

THE NAMELESS DEAD

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

In 2023 Kristine Kathryn Rusch hopes to write something in all of her various series and commit standalone stories and novellas as well. It's an ambitious goal, since she has at least a dozen series (under various names) and some of those series take a lot of research. She's finishing yet another book in her Diving series. The previous book, *The Courtmartial of the Renegat Renegades* just appeared in print (after being serialized in *Asimov's*). Her first full Fey novel in twenty years, *The Kirilli Matter* came out recently as well. Her mystery novella, "Grief Spam," just appeared in *The Best Mystery Stories of the Year 2022*, edited by Sara Paretsky. When Kris isn't writing, she's running (literally), indulging in too much theater, reading, or hanging out on her website, Facebook, and Patreon. You can follow her on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/kristinekathrynruschwriter>, and on Patreon at <https://www.patreon.com/kristinekathrynrusch> or her website (where you can sign up for newsletters, which is <https://kriswrites.com>.) In her latest story for us, a researcher uncovers more than one painful truth while investigating . . .

THE NAMELESS DEAD

I like to think I was kidnapped. I like to think that some thugs grabbed me, and tossed me into their ship, and I ended up here six months later, through no fault of my own.

I like to think that, but the records show something else entirely, and my memory always, always gives the records an assist.

That night, thirty-five years ago, I'd had enough. If we're being 100 percent honest here, I wasn't really cut out for marriage or motherhood. I was twenty-five and figured I could handle all of the emotional fallout, but of course I couldn't.

I get that night in snatches: the stench of sour milk and poopy diapers, the sound of voices screeching at each other over the wail of an unhappy baby, the scratch in my throat because this was the fifth night in a row of that kind of yelling—and worse, Austin, clutched in his father's arms, waving his little fists.

I blamed Austin that night: I said, "Well, he wants me to go bye-bye, so I think I will."

And my husband Tom, all sympathy and warmth, said, "Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

The door didn't hit me. Nothing did, even though I was sore and tired and angrier than I should have been. I picked up a bottle of what I then thought was good beer, and carried it, wondering if I should drink it since I was breast-feeding and then deciding, *ah fuck it*, and downing it like I was dying of thirst.

The beer glugged, and the bottle emptied, and I bought another, and another, and another as I staggered across what we called the Holy Trinity—a series of blocks that contained nothing but bars, usually catering to spacers, not people like me.

By the time I ended up in the last one, wearing a smelly sweater that someone had given me to hide stains from my leaking breasts, I was ready to give up.

Deep down, I knew Tom was right: I sucked as a parent. I didn't want to feed the kid on the kid's schedule. I didn't want to pump my breasts. I didn't want to spend half my life tied to those two people, even if one of them was too small to talk and needed me more than I needed him.

If I left, I rationalized drunkenly, then they would have a better life. If I left, Tom could remarry and Austin would reach his potential, and I—I would be free.

Maybe I actually had that conversation out loud. Maybe I just thought it.

Next thing I knew, I was at the space rings, staring at what wasn't quite a luxury cruiser. It was one of those ships that took executives to their postings so far away they could never return.

I ended up in a small antechamber in the docking rings with a man who wrinkled his nose as he talked. At the time, I thought he was fussy. Looking back, I realized that he thought something smelled bad—and that something was me.

He warned me, and warned me again, and then warned me a third time.

"You do this," he said, "and you won't see anyone you ever love again."

"You assume I love someone," I muttered drunkenly.

He looked pointedly at my leaking breasts, and said, "Someone clearly loved you."

"You're confusing love and sex," I answered and thought I was witty.

"Yeah," he said. "Where's the baby?"

"With his dad," I said.

"You mind if I check that?" the man said.

I waved one hand at him. "Be my guest."

So he vanished. For how long, I don't know. But he came back armed with vids and tablets and more information than I wanted. And then he said, "You got an hour to consider this. Maybe by then, you'll be sober enough to change your mind."

I got a little more sober in that hour. I'd like to say I didn't understand what I learned from those tablets and vids, but maybe I had understood it more than I let on.

I wasn't making an accidental mistake, no matter what I used to tell folks years later, when I was drunk and alone and confessed that I had once been a parent.

Now I'm never drunk, although I'm still alone, and I really don't think that anything I did in those few months after Austin's birth counted as parenting, not even the haphazard breast-feeding that I mostly did on a dare.

I hadn't changed my mind after that hour had passed. I cashed out the money in

our savings to buy a berth on a lower level that turned out to be barely bigger than the width of a single bed. I was allowed to leave the berth, thank heavens, because the journey lasted six months. Six months in that tiny space would have made me crazier than I already was.

The food was included in the price, but little else, and because I hadn't planned ahead, I had to pay for new clothes and some expert to help my body past its hormone overload.

Three months in, I woke up and realized that I wasn't cut out to be a spacer, and I really didn't want to be somewhere new, and so I got some initiative and found the man who'd tried to talk me out of the trip.

Turns out, that was his job, to make sure everyone who got on the transport knew it was a one-way trip.

I, of course, didn't believe him. I rarely believed anyone in those days, and when they challenged me, I doubled-down on whatever fool thing I had in my head.

"I want to go back," I said.

"We're not going back," he said.

"So drop me somewhere," I said. "Someone can take me back."

"You saw the vids," he said. "You signed waivers. You said you understood time dilation."

"Yeah," I said. "It works the same going back, right?"

He stared at me like I was the dumbest person he'd ever seen.

"Time never goes backward," he said. "No matter how much we want it to."

"Meaning what?" I asked.

"Meaning that if we drop you 'somewhere' and you magically find enough money to fund your return trip, you will arrive fifty years after you left, give or take."

"That's not possible," I said, my heart sinking. "I've got a baby back there."

"Not anymore you don't." He punched a button on a nearby console, and double-checked it. "Your baby is at least twenty years old right now. I suspect he's probably pissed at the mother who abandoned him, and he doesn't want to see you."

I crossed my arms. "You lie."

He shook his head. "I don't get paid enough to lie. You go back immediately after we arrive at our destination, and your kid might very well be dead. He'll be pushing a hundred at least, and he certainly won't forgive you for missing his entire existence."

Talking to that man was the first time my memory wouldn't let me off the hook. Even though I'd been drunk when I boarded the executive travel vessel, I had heard all the talk about time dilation and loss and not being able to return to the place you'd left, not really.

I'd thought that was a good thing, at least that night, with my sore and leaking breasts, my scratchy throat, and Tom's vicious but true words about what an awful person I was still stuck in my ear.

Then, somehow, I'd twisted the memory as I tossed and turned in that single bed, thinking that somehow time dilation worked in reverse—you got farther away and lost time, and regained it when you got back.

I knew better. I wasn't really a scientific illiterate. I was just really good at dismissal and denial, two reasons why I'd had a baby in the first place.

And here's the sad part—at least to me—the part I usually don't confess to anyone: I don't miss the baby. I don't miss the idea of the baby either. When I think about the sleepless nights, the way his baby nails scratched at my hand whenever he grabbed my finger, the way his sleepy eyes made me want to shake him awake, I knew we were not meant for each other.

