he asked. The lift doors swished open, and they stepped inside. He punched a deck level, just like on an elevator back home. But then, Omicron had been built Before. And if something worked, moderns saw no need to replace it.

The elevator/lift operated smoothly, and the doors swished open on level five, which was as good a place to start her search as any, if she remembered the station schematics right. She looked up at her guide, his last question hanging in the air, trying to decide if she should bother answering him. Of telling him how no one else had survived their ship's flaky cryo units. All dead. Gone. Leaving her alone.

"No," she said finally. "They didn't make it." She stepped off the lift and marched down the corridor to the entrance to the bazaar quarter. She felt him following her, although a bit slower than before. Somehow, that gave her a small twinge of satisfaction. Felt they had some kind of camaraderie, did he? Just because they were both Sleepers? Hah!

There were two security officers stationed by the bazaar area's doors, one a bit taller than Ridgeway and built just as bulky, the other shorter, trimmer. The taller one checked her ID tag, while the other very politely asked her to open her sidebag for inspection. She handed it over impatiently. At least Regis kept up a proper level of security. She'd been on some stations where she could wander about through the public areas without being stopped. She'd once had a target that had carried a stungun with him wherever he went. She'd had to use extra force with that one.

"What's this, Citizen Barron?" the officer said, holding up her portable tracker. The taller officer ran its serial number through his scanner.

"That's my tracker unit. I use it to narrow down the location of my target," she said.

"Checks out," the officer with the scanner said. The other grunted softly and handed her back her bag. "One moment, Citizen Barron," the first officer said as she was about to walk passed him. "Your file shows that you do not have a signed warrant to operate on this station. By law, you may not apprehend your target until your warrant is signed."

"I'm aware of that, Officer," she said tightly. "But I have authorisation from the Fleet Commander to conduct a search for my target. I plan on using this time to locate him, so that when the warrant is signed, I can collect him quickly and be gone."

The officer nodded. "Makes sense. Has someone checked the station files to see if we can locate your target?" He looked at her assigned babysitter, who was standing just behind her and to one side.

"No, they haven't, Officer," she said, forcing a smile. The expression felt strange. "But then I haven't been on station for very long."

He shrugged. "It doesn't take very long. What information do you have on him?"

She told him. "Male, standard, Caucasian. Uses a variety of alias, but his proper name is Jon Samms. Was off the *Coriander*. No fixed ID number. He's a slicer, who's gotten into every computer system he encounters."

"Damages them?" the officer who'd checked her bag said, while the one with the scanner kept entering the data on his mini-keyboard.

She shook her head. "Not really. Just carves himself new identities, keeps track of security operations, personnel lists, and so on. Very good at slipping through secure areas, avoiding sweeps, finding little nooks and crannies to hole up in. This is the third station I've tracked him to, and through four different planets. Slippery bugger."

The officer doing the data entry nodded as he worked, then glanced up with an eyebrow raised. "What are his transgressions?"

"Non-conformity, mainly. Hasn't been able to adjust since being released from quarantine. Not able to perform his job skills to satisfactory levels continually. Has been terminated from nine different positions."

"Nine? Sounds like he was trying harder than most to make it," commented her babysitter. She shot him a caustic glare.

"Not hard enough. But then I'm not the one who makes the rules. Although the hacking, I mean splicing, alone makes him dangerous enough, in my book." She wondered if she should tell them about Angii yet. Yes, they probably should know. It was by far the worst thing she could accuse him of, although without a body, it would be hard to prove.

"There's something else, not on his official file," she said. "I had a partner. Her job was to get close to the subject, either by gaining his confidence or just by shadowing him. She wore a transmitter, an organic one. I could use the tracker to follow her signal, even though they moved around a lot. But then her signal stopped. He must have been on to her. Killed her. That's the only way the signal would've just stopped like that."

