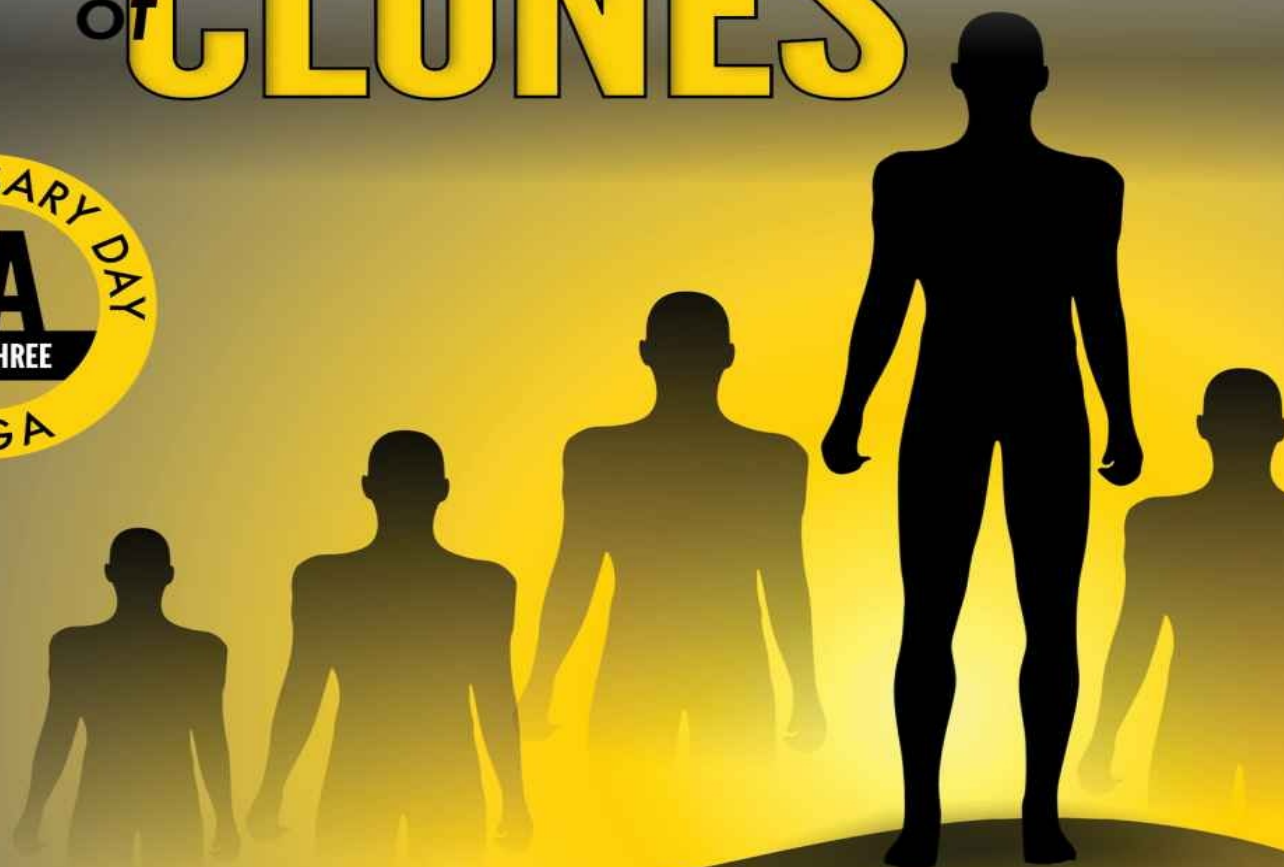


KRISTINE KATHRYN
RUSCH

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A **MURDER**
of **CLONES**



A RETRIEVAL ARTIST UNIVERSE NOVEL

A MURDER OF CLONES

A Retrieval Artist Universe Novel



KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH



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For Kevin J. Anderson

because he and I have been navigating this writing stuff together for more than thirty years now. I
don't think I could've done it without you, Kev.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Paul B. Higginbotham for his help in designing the court system for the Retrieval Artist universe. I had stumbled along early, but he has come up with a way to make it work. Of course, any errors here in understanding common legal procedures are mine and mine alone.

