

BONEYARDS

KRISTINE KATHRYN

RUSCH

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**an imprint of Prometheus Books
Amherst, NY**

Published 2012 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover illustration © Dave Seeley
Cover design by Nicole Sommer-Lecht

Inquiries should be addressed to
Pyr
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228-2119
VOICE: 716-691-0133
FAX: 716-691-0137
WWW.PYRSE.COM

16 15 14 13 12 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn.

Boneyards / by Kristine Kathryn Rusch.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-61614-543-9 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-1-61614-544-6 (e-book)

1. Life on other planets—Fiction. 2. Space ships—Fiction. 3. Interplanetary voyages—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3568.U7B66 2012

813'.54—dc22

2011037543

Printed in the United States of America

For Sheila Williams again
This series wouldn't exist without you

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks on this one go to Lou Anders for understanding my method, Dean Wesley Smith for reading more versions than he probably wanted to, and all the readers who have let me know how much they like the stories in the Diving universe.

SECTOR BASE W

ONE

Rubble everywhere. Dust. Debris. I feel filthy and we've only been inside this room for fifteen minutes.

If you can call where we are "inside." Most of the rubble around us comes from caved-in rock destroyed not by time, but by some kind of blast.

We're here because Coop has finally tracked the location of Sector Base W, the base that was under construction when he and his Dignity Vessel, the *Ivoire*, left their timeline and got caught in foldspace. Five thousand years have passed for him, which is hard enough for me to grasp, but must seem impossible to the crew of the *Ivoire*.

Not all of them have dealt with it well. Maybe none of them have dealt with it well.

But some are dealing better than others.

I like to think Coop is one of those who is dealing with the loss of his friends, family, and universe quite well.

It's cold here, the kind of cold that I associate with failing environmental systems on spacecraft instead of with planets. Some of us are wearing our environmental suits (without the helmets) so that we can stay warm. Others—the planet-raised for the most part—are wearing layers of clothing.

That doesn't matter to me at the moment. At the moment, we're not going to do heavy work. But when we decide what heavy work to do, I'm going to make the ground team wear environmental suits, just for ease of movement.

Technically, I am running this mission. Coop has hired me not as the CEO of a now-huge corporation called the Lost Souls, but in my former capacity as a wreck diver. He has decided that he needs my expertise, and I have decided that I need to return to basics.

We have brought quite a crew with us. My three main divers—Mikk, Roderick, and Tamaz—are on the team, along with the Six. The Six are civil-

ians who have a genetic marker that allows them to work in stealth tech. Or, at least, they were civilians. They've now worked in and around stealth tech for five years.

Archeologist Lucretia Stone, historian César Voris, and scientist McAllister Bridge finish off my team. Coop's team includes military officers from the *Ivoire*, a cadre of linguists, and a large group of scientists who specialize in what we have come to call Lost Technology, even though we should probably call it Found Technology, given the circumstances.

We have one large ship in orbit, *Nobody's Business Two*, although it's not large by Dignity Vessel standards. (A Dignity Vessel can house a thousand people somewhat comfortably, although it's designed for five hundred.) The *Two* is large by *my* standards. Even though I have run a huge corporation for almost a decade now, I still think of myself as the woman who ran a small diving operation out of a ship barely big enough to hold the team on this ground mission.

Most of our crew is not on this ground mission. Most are still on the *Two*. We wanted a small team down here—well, *I* wanted a small team down here—to assess what we need to launch some kind of study of this place.

The ground mission isn't risky the way that some of my wreck dives have been risky. We're not operating in the vacuum of space, and we don't have any inexperienced tourists with us. We're operating in the remains of a mountain on a planet with normal gravity.

But the ground mission is still difficult, and not just because we're working in the unstable remains of a mountainside. We have strange levels of command here, and even stranger levels of emotion.

For Coop, this place must seem surreal. He had looked at the schematics of the sector base before it was built, approving the design in a large meeting with the other captains of the Fleet. In his mind, Sector Base W is both a place that's still under construction and a place that was ruined centuries ago.

It represents a hope, now gone, that he will find his people again—or what remains of his people, five thousand years in the future.