The babysitter looked at her, his expression pained. She felt a wave of disgust for him. What? Did he think she did this for kicks? It was her job. Angii's job, too. They'd been good at it. They'd made a good team. She owed it to Angii to track this bastard down.

"What if she's just taken it off? It was removable, wasn't it?" Ridgeway said, fidgeting slightly.

She snorted. "Yeah. Surgically. But why would she dig it out of herself when as soon as I caught him, she could get it done properly? Besides, the job wasn't done yet."

The one officer pointed at her bag. "If her transmitter doesn't work anymore, how are you able to keep tracking him?"

She shrugged. "I put a micro transmitter on him myself, the only time I've ever been able to get close to him."

"You were close enough to put a transmitter on him? Why didn't you apprehend him then?" her babysitter said stiffly.

She looked at him evenly. "Close, but not that close. Actually, I used one of those nanobot transmitters. Slipped it into a drink he was about to be served. The little thing took up residence and has been transmitting ever since. It's not as good as Angii's was at a distance, but it's done the job well enough. I know he's here, and that he hasn't left. Yet."

The computer pad gave a beep, then a deeper, double beep. She looked at the officer, waiting. Something had come up, it sounded like. But she'd never heard that double beep before.

"Uh, I'm sorry, Citizen. It's come up negative." He looked over at her babysitter, a strange, tight look on his face.

"That's fine, officer," he said smoothly. "We'll just move into the bazaar. Maybe her tracker will locate him. Citizen Barron?" he gestured for her to proceed him. As she walked passed the guard station, the two officers began whispering to each other, but her attention was riveted on the shiny metal double doors before her that slid open as she approached. The cacophony of movement and noise that poured over her was unexpected, and she hesitated for a moment on the threshold. Omicron was one of the largest space stations ever built, but it was nowhere near as crowded as some tenement buildings back in her day. But the noise and somehow cheerful confusion was completely different, and a bit off-putting. But somewhere in all of that noisy brightness was her quarry. She gritted her teeth and stepped through, Ridgeway right behind her.

Once through the wide double doors that marked this entry point into the bazaar, Ridgeway guided her through the throngs of people. He moved quickly, not quite weaving in and out among the moving crowd, forcing her to concentrate on following him. Usually, she walked slowly through a crowd, watching people's faces, searching for her quarry. Although she trusted her tracker more, there was always the chance that she could get lucky and find herself face to face with her target. But following Ridgeway through the crowd took all her attention.

She caught glimpses of vendor booths lining both sides of the broad pedestrian path, selling everything from brightly coloured scarves and clothing, to foodstuffs with strange but enticing odours that wafted through the crowd. There were little shops that sold trinkets and jewellery, and others that hawked perfumes and incense, or boots and other footwear out of stuff that she could swear was real leather. She almost slowed down for that one, but one glance at Ridgeway's broad back moving away through the throng of people got her scurrying after him.

She'd been on other stations that had sported a thriving merchant area, and many of the planets she'd been on had had them as well. But always before she had been too intently focused on tracking her quarry to have paid much attention to her surroundings, no matter how exotic. And once she'd collared her target, and delivered him to the authorities, then it was back to her little apartment on meagre, overcrowded Gamma Station.

The apartment was the one first assigned to her when she'd completed quarantine and was assigned to this duty. She'd seen no need to change it, although Angii had tried to talk her into putting up some pictures, or a plant, or anything to break up the blandness. She hadn't wanted to, couldn't bring herself to. Same thing for going out to see what this century offered. It didn't feel safe, didn't feel right. So she just did her job, and other than when Angii coaxed her out for the occasional meal, kept herself isolated. She didn't want to end up like so many other Sleepers, unable to conform and fit in to this radically different century. Non-conformity was a major issue for moderns, in her experience. It was better to just blend in and not make waves. And if the job they had assigned her to do was to track down Sleepers on the run, well, she was good at it. She'd always got her quarry, either with the help of a partner like Angii, or on her own. And this Samms would not be her first failure. She didn't like doing this without Angii, but she owed it to her partner to see it through to the end. Maybe that would help with the hollow feeling she got whenever she dwelled on the fact that Angii was gone. Maybe not.