Thanks also go to Allyson Longueira for figuring out how to make these projects work, to Annie Reed for making sure I get my facts straight, and to Dean Wesley Smith, who consistently says, “Just write it, Rusch, and then we’ll worry about what to do next.”

And finally, thanks to all you readers who have joined with me for ten books now. Each book is an experiment, the Retrieval Artist series more than most, and I appreciate your willingness to join me on the journey.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

You have in your hands book three of The Anniversary Day Saga. However, if you bought this book thinking it's a standalone title, your reading experience should be just fine. If you enjoy the book, however, go back and read Anniversary Day and Blowback before moving on to the next book in this saga, Search & Recovery.

As for the rest of you who've faithfully read the Retrieval Artist books, yes, I'm using the word "saga." I did not intend for this saga to happen. When I started Anniversary Day, I thought I was writing one novel. I was wrong.

I wrote the opening sequence of A Murder of Clones to explain a scene in Blowback to myself. I thought A Murder of Clones would be a standalone novella. Of course, it wasn't. It was a novel. At that point, I thought I could write the novel years from now, when I wasn't finishing what I thought was the Anniversary Day trilogy.

The minute I made the decision to make the novella something bigger, I quit writing on the novella and went back to Blowback.

One year later, I came back to the novella with the idea of finishing it for the Fiction River Kickstarter project that Dean Wesley Smith and I did in the summer of 2012. I thought finishing the novella would be easy—and it was.

But, as I finished it, I realized that I couldn't move forward with the next book in the Anniversary Day trilogy without writing Judita Gomez's story. At first, I thought I could write her story for myself and not publish it.

I soon realized, however, that if I followed that plan, the moment Gomez appeared in the book I was writing, she would seem like a deus ex machina. In other words, her appearance would feel both superficial and a cheat.

I was then faced with two problems: my trilogy had just become something bigger. And the next book I had to publish in the Anniversary Day saga would be a Retrieval Artist novel without our favorite Retrieval Artist showing up at all.

I knew many readers would wait for Miles Flint to appear, and he's not going to. Not in this novel. Which is why it's called a Retrieval Artist Universe novel. He'll be in some of the books in this

remaining arc, I promise.

In fact, when you finish this saga, you'll see that the center of the books-long story is Miles Flint.

Honestly, the fact that my unruly brain served up Judita Gomez next shouldn't surprise me. When I first designed the Retrieval Artist universe, I wanted some books to focus on other characters besides Miles Flint. My desire to write non-Flint books is modeled on the mystery genre, particularly two of my favorite writers in the genre—Elizabeth George and Ed McBain. Each of George's books focus on a different main character within her series. But I suspect McBain had a larger influence on the Retrieval Artist Universe.

I have always said that this series is my 87th Precinct. Ed McBain wrote dozens of books about the precinct, and rotated his characters in and out of the novels. Some books would focus on a few of the characters, others would focus on different characters.

This is the first full novel in which Miles Flint does not appear. There will be others. There have already been side stories without Miles Flint, like The Recovery Man's Bargain. There will be more of those as well.

Which is a long way of telling you why I'm starting this book with a letter to the readers.

What WMG Publishing and I decided is that the last six books of this saga will come out every month until this saga is finished. You're holding A Murder of Clones, which is a January 2015 release. The next book will appear in February of 2015. Then you'll get a book every month until June when this saga ends.

The Retrieval Artist series won't end there, of course. I already have a lot of side stories sketched out (and started), and several future novels in mind. I will take a break from the universe after more than a year of writing in it. I have other series and stories to tend to.