Maybe Tom wasn't the best parent. Maybe Austin would've been better off with some adoptive parents or with his paternal grandparents or maybe just with

someone else.

But Austin was certainly better off without me.

That thought, which I've had repeatedly over the years, is not a justification for what I've done. Just the plain cold truth about who I am.

I'm better off alone. I'm better without being responsible for anyone.

I can barely be responsible for me.

But that's another story.

* * *

It is not without some small irony that I'm the go-to woman for all things time dilation. I hadn't planned it. I may be emotionally cold, but I'm intellectually hot. If there's research to be done or information to be gathered or thinking about things that have nothing to do with *my* emotions, I'm the person for the job.

And here, on the very first large port where the executive "shuttles" stop, my services are in great demand.

First, let me explain the situation here. This is a large port city, the Gateway to the Future, some wag named it.

The city itself spreads over half a continent, and the spaceports are built above the city proper. So when you're on the ground and look up, what you see is the scaffolding that holds all those docking ports in place.

No one docks in orbit here. They all come down, and then the executives who don't have a transfer to some other part of this sector stay for a few days or a month or sometimes even a year, just to get their footing.

They can't go back, anymore than I can, but a few of them routinely sue, claiming they haven't understood their contract.

Most of their contracts are the same. It doesn't matter what industry they're involved in. The contracts give them a hefty upfront fee if they choose to take it. The ones who usually sue take the hefty upfront fee and give it to their families.

Why execs? I have no idea. I'd think skilled people, who can grow plants and lovely food in a hydroponics garden or folks who make life nicer and prettier, would be better. Those skill sets are always in vogue.

But execs? All they have is the ability to manage other people in a controlled environment. And maybe a willingness to work hard on things that no one really cares about. Weirdly enough, that's a particular skill set too, and it doesn't matter what kind of job they're supposed to do. These execs will do it with competence, even if they hate it.

They're about as alien to me as human beings can get. So I don't even try to understand them. I particularly don't understand why they take these crappy deals, but they do.

They sign the contracts and board the executive cruisers, thinking they're going to go off and work for maybe five years max—which is what their contract says—and then they'll come home to the same family they left, albeit five years older.

These execs don't understand time dilation or maybe hadn't realized that it would have an impact on them. Most of these prizewinners never read the contract at all. They just looked at that hefty upfront fee, figured it would set their family up for life, and took the deal.

Then they went very far away. The farther reaches of the sector had a lot of resources and a lot of tech, but not enough human beings to manage it all. Managers are, by nature, cautious types, and they don't want adventure. So they had to be paid a lot to go far away, because recruiting through the ranks when there are very few ranks really doesn't work.

By the time these execs found me, they would be all but broken, devastated by a decision they'd made for financial reasons without really understanding the emotional

underpinnings.

They didn't even have the same excuse I had: they weren't drunk when they made the decision. Most of them had weeks—sometimes months—to consider what they were about to do.

I have no idea how these people still missed the time dilation part or misunderstood it or didn't think it would be a factor for them.

Many told the same lie I considered telling: that they'd been taken against their will. Being a victim was apparently better than being a stupid greedy idiot.

Some of the folks here think it's an anti-science thread that's been part of our culture from the get-go. Others think that it's a failure of education—most of these execs aren't the brightest lasers in the toolbox. Most of the folks here agree with me though: this was all about greed and money and execs thinking they'd be set for life, not realizing that their *family* would be set for life, but these poor losers would have to work for the better part of theirs just to repay that upfront fee.

Still, they managed to reach deep into their pockets and find enough resources to pay me—and my services don't come cheap.

I also take payment up front, no refunds. Most people don't like what they hear when I'm done, and a few stiffed me early on. That's when I inaugurated the no-refund policy and that's when I tried to warn off potential clients.

Because all I do is gather information for them, but it really isn't information they can use. They can't change what they find out; they can't help; they can't do much more than muddle.

In that opening meeting, before I take their money, I warn them that they're not going to like what they learn. But they make the same mistake they made getting to this place: they think they know better than the person with the experience, the person giving them the advice.

This is where it helps to be emotionally cold. Because I really don't care if the information hurts them. I really don't care if they tear up or get angry at me—unless they try to trash my place. I don't even care if they sue me, because they always lose.

The only time I ever lie to them is when they ask me if I've ever researched someone from my past.

"Yeah," I say, with an air of sadness. That way, they think we're kindred spirits. That way, I have the credibility to convince a few of them to turn away.

I suppose it's not a complete lie. The reason I know how to research what happens to relatively anonymous families on a completely different planet so far from here that time bends is that I started to research my own family.

Got far enough to realize that Tom raised Austin and never remarried. Didn't look any farther, though. Didn't bother with the things I'd do later, like arrest reports and rehab files. Didn't look at school records or bank accounts. Didn't examine the genealogy and figure out if I had any grandchildren or great-grandchildren or if the line died out with the kid who waved bye-bye that fateful night.

My rationale? If I did know, it would make no difference in my life. And since it would make no difference, why expend the energy in the search?

I am an enclosed being of one, a person who is completely different from the messy and sloppy drunk who started on this journey.

I really don't like her, and I don't like to think about her.

So I don't.

* * *

The second big change in my life came when Astra Lin-Wonle paid for an hour of my time to explain the death situation.

I hadn't known who she was when she sent me the hefty upfront fee. Just another name—and, I assumed—just another executive. I didn't research her—she hadn't

paid enough yet—and I forgot about her.

She just became a name on my automated calendar, a name that got attached to a person the moment she arrived at my door.

She was small and dark-haired, with black eyes and high cheekbones, and a nose that didn't fit her face. Her chin was narrow and made her look slightly feral, accenting the intelligence that I would later learn was as formidable as mine.

She wore a black cape over black slacks. The entire outfit looked dramatic and yet professional. Her small feet were encased in small black shoes that seemed impractical for life in this city. Every part of her clothing glistened and shined and seemed like she hadn't just put it on, she had also dusted it with something to make it appear as though it was newer than new.

The automated door to my office let her in at the appropriate time, about fifteen minutes before the appointment. She waited in the tiny antechamber, which allowed me to do a full body scan for weapons, and a current background check to make sure there were no outstanding warrants or other criminal details in her history.

When the check came back, listing her as the head coroner for the entire city, I froze, all kinds of possibilities running through my mind. I had no idea why she wanted to hire me, but she'd been in that job for nearly twenty-five years, so she wasn't one of those bamboozled execs. Maybe one of them did something bad, and they had my information on them.

Her position made it impossible to turn her away. If I did, I'd be ruminating over what she wanted for months, maybe years. Yes, sometimes I could be obsessive. That was also part of my makeup.

Since she was an official, though, and I was leery of officials—mostly because of some of my drunken adventures—I gave my office a quick once over. It was clean enough. Two chairs, about four feet apart. Mine had wide arms so that I could activate all kinds of recording and emergency backup systems with the touch of a finger.