Ridgeway finally paused long enough for her to catch up, and pointed at a cluster of tables with chairs pulled up around them, with brightly coloured umbrellas shading each table from the bright lights that lit the area. The lights were bright, but she really didn't see the point of umbrellas when they were essentially inside. But she'd seen people do stranger things when trying to make station life more home-like. Ridgeway was saying, "Why don't we stop here for a bit and get something to drink. You hungry? They make a really nice protein wrap here. Just like a chicken fajita."

She wasn't hungry. She hardly ever was these days. But she let him order her one of the protein wraps, and some kind of fruity iced drink that almost tasted like. ...well, it didn't matter what it almost tasted like. They hadn't made them for over two hundred years.

She'd chosen the table they were sitting at, and with a pointed look had positioned him so he wasn't blocking her view of the pedway. Tanya sipped slowly at the iced fruit drink, and watched the people moving by. The table was on the edge of the cafe's outer space, and it had the advantage of both keeping her more or less in shadow while giving her a good vantage point. She had a clear field of vision of three of the four pedways that intersected just beyond the little cafe, and as they were in the Bazaar's heart, it was quite a busy spot.

She'd slipped the tracker out of her bag as she sat down and now held it in one hand just under the table. From time to time she glanced down at it as it tracked her quarry's location. She was pleased to see that he was actually in this quadrant of the station, probably in this section even, and it would only be a matter of time before he wandered by as he went about his daily business. She had him this time. And for a change, she was the one lying in wait for him, not the other way around. She was even playing a little game by trying to see if she could spot him without the scanner.

Ridgeway sat across the table from her. Once she'd had him positioned so he wasn't blocking her view, she ignored him. He was trying to appear casual as he sipped his own drink, occasionally watching the crowd with idle interest. It was annoying, having him here, watching her, but until she got the clearance to apprehend her quarry, she was stuck with him.

"So," Ridgeway said after a while, clearing his throat a few times as if to catch her attention. "How long have you been doing this kind of thing? Ever since you woke up and were acclimatised?"

She looked at him, her eyes narrowing. He looked a bit uneasy, sitting there with his drink barely touched, as if he knew she still wouldn't talk to him, but he had a stubborn look about him. She'd had pegged him as one of those persevere at all costs guys, the earnest, marine crossed with a boy scout type of personality. She'd thought she'd clipped his desire for personal chitchat earlier. Apparently not.

So. If he wanted to know about her, she'd tell him something. Enough maybe to shut him up for a while so she could concentrate on her job.

"Six years. I'd been out of assimilation for a little over a year," she said, talking but still watching the crowd streaming by, and the tracker. "You got anymore questions? I'll give you five minutes, then you'd better clam up and let me work."

He blinked, startled. "Five minutes. Okay, I can work with that. Why'd you start doing this? You like tracking down sleepers who're going against the system?"

"Like? Like has nothing to do with it," she said, a little surprised at that question. "I needed a job, and I'm good at this. This society is pretty lenient with people. No reason everyone can't find someplace to fit in, even Sleepers like us who're out of touch by a couple of hundred years. Besides, not everyone I track is a Sleeper. There've been a few moderns who've kicked the traces a bit too hard and needed to be brought in for adjusting. One more question."

He laughed, a short bark of sound. "It seems like a hell of a way to live, when this time has so many possibilities. But what's the deal with this guy? I saw how you looked when you gave his description to the security detail at the guard station. This a personal thing with you?"

She frowned. That was a question she hadn't expected. "I don't know him, if that's what you mean. But he's been harder than most to track down, which was why I had a partner."

"That the one who disappeared? You think he killed her?" Ridgeway said. He looked a bit green, which was odd, considering his own line of work. Who'd ever heard of a squeamish security guard?