For me, Sector Base W is a curiosity, albeit one that has a firm grip on my imagination. I want to know what happened here. History always captures me, and now that I'm working beside living history, I'm even more captivated.

But I'm worried as well. No matter how often I do planetside missions, I hate them. I prefer to explore in zero gravity, so that I can float around the problems, propel myself forward with my arms alone, look at everything from top to bottom without climbing anything.

I have learned that ground-based missions are not my strong suit, which is why Lucretia Stone is actually in charge of the physical part of this trip.

Stone, one of the most highly regarded archeologists in both the Empire and, now, in the Nine Planets, has perfected the art of ground-based exploration, and I was foolish on our very first mission not to trust her experience.

In the five years since, I have rectified that. Stone has proven herself time and time again to be an able group leader. I'm just not a very good follower, and neither is Coop.

He's beside me now, standing on the wreckage of a platform with the word "Danger" written on it in Old Earth Standard. He is tall and broad shouldered, with dark hair and intense blue eyes. If I had to tell someone years ago what a captain of a Dignity Vessel looked like, I would have described a man like Coop. The square-jawed hero of legend.

Only Coop's not a legend, and at the moment, he looks heartbroken.

I want to slip my arm around him, but I don't dare.

Right now, he has assumed his professional persona, that of Jonathon "Coop" Cooper, captain of the *Ivoire*. Captain Cooper remains strong for his troops, even when there aren't many of them around him. Only two of his people have joined us on the ground. Joanna Rossetti, small and tough, has moved closer to Stone, trying to see deep within the rubble. The *Ivoire's* chief engineer, Yash Zarlengo, stands beside Coop, hands clasped behind her back.

Yash's face is always hard to read. She was raised planetside by an engineering family at one of the sector bases and has the thick muscles and firm bones of anyone raised in real gravity. Coop has them too, although not everyone on his staff does.

Yash should be back at Lost Souls, working with one of my teams on the various *anacapa* projects. The *anacapa* is a specialized drive developed by the Fleet, something no culture has replicated in five thousand years. Initially, my people thought the *anacapa* was stealth technology. It functions that way sort of, but really, it's much much more. Yash heads *anacapa* research in Lost Souls, but she, like Coop, wants to solve the mystery of the Fleet. She wants to know where her people are, even if they are her people no longer.

The condition of Sector Base W, however, has all three of them upset.

"A lot of this damage could just be caused by time," says Stone.

She's in the very middle of the debris field, trying to look through the boulders and the broken rock at the remains of the room beyond.

I have been inside a sector base before, albeit one long shut down. The main room of a sector base is huge, big enough to hold several Dignity Vessels. The floor is smooth, and there is lighting everywhere. In the very back, there should be apartments for visiting workers and storage rooms. The ceiling is high, and in some sector bases, should open to the planet above.

If you didn't see the Old Earth Standard word "Danger" on the platform

Coop is standing on, you might not realize that this is a man-made cavern. The door is long gone, the corridors leading to the room have collapsed, and there is no equipment that I can see.

Of course, I've learned from Stone that time adds to our problems in understanding what happened. Over time, dirt and debris and basic garbage cover the ground layer, burying the path that people walked on five thousand years ago in centimeters, sometimes meters, of material.

Plus, planets change. They're living things, just like we are, and they expand, contract, and alter as their atmospheres and environments wear on them each and every day. That doesn't count what humans do to planets, carving them up for bases or building roads. Nor does it count things that impact planets from the outside, like large asteroids that don't entirely burn up as they hit the atmosphere.

Stone assured me before we came into this part of the mountain that mountains age like everything else. Old mountains—like old humans—grow shorter with time. Sometimes mountains implode from within. Sometimes rain and other forces wear at mountainsides, and those tumble away. If the mountain is filled with caves or is, like this one, mostly hollow thanks to the work Coop's people did on it five thousand years ago, then that rock slide, that tumble, might lead to a cave-in, which could lead to something like this.