The systems were a bit old-fashioned, mostly because I wasn't born here. I could've had implants put in that would have attached me to all kinds of systems, but when the implants were offered, I was still drinking and thought maybe the government wanted to control me.

Now, I know the government is too busy to control anyone, and I vaguely regret the decision. Not enough to get the implants, mind you, but enough to consider doing so from time to time.

I unlocked the door between the antechamber and my office without getting out of my chair. The door swung open, and she entered in a wave of perfume that seemed to cover something sharper, another earthier scent.

She looked at me oddly, maybe expecting some kind of nicety. I don't traffic in niceties. I waved a hand at the chair.

"Sit," I said.

She hesitated, apparently not used to being ordered about.

I didn't move. Nor did I speak again. Either she would sit or she would ask a question. I hoped for sitting, because the questioners were always trouble.

Finally, she squared her shoulders and eased into the chair.

I waited.

When she realized I wasn't going to speak, she said, "I understand you can dig through a massive amount of information in a very short time."

Whatever I had expected her to say, it wasn't that.

I didn't nod or encourage her, though. I continued to wait.

"I have a project—if you can call it that—which needs someone like you. The city will pay you at your going rates, which," she said, as if she couldn't trust me (and maybe she couldn't), "I have already investigated."

"I don't work for governments," I said.

"Well, this really isn't a government job so much as a government favor," she said. Despite myself, I was interested. "I'm willing to listen," I said.

She looked at me oddly again, but I wasn't about to agree to listen only to find out that there was some kind of confidential nightmare thing I had agreed to just by opening my ears.

"Okay." She sighed. "Forgive me if I tell you something you already know."

I nodded, just once, hoping that encouraged her to continue.

"We have a lot of transients in this city, and they are unusual." It felt like she was beginning a settled speech.

That I did know, clearly. I built my business on them.

"A number of people manage to forge their identity before they get on the shuttles that bring them here." She watched me, maybe thinking I would be surprised.

I wasn't surprised. I knew that, almost as well as I knew my own name. A few of those unfortunates had come to me, trying to figure out a way to recapture the life they had abandoned. They couldn't, of course. And I really had no inclination to help them.

"A lot of them die here," she said, her gaze on mine.

I started. That I did not expect, although it made sense.

"Suicide?" I asked, because that makes sense to me too. The despair I've seen in my work has often been deep and dark.

I've often suggested that those who go to an even darker place after hearing news of their family get some kind of professional help. I mean, after all, they can afford me, so they should be able to afford a therapist, counselor, religious leader, or someone who can assist them in figuring out how to deal with the situation they find themselves in.

I might be emotionally cold, but I know that having a lot of clients die on my watch is bad for business. Besides, people need help. I got some, finally, when I realized that drinking yourself to death wasn't as much fun as it was cracked up to be.

"Some commit suicide, yes," she said, "but most of the suicides identify themselves for us. It's part of putting their affairs in order."

That made sense to me. I met a lot of those people. Finding out what happened to their family was part of putting their affairs in order as well.

She seemed frustrated that I wasn't asking follow-up questions. Apparently, she was usually as tight-lipped as I was.

She folded her hands on her lap. Her hands were not manicured, which made sense now. She was one of the few people in this city who actually used those hands for some kind of labor. Hers involved bodies and chemicals and investigations. Even if she used some kind of device to peek under the skin, she still had to handle that skin. Move it, change it, shove it into some kind of bag. The city didn't let robots do that—some bad public thing happened a while ago, that made people believe they were not respected after death—and the city made the wrong kind of change: the kind that made work harder for the actual humans without really solving the problem.

"We need your help with some categories of unsolved," Lin-Wonle said primly.

Maybe she was being deliberately vague. Maybe she was trying to force me to ask questions. If that was the case, then it was working.

"What do you mean, categories of unsolved?"

She inclined her head a little, as if she didn't want to elucidate. But I waited again, and this time it took her only a fraction of a second to go on.

"Some deaths," she said. "They're haunting."

Whatever I had expected, it wasn't that.

"I'm retiring soon," she said. "And, I would like . . ."

She gave me an odd smile, one that was uncomfortable and didn't quite reach her eyes. It made her feral little face softer and sadder, if that was possible.

"I would like," she said a bit more firmly, "to know who they were and why this happened to them."

"Sounds like a lot of work," I said. I wasn't complaining. But if she was trying to resolve an entire career in a few months, and she had hundreds of names for me, what she was asking wasn't possible—no matter how much she paid me.

"It might be," she said. "But you wouldn't do all of it."

"Meaning what?" I asked.

"We don't have the resources to research the names," she said.

"Don't have the resources?" I asked. "And yet you're going to pay me?"

"I'm not referring to financial resources," she said. "I'm talking about systemic resources. We'd have to set up a system to do work that you already do. We don't have the resources for that."

That made sense to me. It took me a long time to figure out how to find information across years and distance.

"Once you find out the person's real name," she said, "we might be able to take the investigation from there. If it's worthwhile."

"I don't understand," I said. "If you have me research the name, doesn't that automatically make it worthwhile? After all, you will have invested my time and your money into this."

She gave me a small smile. I couldn't tell if it was condescending or not. "I've already invested time into these people. There's something about each one of them that has caught me, held me. I want to find out who they are."

I stared at her, the lines in her face that time and stress had created, the dark wedge of exhaustion under her eyes that looked permanent, the way she held herself, as if her shoulders were so tense that they hadn't relaxed in more than a decade.

I usually did not understand my clients. I never figured out why anyone who abandoned friends and family wanted to find out what had happened to them, across time and distance impossible to resolve.

There was no logic in it, and the emotion often felt false. They couldn't have cared, could they? Hadn't they felt the relief that I had when I realized I never had to look at Tom's face again or feel that thread of revulsion at Austin's grasping hands against my skin?

If they cared, they wouldn't have left. That was the logic. The *human* logic, the one that the man on the ship had tried to appeal to when he looked at drunk me and told me that I was about to make a decision I couldn't take back.

I lacked that small human element. I never really cared about anyone, except maybe myself, and even that was in doubt. After all, I hadn't treated myself well.

Some would argue that I *still* wasn't treating myself well. I had a small apartment, an interesting job, but I stayed away from people, I did not do much beyond the basic self-care. I knew no one would care if I disappeared again. I wasn't even sure I cared. I certainly didn't care about my future past that day, that night, and maybe the following week.

But this woman, this Astra Lin-Wonle, she cared. The deaths, the bodies she had found, the bodies she couldn't identify, they *haunted* her. *Haunted* was a word that interested me. It suggested so much more than a need-to-know.

This was an obsession to know, and I almost asked her why she had elevated these people, this group of nameless dead, into something that caught her attention and wouldn't let her go.

But I didn't ask. Instead, I said, "How many are there?"

"Two hundred," she said.

The number startled me. For some reason, I expected it to be smaller. Yet she had said *categories*. As if people could be placed into neat groups, groups that she expected to file away in neat spaces.