I'm having a lot of fun writing this saga. It's a challenge, and I love challenges. However, I promise (as much as I can with my recalcitrant brain) that the next RA novel after I finish this mini-saga will stand alone—like the first eight did.

Thanks for joining me on this journey.

*—Kristine Kathryn Rusch
Lincoln City, Oregon
April 29, 2014*

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

ONE

THE STENCH MADE her eyes water. Marshal Judita Gomez had a protect-strip over her mouth and nose, but the stench still got through. Something had died here. Something big, or many somethings big. The fact that the stench was so strong meant she would have to destroy her clothes. Nothing anyone had invented had been able to take the overpowering smell of corpses out of clothing.

At least nothing had done it to her satisfaction.

And perhaps nothing could have satisfied her. Every time she found a corpse, she felt the death viscerally. It became part of her. Perhaps it made sense, then, that it would seem to be part of her clothing as well.

She carefully moved several flat leaves, following the Eaufasse into the cluster of trees. She hadn't studied this culture at all, just responded to their call. So she touched what the Eaufasse touched and stepped where the Eaufasse stepped, which was hard, since the Eaufasse was the size of a thin twelve-year-old human child with extra-long legs and feet the size of fists.

Be extremely careful, she sent to her partners Kyle Washington and Shakir Rainger through their links. They'd been with the Earth Alliance Frontier Security Squad for years, but she wasn't sure they'd ever been in a situation like this before.

She wasn't sure *she* had ever been in a situation like this before.

The Eaufasse Emir had contacted the Earth Alliance about an enclave of humans hiding in the backcountry, near one of the Eaufasse's major cities. The Eaufasse was one of sixteen different sentient species on Epricom, the habitable moon of an uninhabitable planet in a sector of space that the Earth Alliance dubbed the Frontier.

Ever since its formation, the Earth Alliance had given several sectors of space the Frontier designation. That meant most of the planets within the sector had applied for Earth Alliance membership—or were potential applicants for membership. Most sectors ended up becoming part of the Alliance, but every once in a while, the designation backfired, leaving the sector unapproved or with only a few Alliance planets, making it difficult for anyone from the Alliance to do business there.

And no matter what the Alliance said, what its propaganda dictated, the Alliance was always about business.

Gomez moved slowly. She loved her job, even at moments like this, moments when a single

misplaced footstep could cause an interstellar incident. Her work was not the same from hour to hour, let alone day to day or week to week, and she saw parts of the known universe that most people never got to see.

She focused on the steps in the dirt before her, noting the strange plants that slid toward her feet. They seemed to move without wind or even being touched.

She'd been trained to watch for cues like that, things that might mean whatever she was looking at was sentient. She carefully avoided those plants, and she sent a message through the secured link to her deputies to do the same.

She didn't expect them to answer. One reason she had chosen Washington and Rainger for this mission was because they had the most experience of all her deputies in first-contact situations. Not that this was the first time humans had contact with the Eaufasse, but as far as she could tell, this was the first time that the Earth Alliance authorities—not diplomats—had in-person contact. And in-person contact was always different from contact through networks and links.

For one thing, it was infinitely more dangerous.

The Earth Alliance Frontier Security Squad had jurisdiction in any sector designated Frontier. But jurisdiction didn't mean they could override local laws. It simply meant that the FSS investigated, policed, and patrolled any Earth Alliance members who found their way to a Frontier planet.

And usually, the shadiest Earth Alliance members found their way to the outskirts of Earth Alliance territory, knowing that the FSS was underfunded and spread much too thin.

Gomez was deeply aware of that right now. She needed half a dozen deputies, not the two she always traveled with. The Emir believed that the human enclave was up to no good—at least that was how the translation program had filtered the Eaufasse's extremely complex language.

The relationship with the Eaufasse was so new that very few Eaufasse spoke Standard, and those who did didn't speak it very well.