She shrugged, irritated. "Only thing I can think of. But your time's up. I've got work to do." He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then closed it with a sigh. Smart man. Played by the rules. Which was fine if you worked security in a big space station like Omicron, even if it was almost like a frontier outpost on steroids. But you had to know how to twist the rules when you chased bounties. And when it was necessary to break them all to Hell. Like she had every intention of doing if that bastard Samms came anywhere near her. Papers or not. If she tagged him, she'd have him explaining pretty damn quick what had happened to Angii. Then let the damn station brass dither about paperwork!

If Ridgeway would let her.

The food he'd ordered for them came after a brief wait, and then sat untouched on the table as she studied the crowd and the tracker, and Ridgeway studied her. When the tracker showed Samms moving close by, the proximity alarm didn't go off. She'd turned it off as soon as she'd sat down. Her expression stayed cool as she continued watching, waiting. Waiting for Samms to settle down some place. Hole up somewhere. The tracker had him now. There was no way it was going to lose him.

He didn't actually pass by close enough for her to have seen him, which was probably a good thing. She didn't think she would have been able to keep that off her face if she'd had to watch him walking by ever so casually. But he was very close, and looked to have settled down somewhere, down one of the pedways lined with vendor booths and shops.

She glanced over at Ridgeway, sitting so stiffly while trying so hard to appear loose and casual. Poor guy. Just trying to do his job, too. She made a quick decision and pushed on before she changed her mind.

"I've got him," she said quietly, bringing the tracker up on the table. He jumped as if something had bitten him.

"Now what?" he said, his voice low and serious. His eyes were staring intently at her, not at the tracker.

"We go after him," she said. "I might not be able to apprehend him, but you can arrest him. On suspicion of murder. That much you can do."

He thought about it, his jaw clenched so tight his cheek muscles were spasming. Finally, he gave her a short, curt nod. "Fine. Let's do it. We'll sort everything out later. Do we need backup?"

Her adrenalin was kicking in, like it always did when she was closing in on her quarry. She shook her head. "We should be able to manage him. Besides, there's security all over here. Someone will come running if things get tight."

His hand reached for the comm unit in his ear, and hesitated. He looked at her, a question in his eyes, and she nodded. Let him check in, if that made him feel better. She heard him explaining the action they were about to take, saw him nod in agreement, and that was all she needed. She got up, and tracker in hand, began moving towards Samms' location, Ridgeway at her elbow.

There were more shops than booths down this pedway, and Ridgeway whispered that many of the shopkeepers here lived in apartments above their stores. She nodded absently, her attention was on the tracker, but she considered the possibility that Samms had taken refuge with some shopkeeper and his family, which made it more likely that innocent bystanders might get hurt, if he decided to run, or take a hostage. She quickened her pace, Ridgeway following close behind.

It was more than a booth, more like a store with an open counter built into the wall facing the pedway. A colourful awning was propped up, and when closed would seal the shop off from the street. She could see into the shop itself, which appeared to be more of a workroom than a showroom. The wares were on display on the counter, hanging from metal stands or in small cases laid flat on the counter. Jewellery, a wide assortment of bright and colourful pieces. She looked into the work area, where she could see someone moving about. It was too dark inside the shop to see the person clearly, but she waited, not even realising she was holding her breath. Whoever it was would move closer to the counter, and she could see if it was Samms, or the shopkeeper. She waited, with Ridgeway a silent statue just behind her, while the crowd eddied around them without pausing.

The person inside the shop moved towards the counter as a prospective customer stepped up to the counter, and Tanya felt her guts churn.

Not Samms.

Angii.

Ridgeway was whispering something to her, taking her by the elbow, trying to move her forward, but it was as if her feet had frozen to the floor. She couldn't hear what he was saying over the sudden roaring in her ears, so loud it made her head ache.

Angii.