It looked, as we landed, like someone had taken a scoop and carved an opening in this mountain, then left all the debris to gather at the base. Some on my team—away from Coop's people, whom we're treating very delicately—made a variety of comparisons: a half-eaten grapefruit, a shattered ball, a wall display punched by a gigantic fist.

Despite our work with archeologists and geologists and land-science people, most of my team isn't used to working planetside. We live in space, we function in artificial environments, and we know that if anything happens to our tiny worlds, that anything is usually caused by malfunctioning systems, mismanagement, acts of war, or something else that can be blamed on human beings.

Arguing whether part of a mountain came down over five thousand years because of natural causes just seems strange to me, and I wonder if it seems strange to Coop.

After all, he was born in space, to a culture constantly on the move. The Fleet never went backward. It only moved to the next system, the next sector, solving problems and meting out its own version of justice.

It did stay in an area for a designated period of time, building bases along the way for ground repairs and other such things. The Fleet cycled back and forth in that designated area until it was time to move forward again, and then

it did, sending teams to build bases ahead of the core of the Fleet, and letting older teams close the bases too far back for the Fleet to ever easily return to.

Sector Base V, the base where I first encountered Coop, where the *Ivoire* appeared one magical day when our blundering saved his people from their trap in foldspace, was one of the bases that had been properly shut down. The last of the equipment, five thousand years old, still thrummed with a bit of life, but most of the tools, all of the furniture, records, and important items, were long gone. Sector Base V had not only been abandoned, it had been forgotten by the people who lived on the surface. No record of the base existed in any of the histories—our histories, anyway—and nothing, not even legends about it, remained on the surface.

When we discovered that base, it was as if we had found an entire world that no one, not even the people planetside, had known existed.

There is no one planetside in this part of Ylierr, and according to the planet's various official histories from all of its cultures, there has never been a community on this location. Ylierr was settled one thousand years after Coop's people touched the place.

No settlement—that we've found anyway, and granted, we've only just started to search the various databases—was ever established on this site. We don't know why yet, whether the destruction we see before us was already here, or if the mountains—which are formidable—scared the other settlers away.

Stone believes the other colonists looked at various places on Ylierr's eight continents and found those places more amenable to settlement: closer to water, arable land, an abundance of plant life.

Coop believes the other colonists looked at this location, saw ruin, and decided to go elsewhere.

Both of them could be right, but I haven't said that. Even though I lead this overall mission, I don't see it as my responsibility to settle an early argument with two invested adults. The histories will eventually give us the information we need. Histories, and the stories the land itself tells.

But right now, we're just guessing.

There appears to be a makeshift path through the rubble leading to the still-intact back wall. We seem to be standing on the platform closest to that wall, but I am not certain.

Yash has a touchpad with the schematics that the Fleet approved for this base before a battle trapped the *Ivoire* in foldspace. She holds the pad up now, trying to find something that corresponds.

Stone has devices that overlay holographic images on top of such sites, but she didn't bring it at the moment. She doesn't want us to go into the area yet, but Coop does.

“I can answer this debate with one simple check,” he says to Stone. “Let me go back there.”

“You don’t know how to move in an unstable environment,” she says. “You could send the entire rock pile down on yourself.”

He gives her a withering look, so intense that it makes my breath catch. There’s a reason he was chosen to command five hundred people at such a young age. He has a power, an *authority*, I have never ever encountered before.

“I’ll be fine,” he says flatly.

Stone is oblivious to his power. Stone is oblivious to a lot of human interaction. It is both her weakness and her strength.

“You don’t decide what rocks do,” she says. “They decide. No matter what happens, Captain, the natural environment will triumph over the human spirit every single time.”

He does not argue with her the way a lesser person would. He was raised in space; he knows that human will cannot conquer everything.

But in this instance, it does not matter to him. I can see it in the set of his jaw, the look in his eye.

Mikk, one of my divers, who has come down here not to dive or explore (since this trip is truly informational), but for muscle in case something horrible does happen, gives me a sideways look. I can read Mikk’s expressions after decades of working with him.

He wants me to step in and settle the conflict between Coop and Stone.

Technically, I should step in. But I suspect there will be a lot of interpersonal battles on this trip, and I am not going to risk my authority arbitrating a fight I will lose.