These people, this group of nameless dead, had not fit at all.

"I have had hundreds," she said. "Hundreds of false names, people who aren't who they say they are. But they are usually easy to resolve. They make mistakes. They booked passage with their real name or they kept their real identification from wherever they have arrived from. Or a holo of family, with time, date, and location built in."

I'd seen all of those things when I researched for clients. Sometimes they would come into this office and sit down and slide an artifact at me.

This is all I have left of that life, they would say, as if the item—the holo, the identification, a ring, a necklace, a bit of fabric—was the most precious thing in the universe.

Now, after hearing her, the number—the two hundred—surprised me in a different way. It was larger than expected. If she had categories of dead and most came with false names but real artifacts, then she should only have a tiny few who had nothing at all.

"These 'categories,'" I said. "They arrived with nothing then?"

"Not exactly," she said. "Some had artifacts, but not their artifacts. Others had names and the names were a tangled maze of connections that at root had nothing to do with the person at all. And some had nothing. No clothes, no identification, no identifying marks, and nothing that made them recognizable to anyone."

She shook her head, the lines around her eyes growing deeper.

"You'd think," she said, "that someone would have seen them. Someone would have wondered about them. Someone would have *cared*."

"People don't care," I blurted, and she looked at me, seeing me for the first time.

Her head tilted. "Is this why you do the job? Because you care?"

I barked out a laugh. It was the opposite.

I did this job because I didn't care. Because it didn't break my heart to see another woman sob when she realized her abandoned children had suffered after her disappearance. It didn't break my heart to watch a man look at the holo of his so-called beloved marrying another person.

I had begun to suspect there was no heart to break.

"No," I said. "I don't really care."

"Except for the money," she said, nodding.

That probably made sense to her, considering the question I had asked. I just didn't like doing work for no pay. Money was how I kept score, nothing more.

Score for what—in what game—I wasn't sure. But it didn't matter. The money mattered only as a number, not as something avaricious. If I had found a way to keep score with shoes, I would have used shoes.

"Not the money," I said. For some reason I felt the need to correct the record with her.

But I did not know how to explain more. How do you tell someone who cares too much that you care too little? I wasn't sure she could even understand.

"The knowledge, then," she said, trying to categorize me.

"The challenge," I said, giving her a category. It wasn't the correct category, but it would do for now.

She grunted, the kind of response people gave when they had no idea what someone else was talking about, but they had to make some kind of noise in acknowledgement. The sideways glance she gave me was measuring, as if she couldn't quite figure me out.

"You said someone would have cared," I said. "Someone should have remembered them. And that is probably true. But not necessarily here. A person can stay anonymous forever here."

Her eyes narrowed. She was still taking my measure.

"These cases of yours," I said, "they're all suicides?"

"Very few," she said. "And even those I'm not certain of. They *seem* like suicides. Suicides make sense, until you understand that suicides follow a pattern. Unless they accidentally overdose or do something that kills them suddenly, suicides prepare. Many of them even practice."

Something I didn't know, then.

"Very few of these people prepared and almost none of them practiced." She ran a hand along the seam of her black slacks, smoothing them out, even though they didn't need it. Precision and just a bit of nerves.

These cases meant even more to her than she was saying.

"What if I'm not able to help you?" I asked.

"You'll get paid," she said. "We don't pay by the job. We'll pay by the time you invest. We'll buy a set number of hours each week. We will, of course, want to see evidence that you worked those hours."

"I work for myself for a reason," I said. "It's so no one keeps track of me or my time."

"Then how would you like us to pay you?" she asked. "There's no guarantee you'll be able to find out anything that can help us."

"I don't give that kind of guarantee anyway," I said. "You'll pay me like any other client. I will try until I find something or until you decide you've invested enough money. As my contact information says, I want a retainer up front *per case* and then I will work on that case until I see it through."

"We have two hundred," she said. "You can't do them all at once."

That was true. I couldn't. If I did, the government would be my only client.

"When do you retire?" I asked.

"In five years," she said.

She was a planner, a woman who knew what she wanted and knew it took time to get whatever it was. For her, five years was "soon."

"Give me five per month," I said. "Oldest cases first, since those are the ones that might take more time than the others."

"All right," she said. "What if you can do more per month?"

"Then I'll take work from my other clients." I didn't quite smile at her, but I tried to soften my words. "I'm not going to work solely for you."

She let out a shaky breath. That was the second sign I'd seen of nerves, the first being that movement along the seam of her perfectly creased pants.

"I can't give you the ones that frustrate me the most?" she asked.

"No." I wasn't being cruel. I needed order that I could understand, not some vague emotional reaction that she was having. "Oldest to newest. I will report to you as each case closes or at the end of every month if I can't find anything."

"What if I don't want to work that way?" she asked.

I opened my hands just a little. "You're free to find someone else."

There was no one else. I was the only person that I knew of who did this kind of work—in this city, anyway. En route to the so-called Gateway of the Future, maybe there were other people like me, but I doubted it.

I would have heard, or tripped over their work. Because, as far as I was concerned, their work was always in the past.

She sighed softly. Then she nodded.

"You're going to be a contractor with the city," she said. "That means there will be a lot of documentation up front. I'll do as much of it as I can and give you the rest to

fill out.”

“I’ve worked for the city before,” I said. “I’m on file.”

She looked surprised. “I thought you were a lone wolf.”

“A handful of people used city funds to make sure that new hires were who they said they were. Those investigations couldn’t go through the usual channels.” Because they had been politically sensitive. One of them had even involved the mayor.

Lin-Wonle frowned.

“Put my name into your system,” I said. “My personal name, not the business name. You’ll find all you need. Then give me the first five names.”

“How about ten, and you can move on if you—”

“Five,” I said. “I have rules. You’ll need to follow them or I’ll cancel our agreement.”

City work tended to creep into other things until it took over your life. That had happened to me once.

It was never happening again.

“You drive a hard bargain,” she said.

I almost said, *Especially when I don’t want to do the work*. But that statement wasn’t really true. I was curious. Lin-Wonle seemed competent enough to do everything on her own.

Cases that stymied her would challenge me.

I hadn’t lied to her about that.

I hadn’t lied to her about anything.

And that in itself was unusual.

* * *

The work wasn’t as hard as Astra Lin-Wonle made it sound. The first five cases took me less than a week. The second five only a few days. I wasn’t really investigating so much as organizing information, discovering identities, tracing journeys, things I normally did.

All ten of the cases had been execs who had come here on similar transports to the one that had brought me. Once I had a real name, I was to turn that over to Lin-Wonle, which I did.

She seemed happy enough.

We worked that way for six months before I hit my first wall. One of the cases she sent me involved a body found outside a dive bar near the port, a dive bar that no longer existed.

The body was male and badly beaten. He had no identifying marks that Lin-Wonle could find, and nothing in the area around him gave any clue as to his identity.

He had been dumped.

Lin-Wonle did give me his DNA, though. She had processed it through her usual databases and had come up dry.