Not dead. Very much not dead. And living the life of a shopkeeper on Omicron station. With... who?

Samms stepped up behind Angii out of the darkness of the shop, bending down to whisper something to her. She looked up, startled, and their eyes locked. Ridgeway began exerting some force behind his pushing, and she started stumbling forward like a sleepwalker. Angii's eyes never left hers, wide and dark and frightened. It was Samms who said something to the customer, apologising for having to temporarily close the shop for a bit. Please come back later today and we'll be happy to show you what you were asking about. The tracker was forgotten in her hand. She barely noticed when Ridgeway took it carefully.

He steered her into the shop while Samms closed the awning, then turned up the interior lights a bit. Tanya just stared. At Angii, standing there with a kerchief over her curly black hair, an apron over her skirts. She looked ... She didn't know how she looked. Alive.

Finally, she blurted out, "Why aren't you dead?"

Angii blinked, and looked down at her hands, twisting them together self-consciously. "I'm sorry for that. I didn't mean to ... "

"What happened to your locating device?" Tanya interrupted, her voice reflecting the coldness that was spreading through her, numbing her from the inside out.

"I had it removed, back on Procima. I didn't think you'd be able to follow ... us ... without it. How did you ...?"

"She'd bugged Jon as well, with a nanobot. She's been tracking you with that."

Tanya twisted around to stare incredulously up at Ridgeway. "You knew ... You knew!" she spluttered, furious. It was his turn to shrug, but he didn't look ashamed. Or guilty.

A new voice spoke from the doorway. "Yes, we knew. I am sorry, Citizen Barron, for this deception, but I felt it was necessary until you had time to learn all the facts." The new speaker was a tall man, not as broad in the shoulder as Ridgeway, but close. His dark hair was salted with silver streaks of grey, and he wore a dark, expensive looking tunic that wasn't quite a uniform.

"I am Anton Regis, the Director of Omicron Station," he said, nodding gravely at her. He stepped forward and a petite brunette stepped into the shop beside him, closing the door behind her. She was no young thing, even if there was only the barest hint of silver in her own carefully coiffed hair. The lines around her eyes and mouth looked to have been caused both by worry and laughter. She was staring intently at Tanya, with a concern that she could feel like an electric current.

"I'm Ellayna Regis," she said, smiling at Tanya "You must have many questions." Her voice was soft and comforting, but Tanya was feeling anything but comforted.

"Questions!" she snapped. "You better believe I have questions!" She swung around to face Angii and Samms, who was hovering just behind her former partner. "Like, why aren't you dead? Why are you with him? Why did you do this?" Her voice rose and broke, and she clenched her jaw tight.

Angii just stared at her in anguish, tears trickling slowly down her face.

"It was very simple, as I understand it," Regis said from behind her. She turned to glare at him, anything other than having to stare at Angii and Samms standing there together. She had spent too much time

hunting him, hating him, mourning her ... She clenched her fists so tight that her nails cut into her palms, a pain she barely felt.

“Tell me,” she grated out, her voice hoarse and thick.

He nodded briefly. “Her job was to get close to him, to help you track him. She got too close. She actually got to know him. And they fell in love. Simple, really.”

“So she had that bug yanked out, not knowing you’d got another one into him,” Ridgeway added, still standing behind her. “And then they ran together, moving quickly, trying to find a place to settle down, not knowing you were only a few steps behind them.”

“They came here,” Regis continued. “They’d heard that on Omicron we try to give everyone a proper chance of fitting in, of finding their own place in life. We don’t force people to live a life picked out for them by the Bureau of Sleeper Rehabilitation.”