One of those Standard-speaking Eaufasse was just outside the investigation area, listening in on a link hooked up to both Gomez and the Eaufasse tracker/police officer/military official who led the small group to the corpses.

The language barrier was still so complete that she wasn't sure what job the Eaufasse in front of her actually had.

Finally, the group reached a clearing. The ground dipped here in a bowl shape, and she knew without looking that the corpses were here. The nose never lied.

She held up a fist, so that her deputies stopped moving. They froze. They didn't dare do anything else. One wrong word, one wrong gesture, one wrong step, and the FSS officer could find herself on the wrong side of an alien judicial system.

There were exceptions for marshals. Exceptions were part of the agreements made with Frontier planets. But that didn't mean every single culture on those planets abided by the rules, nor did it mea

that the Earth Alliance would always defend a marshal's behavior, particularly if some authority in the Alliance felt the marshal was out of line.

We would like to spread out along the rim of this small clearing, Gomez sent through the joint alien-marshall link. *Do we have your permission to do so? If not, where should we stand?*

The Eaufasse responded quickly. *Of course, permission.*

And she had no idea if that meant she had permission to stand wherever she wanted or if she had to wait while it translated her request to the Eaufasse leading her.

That Eaufasse turned its pointed head toward her. Its eyes, large and liquid, fixed on hers. Then it waved one of its extra-long limbs toward her, in what seemed like a very human gesture for *Continue*.

She knew better than to assume she knew what the Eaufasse meant by the gesture.

After a moment, it tilted its head away from her, and another message came through the link.

Of course. Permission. Stand you want. Okay.

She cursed silently. She hoped that meant it was okay to stand where she wanted. At least she had it on record.

She put down her fist, gestured for the others to join her, and moved near the Eaufasse. It hunched toward the bowl like a mangled question mark.

The two deputies fanned out beside her, moving as cautiously as she was.

The clearing had an open view to the sky. Epricom's bright sun made the plants glow bluish green. Epricom had the right oxygen mix for humans, which made it an enticing planet for development, but it was clearly an alien place.

So alien, in fact, that it took her a moment to recognize the bodies in the tangle of vines, leaves, and branches that passed for ground cover here.

The bodies were equidistant apart. They sprawled face down, heads turned toward her, arms outward, feet bent. They were so bloated she couldn't tell much about them—male, female, age. Nor could she quite comprehend what they were wearing; in most areas the bloating was so severe that they had burst through their clothes.

The identical positions, and the fact that they sprawled face down, however, led her to believe they had been killed. Whether or not they had been dumped here was another matter.

She suppressed a sigh. She also didn't know what kind of killings Eaufasse did, if any, and how they treated their dead.

May we approach the corpses? She sent through the links.

Of course. Permission. Stand you want. Okay.

"Okay," she muttered. Washington glanced at her, his mouth a thin line.

She started down the incline, leading the way. Washington and Rainger followed, doing their best to walk where she had. Branches clawed at her boots, and she had the impression that some of the stunts had scuttled away from her feet.

Her heart pounded. She hated this kind of thing. She always felt out of her depth in situations that involved killings in Frontier planets. She had no idea what the temperature ranges were, how the local flora and fauna interacted with rotting material, what kind of insects—if any—went after corpses, and on and on.

She could only guess at things, and she was terrified she would guess wrong. Not only did her future depend on the correct moves, but often so did the future relationship between the Earth Alliance and the Frontier planet.

When she was within a few meters of the bodies, she turned slightly toward the deputies.

Spread out, she sent through the private links. Tell me if you can make any sense of this. Try to limit your guesses to the ones you're at least half certain of.

Rainger gave her a grim smile. Washington nodded once. They picked their way around the other side, with Rainger continuing until he stopped above the corpses' heads. He crouched. So did Washington near one of the corpse's backs.