I had several other databases that she couldn’t use. The city had deals to share information with other governments all over the planet, but couldn’t afford deals with various sector governments. I didn’t have to participate in that kind of cross-agency cooperation. I was a single operator who was trying to help people.

When I approached agencies that way, most of them allowed me access or gave me assistance that they wouldn’t give Lin-Wonle, not without some interagency b.s.

Then there were the databases that I had found over the years, the ones that had been abandoned as their organizations failed or moved to a new system or simply disappeared. I was working from the present to the past, as measured by one long trip of an executive space cruiser. I had a lot of touch points because over the years, I had had a lot of clients.

The DNA was a great starting point, but it required a methodical search, one that took more time than the kinds of searches I was usually doing for Lin-Wonle. I had

to peer into distant family connections, trying to find something that this body had in common with someone somewhere within range of this particular spaceport.

I was making an assumption: I assumed he had arrived through the port. I had to, at least at first, because my databases all focused on the past.

I figured if his trip was supposed to originate here, then he'd be a local and Lin-Wonle would have information on him, somewhere. But she didn't either.

Just the body, dumped, behind a no-longer-existent dive bar.

I remembered the bar. I'd gone there shortly after I arrived. It was a filthy cubby in a row of even dirtier storefronts, the kind that people expected near the port. Most of the goods sold there had been familiar ones to the folks who just got off the ships, items that couldn't be found as easily away from the port.

Of course, anyone who went into one of those places paid a premium for whatever it was that their heart desired.

Me, I desired whiskey, which was available elsewhere in the city. I just didn't know it yet.

When I squeezed myself inside, saw the sad customers sitting at the five round tables, and the even sadder customers sitting at the bar itself, I almost stopped and left.

But I didn't. I went to the bar, startled to discover a human behind it, a hard-faced woman with even harder eyes.

I ordered whiskey and she said, "We don't got that here."

I knew she was lying. The guy next to me had a glassful and wasn't really nursing it.

I eyed it, then looked at her and she shook her head just a little.

"Look, honey. I've seen you around just enough to know you're living nearby. So lemme give you a tip." She leaned in front of the bottles of booze on the wall, either to block them or so that I could see them. I wasn't sure which. "What we got here—what anyone has down at the docks—you can't afford. You want to drink yourself into oblivion, drink downtown or in the comfort of your own home. Here, you get all the crazies who just got off the boat and you get to pay extra to watch them tear up the place. A lot extra."

I didn't move. I wanted a drink badly enough that I was going to ignore her. And she knew it.

So she waved a hand at me. "Get outta here. Because I ain't serving you."

And the drunk guy next to me slurred, "And I ain't sharing."

I'd never been denied service in any kind of bar before. It felt odd. It caught my attention the way that not much else had. Maybe because it didn't feel personal. Or maybe because a woman I hadn't known had shown me a kindness.

A lot of people had shown me a kindness since I'd left my family, kindnesses I didn't deserve.

She was busy with another customer—talking and pretending to laugh—by the time I finally managed to move. I left that bar, and thought about that incident every single time I passed it over the years, until the bar vanished entirely, to be replaced by some automated hair-cutting service.

I wondered where she had gone, I wondered where the new drinkers went to drown their sorrows, and I wondered how the hell I had gone from craving whiskey on late nights to not having a drink in more than thirty years.

The bar was a turning point. Not of the *and I will never drink again* kind, but of the finally noticing that other people still existed kind.

Somehow, I went from there to here, investigating part of a death that occurred behind that bar long before it closed. A death that, truth be told, could have been just as empty and as meaningless as my own would have been.

I wondered if the bar was a clue. I wondered if the neighborhood was a clue.

I wondered if the cops had even bothered to look at all of the clues.

I didn't really want to do the local investigatory work, not yet anyway, so I put it off. I didn't have to finish this job to get the next five. Lin-Wonle wanted the work finished before she quit, so she continued to hand me cases whether I'd helped her with the others or not.

I kept investigating Naked Dead Dive Bar Guy, as I had privately taken to calling him, as I fulfilled my contract with the other new cases.

Just because Naked Dead Dive Bar Guy ended up at the port didn't mean that he had come through on any ship, and certainly didn't mean that he had come via one of the longer distance ships.

But I was making that assumption. I figured Lin-Wonle had looked at the local angle. (If not, she should have.) I had one investigatory problem that I didn't confess to her.

My databases all came from worlds that fed the executive tract here, not from other worlds that ships still traveled to. Some of those worlds sent people back here on various ships after they had worked through their contracts.

By then, those people understood time dilation, and they knew they would lose years again. But they usually didn't care.

I didn't have information from those places. I didn't have databases to tap or agreements with the current governments of those places. Nor had I ever investigated their historic databases.

I didn't want to make an agreement with those governments and/or the corporations that sent their executives into a bright unknown future. Communication over long distances was a pain in the butt, and, quite frankly, the coroner's office wasn't paying me enough to volunteer to have my butt pained.

After six months, I set Naked Dead Dive Bar Guy aside, figuring I'd come back to that investigation.

And then I tripped on another of the files that Lin-Wonle had given me. It came—as they all did—complete with holographic images of the deceased.

I had looked at the first three images, back when she'd started giving me the cases, and I had decided that holographic life-sized images of corpses did not belong anywhere in my office.

I had switched off the automation in the files that Lin-Wonle had given me, so bruised and bloodied dead people weren't prone across my workspace. But I discovered that I needed to see their faces.

And just as with Lin-Wonle, the nameless ones—the ones it seemed like I couldn't solve—bothered me.

The second one wasn't a guy. It was a woman, older like me. No real identifying marks.

Like me.

The image had risen from the file—her lined face, her cloudy sunken eyes, and her body, from the armpits upward. She was naked, of course, because the image I saw had been developed just before the autopsy.

Lin-Wonle had edited those images, because they were part of her reports. The images were actually vids that showed the entire autopsy, from the external examination of the corpse to the internal, should it be necessary.

She had accidentally left one of those once, and I managed to shut it down before it got too gruesome. The things she did for her job made me appreciate mine all the more.

I dug into the file she sent me about this woman. It said precisely nothing. One of the attending officers thought maybe the dead woman worked at the same dive bar

as Naked Dead Dive Bar Guy, confirming what I knew about the place. It actually had human employees.

But I also knew that she was not the woman I had seen.

Most of the bars in this city didn't have human employees. Just robots and automated serving procedures. This kept the pour counts accurate in the mixed drinks, but did add a certain blandness to the alcoholic offerings all over the city.

Before I dug into her file, I looked up the bar.

It was called, unoriginally, the Watering Hole. There were places in every single city all over the sector with a similar name, although if I were in the naming businesses—particularly of dive bars—I would never voluntarily use the word “hole” in conjunction with them.

Or maybe that was a marketing tool. Because dive bars really weren't for the casual drinker. They were for the down-on-their-luck sad sacks who wanted a safe place to drink, no questions asked.

I paused in my reminiscences, thinking about the handful of places I'd visited as I'd fled my family so very long ago.