“I am a fully trained and licensed doctor of psychology,” Ellayna Regis said, moving close to Tanya but not touching her. “My speciality is the adjustment and integration of Sleepers. Our society hasn’t always treated you people very well. You didn’t plan on being trapped in cryo sleep for over two hundred years. Who would? We have always considered ourselves so morally superior when we compared our century with yours, that it was assumed you’d be happy to be in a better time than the one you’d left behind. We should have realised that it wasn’t just a matter of accepting what had happened. Your homes, your families, everything that connected you with your society was dismissed as an acceptable loss. But what I, and a few others, realise, is that it wasn’t an acceptable trade-off for you. We looked at all the Sleepers who found it so hard to accept life in our century. It took some time, but we realised that you must have felt like you’d been marooned, all the while surrounded by well-meaning but oblivious people who didn’t even notice that you were drowning. You were all being forced to fit in, and I know the extremes they went to in too many cases.”

Her voice was so sad, so sympathetic, that Tanya found herself awash in all of those old feelings of isolation. She had pushed those memories so far away while she’d struggled to adjust. Had forced herself to shut off her feelings lest they spill out and mark her as “uncompliant” and “difficult”. She’d seen what had happened to other Sleepers who’d had trouble adjusting. She’d been numb, but at least she was alive, with all of her mind and memories intact.

Regis spoke then, still standing behind her. “I was there when the first Sleepers were thawed. So was Ellayna. We never believed that the rehabilitation process used was the right method to acclimatise Sleepers. But the experts had agreed on their course of action, and that was how things proceeded. Very few people in the bureaucratic machine bothered to inspect the results they were getting. And the failures. But now, here on Omicron, I can at least try to rectify that. We enjoy full autonomy, and we have made a haven of sorts for anyone, Sleeper or Modern, who has trouble fitting in elsewhere. This station is big enough for everyone to find a place to belong. And the Central Authority has, somewhat reluctantly I’ll admit, given us leave to deal with Sleepers, and anyone else who comes our way, exactly as we see fit. We are the unofficial alternative to re-processing, and the other, harsher methods of rehabilitation that they have been using on the “uncompliants”.”

Ellayna Regis spoke up again. “When Jon and Angii learned of our policies concerning sleepers and their rehabilitation, they came to us and asked for help. And we gave it to them.”

Her head was pounding so hard it felt as if she'd burst. "So you take him in, and that's it? His crimes don't matter?" Tanya said, feeling as if they had drained all her energy out of her. All this time chasing him, hunting him, and it didn't matter? She turned to face Regis standing behind her.

Regis smiled and shook his head. "None of his crimes were that serious. Personally, I don't even consider them really crimes. They have been here on a temporary residency permit, which has allowed them to live on station and to make a living within our rules and guidelines, while they were being evaluated for permanent status here. Just before you arrived, I was about to grant them permanent status and start steps to clear his record of all those misdemeanours that have been piling up as he tried to keep away from you. When you arrived, bristling with suspicion and hostility, well. You presented us with a pretty problem."

"Why?" she said. "What problem? You were going to legitimise him, give him a place here, which would have satisfied Central's requirements about conformity and being useful. Why didn't you just tell me and send me packing?" Suddenly, she was so tired, she just wanted to sit down and cry. Or scream. Or something. She didn't want to think about anything. This wasn't the way the job was supposed to end! What was she to do now? She couldn't bear to think about returning to that barren, austere apartment she lived in between jobs. But what else was she to do? It was the only place she had to go to.

She felt someone touch her arm from behind, gently turning her around. It was Angii who was looking at her, the tear streaks drying on her cheeks. "They couldn't send you away, Tanya. I told them. You need to be here too. This is home. You needed to realise you were home."

Home?

Ellayna Regis stepped up beside her, encircling her with comforting arms, pulling her close. "Silly girl. Welcome home."

Home?

Anton Regis moved to stand beside Samms, who wasn't looking scared anymore. Regis was nodding gravely at her. "Home," he said.

Home?

And then Ridgeway moved into her field of vision, and blurred though it was, she could see he was smiling, grinning even as he too nodded at her. "Home!" he said.

And she finally believed it.

Home. And then the tears began.