Gomez stood near the feet, gazing upward. As she'd been traveling here, she had downloaded all the information she could find on the Eaufasse. She'd stored a backup copy on a chip in her thumb. Not that there had been a lot of information, just the preliminary report, filled with the usual happy-shiny crap about what a great planet it was, how accommodating the locals were, and how happy they would be to cooperate with any Earth Alliance culture that wanted to set up a base here.

No initial cultural difficulties, not with the advance team, and no mention of crime at all. Now whether that meant that the Eaufasse didn't commit crimes against each other or whether it meant that the Eaufasse had a different conception of crime than the Alliance did was anyone's guess.

And search she did, but hadn't found anything on Eaufasse death rituals. So that meant the advance teams and the later observers weren't allowed to see what the Eaufasse did. But she had learned not to interpret that either. It might mean that they kept the rituals private like some cultures kept bathing private or it might mean that the teams simply hadn't been near a death so didn't get to see what the Eaufasse did in that circumstance.

Not that it mattered now. She couldn't find the answer she wanted. She had no idea if these corpses were arranged in an Eaufasse death position or one of the other fifteen species on this planet had been involved in any way or if she was looking at a human-on-human crime.

She sighed softly. She had hoped for a simple knife in the back of one of the deceased, with a note attached, explaining all the reasons for the crime—or at least something similar, something that was obvious and unambiguously human-on-human.

Something she could deal with.

“Rainger,” she said out loud, knowing that the Eaufasse could hear her conversation and would do its best to translate it for the other Eaufasse. “Send for the collection team. Tell them you'll meet them here, and remind them of the delicacy of the recovery effort.”

“Yes, sir,” Rainger said. “Mind if I continue to examine the scene, sir?”

“Don’t touch anything,” she said. “In fact, make a secondary recording. Get up close. The more information we have the better.”

He nodded.

“Washington,” she said. “You’re with me.”

“Sir?” he said, looking startled.

“We came here to remove a human enclave,” she said. “I think we should see what we’re facing.”

TWO

TWO MARSHALS COULDN'T remove a human enclave from anywhere. But they could investigate the enclave, see its layout, maybe get a guess as to how big it was.

The Eaufasse that brought them looked at her, then at Rainger, then back at her. This one she could interpret: It wasn't certain if it should stay with Rainger or go with her. Clearly someone had asked it to keep an eye on the team of humans that had arrived.

That was their mistake for not sending more than one Eaufasse on this little adventure.

Gomez settled it for the Eaufasse. She started out of the clearing, following the footsteps they had made on the way in. Spread across her left eye, she had a map of this area that she had downloaded from some database. The trail she needed to follow branched off the trail they had originally walked down.

The Eaufasse let out a small peep and scrambled after them, using its long limbs to pull itself through the branches. The branches would swing it forward just a bit until finally it arrived at Gomez's side.

Wait. Please. Me lead. The translator said for it.

It's okay, Gomez sent. *I have a map.*

No, no. The Eaufasse sounded distressed. Could Eaufasse sound distressed? Or was she anthropomorphizing again? *Colleagues yours. Know not. Secret us.*

Okay, she sent. *I didn't understand that. Try again.*

Colleagues yours. Think secret. Yes?

She sighed. She still didn't understand it.

"I think it's saying that the enclave has no idea that the Eaufasse know anything about them," Washington said, sounding tired. Or maybe he was overwhelmed. This was already shaping up into something bigger than either of them wanted it to be.

Is that correct? Gomez sent. *Do the humans know you are watching them?*

Humans know not us, the translator sent back. *We want not humans know.*

That one she got. They didn't want the humans to know that they had discovered the enclave. Which begged the question: how did the enclave get here without the Eaufasse knowing?

But Gomez wasn't going to ask. She wouldn't get an answer she understood anyway. She'd leave

to the diplomats, whom she was going to have to send for, given the three bodies.

I won't reveal your location, Gomez sent. I don't want the enclave to know about us either.