Twice I had gotten off the ship and twice I had reboarded it. I took one look around whatever port city we had landed in, and I figured I didn't want to stay there.

I hadn't wanted to stay here either, but I had because that was the trip I had paid for, not because I liked the location.

But I vividly recalled two other Watering Holes at both ports. Same kind of place—narrow slice of real estate with only one obvious door. In one case, the door had been so grimy I hadn't wanted to touch it. In the other, I had paused, remembering that I didn't have a lot of money and the booze was free on the ship.

In fact, it was the familiarity of the look and name of the Watering Hole that had brought me to it here, all those years ago.

I sat back down, shoved both files aside with the swipe of a hand, and started digging.

There were a lot of businesses—and I mean *a lot*—that operated on all the executive cruiser stops along the way. I had never given those businesses a lot of thought, but I did now.

Because something was itching at me.

I'd never dug into the companies before. I hadn't even investigated the personnel files, because my clients were known. They wanted to know about their families, and their families clearly didn't work on these ships.

I almost asked Lin-Wonle about the companies, and then decided not to. I had no idea how much money these companies brought into the city, but I would have wagered it was a fair amount.

Maybe that was why she had come to me. Maybe the nameless dead weren't as nameless as they appeared. Maybe she needed someone outside her system to investigate the other dead.

But if that was the case, wouldn't she have put more of those cases into my pile? So far, I'd only had two that were even remotely difficult.

I did not know, and didn't want to guess. Her motives mattered less to me than the work itself.

I actually did like challenges. And I had found one here.

* * *

Forty-seven starship corporations carried passengers across the sector, along the route that I had happened into one drunk night. Forty-seven starship corporations, none of which shared the same corporate DNA.

I checked.

The company that had ferried me from one life to another had no complaints lodged against it, except for the obvious fold-ins. Those were usually easily dismissed

because the company had been folded into other suits, usually against some bigger corporation. That corporation was the one that the person who had lost their entire life in exchange for a crapload of money often sued for misrepresenting the work.

I examined a few of the lawsuits. The corporations always had the proper documentation. The starship company's part in the case always got tossed out. Several judges—different ones in different jurisdictions—all informed the poor hapless executive that courts did not have to protect someone against signing a bad contract, unless the contract was egregious, which these weren't.

There was plenty of evidence that these executive schlubs were supposed to get educated about their journeys long before travel commenced.

Most of them simply chose not to take advantage of the opportunities.

I lost several days to deep-diving into about thirty of the forty-seven corporations. Those were easy to investigate. Corporate documents all properly filed. Information at the ready. Lawsuits mostly won, and those that weren't required them to pay another crapload of money.

After every single crapload, those thirty companies would alter their practices, their contracts, and their behaviors to make sure that whoever climbed onto one of the ships did so fully educated—or at least, had every opportunity to become fully educated.

The remaining seventeen? That was where it all got interesting.

Seven of them were as old as time itself—or so it seemed. They were the granddaddies of all the corporations, and many of their practices were grandfathered in.

I had to investigate them because some of the oldest cases that Lin-Wonle had given me had involved those seven corporations.

They were either out of business now or sold and absorbed by one of the legit corporations that were easy to investigate.

The remaining ten presented me with a small mountain of issues. I found more corporate name changes than someone escaping a criminal past. Each corporation took me down more dead ends than I expected. They seemed to be hiding something, but what I couldn't tell.

I got very wrapped up in the overall investigation of the corporations. I like research. I like information. I like finding things out.

It frustrates me when information gets hidden from me, as someone was doing here. So I searched even more, taking the time out to investigate each group of names Lin-Wonle sent me.

Truth be told, I was hoping I'd find another difficult-to-identify nameless. Because I figured if I had three points of a triangle, I would have enough information to make a difference. That wasn't exactly true, but it felt true.

I figured it might open a few more doors, at any rate.

Instead, I spent weeks on the corporations, until I realized that one of them ran more than star cruisers. One of them rented out properties in the ports of various cities, ports where the star cruisers stopped.

Several of those rental sites rented to Watering Holes in the various cities. Not here any longer, though. Not for years.

I felt like I was onto something now. I wasn't sure what it was, but I was searching.

I stopped everything else I was doing and dug into the history of the Watering Hole here.

Not that there was much. Twenty years ago, the city changed its policy regarding businesses around the port.

The city decided to take over the entire area. Instead of buying out the businesses at the going rates, the city used some of its eminent domain laws to offer a token fee and take over the entire neighborhood.

Except for the block with the Watering Hole.

There, the city simply reclaimed all of the businesses and replaced them with tiny automated shops like the hairstyling salon.

And for the life of me, I couldn't find out why.

* * *

Lin-Wonle never sent me the latest files. She always insisted on dropping them off. Sometimes she told me her history with the deceased, not that I cared, and sometimes she stepped in as if she was checking on my progress, as if she was my boss.

I never answered her questions on those occasions. I was always too annoyed to say much more than *hello* or *thanks*.

But the drop-off after I had used all of my tricks to find out what was going on with that block, I invited her into my office.

She came, wearing a gray version of the cape and slacks that she had worn at that very first meeting more than a year before.

I waved a hand at one of my chairs, sat down in the other, and said without any kind of greeting to soften my words, "I need you to look through city records for me. I can't access the information that I need."

She looked surprised. Of the sixty-plus names she had sent me so far, I'd only delayed on two. She had told me the month before that she was pleased with my work.

She had even implied that some names would be impossible to find.

I knew she was heading toward her retirement, and from her perspective, getting answers on most of these cases was better than no answers at all.

But that wasn't my perspective at all.

"What do you need?" she asked in a tone I'd never heard from her before. It was carefully neutral.

"The Watering Hole," I said. "Two of the bodies you sent me were found behind it."

"Yes, one of the portside bars that the city closed down years ago. That area was a lot scarier thirty years ago. If anyone went down there, they had a good chance of being mugged or beaten or worse." She folded her hands over her lap. "I don't remember this particular bar. It wasn't even the worst offender. That was—"

"I don't care," I said. I hated chatty people. I thought she had known that. "I'm interested in this bar and the block it was on. The city reclaimed that block, but didn't pay the corporation for taking the property. The city just took it, and I want to know why."

"I'll look it up for you to be sure," she said, "but if I remember correctly, the city seized a lot of businesses known for illicit activity."

"What kind of illicit activity?" I asked.

"The kind you would expect near the port," she said. "Mostly selling banned and illegal substances."

"Mostly," I said. "What else?"

"That I don't recall," she said. "I do remember the Clean Up The Port campaign went on for nearly a decade."

Then she squinted at me.

"I thought you were in business at that point," she said. "Surely, you remember this."

"I usually don't care what happens in the city," I said.

"But you do now," she said.

"You want all the names or not?" I asked, maybe a little more sharply than I should have.

"I do," she said, sounding surprised. "This will get them for me?"

How the hell should I know? I almost said, but I had enough common sense not to alienate her too badly.

“Maybe,” I said. “I’m wondering why the information wasn’t easily available in the first place.”