Stone is right, of course: Coop should not go in there. But Coop has spent the last five years coping with loss and change that would devastate most people. I am not sure he cares if the rocks slip and he gets crushed.

“You do realize,” I say softly to him, “that if you’re back there and injured we might not be able to help you.”

He gives me the same withering look he gave Stone. He realizes it, and as I suspected, he doesn’t care.

“You have my permission to abandon me for the sake of the mission,” he says.

The words have just enough sarcasm to anger me. But I don’t let that out. He’s baiting me when he’s really angry at Stone for treating him like an idiot.

“What are you trying to find back there?” I ask, pretending like his previous words don’t matter to me at all.

“Evidence,” he says.

“That’s what the prolonged investigation is for,” Stone says.

“I don’t want to have a prolonged investigation if we can settle this in a few minutes,” he says in a tone that vibrates with frustration.

They have had this argument before, clearly not in my presence, and they still haven’t settled it.

Now Yash is the one to give me the sideways look, but not before Stone starts down the argument’s familiar road.

“You can’t determine what happened from guesswork,” she says, not trying to hide her frustration either. “Sometimes I think you don’t understand what five thousand years really means in terms of the toll it takes on everything from buildings to mountains.”

Her words echo in the rock-strewn space, and then she blanches. She has just realized what she has said.

“Captain, I’m sorry—”

“No, you’re not,” he says. “I’m going in there.”

And then, he stomps into the small corridor made by those rocks.

I curse silently. I had asked what he was looking for so that I would have an idea of how long he would be back there. I want to know if we’re going to need to worry. It’s a simple precaution we use on space dives—timing everything, giving limits because they ensure that the diver remains focused on the task at hand.

I take a deep breath to calm myself. Of course, Coop will stay focused on the task at hand. He’s the one who has been focused on this mission from the very beginning.

Still, reflexively, I glance at my watch, then move to the mouth of that corridor. Stone grabs my arm and moves me back a dozen centimeters.

“I don’t want you to get hurt if those rocks fall,” she says quietly.

She seems resigned. Maybe, like me, she has always known he would go in there and that there would be little we could do to stop him.

I want her to reassure me that he will be all right. I want her to tell me that ground accidents are rare. I want her to say that we’re not silly for letting him go alone.

But I know she will say none of those things. I wouldn’t say them if we were on a real dive.

Instead, I beckon Yash to my side. “Let me see those schematics,” I say.

She taps the pad, zooming in on the part of the room that she believes we’re standing in.

Just like I thought, we’re near the back of the gigantic room, not too far from the doors that open onto the apartments and the storage areas.

If, of course, the Fleet built Sector Base W according to these schematics and didn’t change the design as they worked on the site. Yash, who was raised

on a sector base to a family of technology specialists, says that often the design will change as the engineers discover problems inside the base's location.

She often discusses a base she apprenticed on, a base that had to make all kinds of alterations because the presence of methane threatened the entire build.

"What's he looking for?" I ask her.

She shrugs, but I recognize her expression. She knows. And she's not willing to tell me.

She assumes everything is confidential. Coop is still her commander, and she operates as if everything he tells her is under the seal of that command.

I don't have that attitude. Coop and I have had a lot of go-rounds since we met, many of them over who is in charge. It took me months to get him to call me Boss, which is what everyone calls me. I don't acknowledge my so-called "real" name, not because I dislike it or even because my father was the one to christen me with it, but because that name no longer applies to me.

It hasn't applied to me for decades.

Coop finally gave in one afternoon over coffee. He shook his head, and said to me, *I can't avoid your name forever. I have to call you something. I'll just pretend "Boss" is your given name. After all, it's not like I'm using that word in my native language.*

His native language, our joint linguists have figured out, is one of the parents of my language. Even the language has twisted and altered over five thousand years, so much so that when we first met, we couldn't speak to each other.

I know Stone's accusation is a false one: perhaps more than the rest of us, Coop knows how long five thousand years is. He deals with it every single day.

And just when I think he has the knowledge—and the feelings it engenders—under control, he does something like this.