At least, not right now. Not when there were only two marshals standing here and an unknown number of people in the enclave.

I just want to see the property, Gomez sent. And in case they didn't understand that, she added, I want to know how big it is.

One hundred, the translator answered.

She hoped to hell that was 100 humans and not 100 buildings. But she didn't ask that question either. All would be answered soon enough. She simply sent a thank you and kept going.

The weird underbrush was thinning. She recognized this area. It took her back to the trail carved into the wilderness—or what she thought of as wilderness. She could cut across the trail and head directly to the enclave, or she could backtrack, and take a much larger trail that had forked from this one a click back.

She was about to take the long route when the Eaufasse peeped at her again. It made that same gesture with its arm (at least she thought of it as an arm), the gesture she had thought of as *Come on*.

Maybe that was actually what it meant.

If we stay off the trail, she sent to the translator, are we in danger of walking in protected areas?

That was probably too complicated for them, Washington sent her on their private link.

There was no answer, at least not immediately.

Of course. Permission. Walk you want. Okay.

“Or maybe not,” Washington muttered, just loud enough for her to hear.

She smiled. They continued. As long as she had permission on the record—or something she understood to be permission—she was going to take the easier route.

The land was hilly here, with more thick underbrush. The Eaufasse would touch branches as it went by, probably wishing it could pull itself along with them like it had before. It would lose Gomez and Washington quickly if it did that.

As rough as the terrain was, the distance they had to cover was relatively short. They reached a hill. The hill wasn't that high, but the hillside was steep.

Down, down, the translator sent.

Gomez and Washington looked down, seeing nothing but ground cover. But the Eaufasse with them made that *Come on* gesture again, only its head was pointed toward the top of the hill.

Then it fell on its—stomach? front? Gomez wasn't certain what to call that part of its anatomy—and started pulling itself through the underbrush. So that was what the translator meant by *down*.

You gotta be kidding me, Washington sent her.

Something wrong? Rainger sent.

Not with us, Gomez sent. Collection there yet?

They say they're an hour out, Rainger sent. I can join you.

We're okay, she sent again.

Except for this stupid obstacle course, Washington sent, then promptly fell on his belly. It wasn't like they hadn't done this in training. They'd pull themselves forward by their elbows or their gun barrels or their knives, sometimes for hours.

But Washington was a lot closer to that training than Gomez was. She hadn't done this in nearly a decade. Plus she didn't know what this ground, and this ground cover, was composed of.

Still, she flopped down and pulled herself forward, using the branches. They actually moved with her, and she wondered if they were some kind of creature. She remembered that feeling she had earlier, that they had clawed at her boots. She wasn't sure if they were physically pulling her forward now.

The movement through the underbrush was a lot more quiet than she expected it to be. She could barely hear the rustle of Washington and the Eaufasse ahead of her. It took almost no time to reach the crest of the hill.

The branches formed a web in front of her, but she could see through the openings. She could have sworn that the branches weren't in that position when she had started up the hill, but she didn't say anything. She'd seen too many strange things throughout her career to doubt her impressions now.

She moved just a little closer to the edge. Washington was at her left, the Eaufasse was at her right. It almost flattened against the ground, looking like a pile of branches all by itself. The perfect camouflage.

She blinked a high-powered scope over her right eye. For the moment, she kept her left open. The red lines of the map converged before her, but she didn't need them.

The enclave looked like an eyesore against the landscape. Gray buildings, made with that weird self-grow permaplastic that colonists often used, rose from the underbrush like rectangular rocks.

She blinked the map away, and closed her left eye, letting the scope in her right eye magnify even further.

Seven buildings, six in a circle around a large main building of some kind. The underbrush had been destroyed here, and it looked like there was some kind of dome or force field around the enclave itself. The underbrush ended several meters away from the first two buildings.

The enclave looked like it had been here for a long time.

Do you have any idea what they do here? she sent to the translator.

No, it answered.