The smile she gave me was condescending. It made me regret refraining from snapping at her a moment ago.

“We’re a port city, Gateway to the Future, as they like to call us. The port shuttles people off-planet on business, yes, but many just come here to visit our attractions, see the various resorts and natural wonders. That’s a good 75 percent of our income.” She added that in her didactic tone, as if I should’ve known all of that as well.

I’d seen the ads, of course, and wondered what kind of idiot came to a place just to see something that could be easily recreated with a full virtual experience. Hell, some of those experiences came with sense impressions—water droplets pelting the viewer (or seeming to) while they were looking at a waterfall.

Something in my look must have caught her because she gave me one of those derisive smiles.

“Oh,” she said. “Such things are beneath you.”

“You’re telling me that the city believes if someone found out that the port was a hotbed of criminal activity, they wouldn’t come here?” I asked, trying to keep the incredulousness from my tone. “Even though that’s been how port cities have operated since time immemorial?”

She shrugged. “I don’t run the city government. I just work for it.”

“So the information was buried, lost, hidden,” I said. “Pretty well, too.”

Although I probably could have found it if I had been willing to break into the city’s systems. I had figured talking to Lin-Wonle was easier.

I was beginning to regret that decision.

“Do you still want the specific information?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I do.”

* * *

She brought me the information a week later on a small protected network device. Apparently she wasn’t supposed to share any of this stuff, not that it mattered.

What she had were city records of the decision to buy out the area, along with the properties to be confiscated because the illegal activities there rose above the 50 percent level, whatever that meant.

The city was good at hiding its sins, and I didn’t care enough to ferret them out.

Instead, I pursued another path.

I looked at arrest records going back half a century. At first I didn’t find a lot. Exactly what Lin-Wonle had told me. Illegal substances, history of muggings, beatings, and the occasional homicide—with an easily identified victim.

Then from a handful of records forty years old, I found a criminal code listing that had no corresponding description in the current criminal code.

Just a series of numbers and letters that looked like they referred to some law or another, but nothing I could find.

And the hell of it was, a lot of them came from the block around the Watering Hole. A handful originated at the Watering Hole itself.

Finally, something I could easily research. Laws that were on the books but either got scrubbed or changed never really went away.

I had to dig to find the code, but I did.

And it made my nonexistent heart hurt.

* * *

Two cases hogged all of the attention. These cases occurred nearly one hundred years ago, when the Gateway to the Future sounded more like the Gateway to Hell. The city was smaller then, the port even more dangerous than it was now.

Andries Schweinzinger, scion of the Schweinzinger clan, one of the city's founding families, was found staggering down the street near the Watering Hole. He was naked, his hands bound behind his back, his hair nearly gone, his tongue black.

He was shouting that he'd been a victim, and some local passerby, someone who didn't stick around, used one of the kiosks (now gone) to contact the police. They arrived surprisingly quickly and one of them was conscientious enough to film the entire encounter, maybe because she recognized Schweinzinger.

He was clearly on something. Eyes crazed, drool on the side of his mouth. He kept repeating that he'd been kidnapped and they were going to sell him to the highest bidder.

Because he was rich, he got some special treatment and some vilification in the local media. The media thought, like the police, that he was hallucinating. The substance he had taken should have rendered him unconscious, but one of the doctors who treated him claimed that Schweinzinger had built up a tolerance to the drug over the past year or two. Apparently, it was highly available at the time, and being used by the inevitable partiers.

Schweinzinger found himself the butt of jokes, but he hired a good attorney who was fighting the case everywhere, from the legal side to the publicity nightmare.

It looked like Schweinzinger had made up the accusation until a woman screamed her way out of the Watering Hole, naked, terrible bruises on her wrists where—she said—she managed to collapse her hands enough to get them out of restraints.

She was at the opposite end of the social strata from Schweinzinger, and her name would never have appeared anywhere if it wasn't for the bizarre history she shared with him.

Lilly Wright was young and pretty and exceptionally smart. Graduated at the top of her class three days before and had spent the post-graduation ceremony partying. Her friends claimed she left them somewhere near the ports, but no one thought much about it.

Until she screamed as she fled the Watering Hole, claiming they were going to sell her to the highest bidder.

The city had no trouble finding people to blame. The names meant nothing to me, and I really didn't care about them at all. The charging documents didn't use the codes that I had found, and I wanted to know why these cases appeared when I dug for the numbers.

It took time, but I found my answer.

The cases changed the laws here. Turned out that there was a kidnapping ring working the docks. They'd take a young, bright, competent person, drug them, and sell their "contract" to someone on one of the many ships going through, taking the victim to places far from here, places from which—someone ominously said—there was no way to return.

When I saw that, I sat down. Hard. I'd been pacing my office, listening, looking, reading, and watching until that point. But places from which there was no return. That was anywhere in this sector, provided the ship traveled far enough fast enough.

Hell, my business was based on people being unable to return. The fact that I could answer their questions simply meant that the answers they sought were some part of some historical record somewhere. That was it.

I never vouched for accuracy. I just did what I could, and usually people left thinking they knew what was what.

The kidnapping laws had to change to accommodate the nightmares taking place at the port. Because if the kidnappings had been successful, there would have been nothing to charge. Schweinzinger and Wright would have been off-planet, and nothing

could have brought them back.

No one would have known what had happened to them.

So the law changed to incorporate attempted kidnapping with some involuntary servitude laws to ratchet up the crimes from serious to so damn serious that whoever tried it would get life in prison—which was, for here, ironically, off-planet, just not far enough away to cause any time ripples.

Schweinzinger became the poster child for the law, but Wright was the one who wrestled it into being. It became her life's work, making sure that no one was ever trafficked out of this city again.

She managed to clean up the port, more or less, except for one aspect.

A lot of people arrived here, fully dressed and not drugged in any way, but impoverished and terrified, claiming they had been kidnapped at the beginning of their journey, light-years and decades from where they had started.

They'd been drinking or partying or in the wrong bar at the wrong time, and somehow, they woke up on a ship, days later, when they were too far out to return home.

The city found enough evidence of a crime to use that code to charge ship owners and ship workers with enhanced kidnapping. But the kidnapping ring was larger than ships and ship workers. They all claimed they were doing it at the behest of one faraway corporation or another.

But there was a major legal issue.

The actual kidnappings occurred off-world, decades ago in real time. The original kidnappers might even have been dead, since most of them never traveled on the ships. Those folks just got paid by the number of able bodies they'd provided to the underhanded shipping companies who brought workers to farflung places.

Turned out that some of the faraway corporations believed it was easier to buy people than it was to pay lifetime contracts. The difference in upfront money was staggering. People could be sold illegally much more cheaply than entire families could be bought off.

The legal issues got more complicated the deeper I looked. There were the jurisdictional suits, the claims that the law sought to regulate behavior that the city had no right to regulate. They could prevent suspected criminal enterprises from using the port, but they couldn't legislate behavior on other planets, behavior that had often happened before any of the attorneys, juries, or judges had been born.

The law was quietly abandoned. The city used the old kidnapping statutes on the books to handle cases like Schweinzinger's—of which there were fewer and fewer as the area around the port got cleaned up. As for people who claimed they'd been kidnapped elsewhere and brought here, there were informal inquiries, halfway houses, places they could go, often getting protected refugee status if they wanted to go that route.

Most, though, just abandoned ship here and fled. The people running the ships never did pursue them, or rather, never pursued them once they got here.

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes, feeling pieces fall into place. I finally understood why some of the people who came to me seemed so very desperate to find out about their families.

Those people hadn't stupidly signed some contract without reading it. They'd been taken, brought here, and knew they couldn't go back.

They had not only come to me for answers, they had probably come to me for comfort as well.

Whoops.

But this was something Lin-Wonle should have known. Except that the codes had vanished from the record.

Unless Lin-Wonle had been a student of history, she wouldn't have known about the law. It was quietly buried as a mistake.

If I was a different kind of person, I would have figured out why the law had been abandoned and information about it buried rather than some activists retooling it so that it would work better.

Very few people alive were old enough to know about this law. Very few.

But it caught me. I shut down all of my systems, stood, and went to the private part of my office.

I was shaking.

I trusted my memory. I had evidence of my own choice. I remembered how I felt around Austin and Tom. I remember how hard that ship employee had worked to make sure I wasn't making a mistake.

But . . .

That moment at the Watering Hole bothered me. Both moments, at both Watering Holes, the other far from here.

The drinks are cheaper on the ship.

I had been easy—at least at that first port stop. It hadn't taken much to force me to return to the ship.

But what about others? People who really wanted to escape? How had they been treated?

I would never know, but I could guess.

I let out a small breath of air and realized that I felt something. I felt something strongly enough that it actually filtered through every protection I had set up within myself.

I was furious.

I knew how hard the damn trip was for someone like me, someone who had no regrets.

I couldn't quite imagine how hard it would be for someone who hadn't wanted to come in the first place.

No wonder Lin-Wonle had seen so many suicides. No wonder people's behaviors made no sense.

Particularly since most of them had no recourse.

I didn't know, and I didn't check, but I would wager that there was no real way to sue those shipping companies either for intentional harm. Since the crews rotated out, they could profess ignorance of what happened, and probably had.

I paced for a few minutes, wishing the unaccustomed emotion would go away.

It was staying. It made me want to punch something.

It made me want to go to the port and yell at someone.

It made me want to find a local bar and have a drink to calm down all the messy feelings.

I stopped.

I had been looking in the wrong databases.

I had been looking for people who had voluntarily taken ships away from their cushy homes.

I'd been looking at *port* records.

I needed to search missing persons databases. Not here, but at the various points of origin.

I needed to find out who, if anyone, had disappeared from their homes.

* * *

Missing persons databases are messy things. Most places keep them up for a few years, but if the missing person had been gone for a decade or more, the record got lost in the chum that was all the crime for a location. Sure, they remained in the missing persons database or whatever some place called that database, but no one looked, no one cared, no one really figured out what was going on.

It took me weeks to find the proper databases. I had to trace most of the ships, where they originated, and where they were heading. The oldest records were extremely old, and in systems even my high-end research center couldn't easily access.

It took me weeks to get more than a thousand new databases into my system. By then, Lin-Wonle had given me more bodies. I solved those, but I did something I hadn't thought of before.

I cross-referenced them.

Then I wished I hadn't.

I cross-referenced most of the cases she had given me, and found a good half of them included people on the missing persons database.

But then, to give myself a foundation, I looked myself up.

And found that Tom had reported me missing as well.

What was worse was that he was one of those sad sacks who checked every few months to see if someone—anyone—was still following up on the case.

When I saw that, I actually left my office. I walked down two miles to the entertainment district and stopped just outside it.

I had been heading to get drunk.

There were two filthy benches near one of the venues. Bright lights flashed, the cobblestone sidewalk was littered with empties, some of them old enough to be encrusted in dirt.

No one cleaned up down here. The air even smelled foul—rotted food, sour beer, and a miasma of rancid smells that I couldn't quite identify.

I still sat down.

I had to. My legs wouldn't hold me.

The stupid son of a bitch had never remarried. He had raised our child, but he had never remarried.

Instead, he had tried to get the local authorities to search for me *for years*.

That stupid son of a bitch had actually loved me. Just like he said he had.

The problem was me. The problem had always been me. The problem would forever be me.

My lack of feeling, my unwillingness to learn how to be inside a family. My unwillingness to do the difficult things.

A drink would help. A drink at that very moment would put the feelings back where they belonged.

The messy anger. The even messier regret.

And the sorrow. Oh, dear god. There was sorrow underneath it all.

A sorrow I hadn't realized I'd been carrying for most of my adult life.

* * *

I have no idea how long I ended up sitting there. I eventually stood up. I did not go into the entertainment district.

I did not buy a drink, then or ever.

I returned to the life I had built. The life I had chosen one drunken night so long ago. The life I said I preferred.

Two days later, when I felt as much like my old self as I probably ever would, I contacted Lin-Wonle. I invited her to my office.

When she came, I explained what I had found.

The color drained from her skin, leaving it an ash-gray. She closed her eyes, bowed her head, and didn't move for the longest moment.

Then she squared her shoulders, sat up, and thanked me.

"We're done now," she said.

"But," I said, "you said you had two hundred cases. We're not there yet."

"I know." Her mouth moved in an attempt to smile. "Thank you. Thank you for

answering my questions. I'll put in for payment for the full two hundred cases."

"I told you," I said tightly, "it's not about the money. It's never been about the money."

"I know," she said. "It's the challenge. And you rose to it."

She left without saying good-bye. I received the overpayment a day later. I contacted the office to ask for a proper payment, one for the work I'd actually done, and I was told that she had retired, more abruptly than planned.

The acting coroner asked me if there was anything she could do for me. I said no, and severed the contact.

Then I sat for a long time, in my single little office.

I could start a campaign. I could be the one to figure out who was coming in on these ships, who didn't want to be on them, and who needed help adjusting. I could start some kind of program or reinstate one. I could see if I could get the city to designate them as something—not a refugee, but some category like that, so that they could get assistance.

But what good would it do? They'd had everything of value stolen from them. Their families, their futures, the world they had known. Nothing could repay that. Nothing could really help them.

Either they survived it, or they didn't.

I survived it.

But I'm not sure my husband did. And I'm not going to look, not again. Looking back is what causes all the pain.

So I'm going to stay in the now. The ever-present now. That's all we have, when it comes down to it. The moments. Passing, fleeting, wrapped in memories if we choose, or lost in what might happen, again if we choose.

Or we can stay here, doing what we do. Thinking only of the way the universe is, not the way it can be.

Changing things is for dreamers, and I most definitely am not one.

I used to like to think I was kidnapped. I don't like to think that any longer.

Being kidnapped is worse. Much worse.

I chose to be here.

And I would choose it again, even knowing what I know.

No matter how much it breaks my nonexistent heart.