How long has this enclave been here? she asked.

Unknown. Long time. Guess.

That was clear enough. The fact that the enclave had been here a while complicated matters although not with the Earth Alliance. Earth Alliance law was clear on this point. In a Territory, Earth

Alliance enclaves were guests at the whim of their hosts. If a guest offended its host, the guest had to leave, no matter how much it had invested or how long it had been there.

The problem wasn't the law. The problem was enforcing the law.

And that was the saga of her entire career.

She deactivated the scope and glanced at Washington. He looked at her, and she could see on his face the same frustration that she felt.

They were going to have to monitor these bastards, maybe for months, while they waited for the Earth Alliance Military Guard to arrive. Then it would take a small-scale war to get these idiots out of here. After, of course, someone—probably her—tried to talk them into leaving voluntarily.

The diplomats got the easy job in these situations. The diplomats got to talk to the locals who barely understood Standard and who probably didn't understand Earth Alliance customs at all.

She was going to have to talk with the humans who had been here for years, humans who didn't want to be found, humans who were probably doing something they believed to be ideologically pure or economically beneficial. Humans who would probably go to war—either for their beliefs or their fortune.

And she wasn't sure which one was worse.

Because they would both cost her months of her life—and, if she wasn't careful, her life itself.

Then she smiled to herself, keeping her head down. Moments like this were the reason she loved this job.

She glanced at Washington again. He was looking at the enclave with great concentration, probably through a scope of his own.

We need to set up surveillance, something as modern as we have, so that their monitors won't find it right away, she sent to him. *And we'll do something from orbit, of course.*

And maybe, if the diplomats did their job and got permission from the Eaufasse, they could fly little bug-like cameras around the enclave itself.

She was tempted to go down to the edge of the enclave and see if someone would let her in. But if they didn't—or even if they did—she would tip her hand. The enclave would know that the Eaufasse were aware of them, and would know that the Eaufasse had contacted the FSS.

She glanced at the Eaufasse. It looked like part of the ground cover. She'd never seen such effective camouflage. Only the glistening of its eyes and the fact that she knew it was there let her see it at all.

Let's go, she sent, and wondered how the hell they were going to back their way out of this mess. And by that, she meant both the branch ground cover, and the situation here on Epriccom.

THREE

GOMEZ'S SHIP, THE *EAFS Stanley*, was one of the flagships in the FSS fleet. The ship had all of the bells and whistles the squad could ask for, from the latest weapons systems to the best forensic labs to several prisoner wings. Not to mention an entire section designed for non-standard passengers.

She had set up the non-standard section to Peyti normal. But she was less concerned with the non-standard section than she was with the forensic lab. She wanted to find out what the heck was going on with these corpses and why they caused the Emir to send for the FSS in the first place.

The bodies had proven difficult to move. It had taken nearly 24 hours to remove them from their resting place in the clearing and get them to the orbiting ship. Several of the branches had worked their way into the corpses and had to be dislodged. Of course, no one wanted to do that without the Eaufasse's permission, and no one quite knew how to ask for it.

Plus no one knew if it was possible to carry bodies out of the place where they had died. If this were a Disty-run area, the problems would be extreme. The Disty believed that bodies contaminated everything, and had elaborate rituals for dealing with them.

The Eaufasse didn't seem to have problems with bodies, but the translations weren't really clear on anything. Gomez was guessing, and sometimes not even guessing on much evidence.

She had managed to retrieve the bodies with her own squad, feeling uncomfortable the entire time. At least the shuttle landing points had been safe.

One of the first things the Alliance did with any Territory was negotiate landing points. The Eaufasse had a space traffic system, but no real port—not in the way that the Alliance thought of ports, anyway—so some diplomat somewhere had negotiated landing areas.

Gomez's team had used the one closest to the bodies for picking up the bodies. After she had done what negotiations she could, given the limitations of the language, she had assigned Rainger and the collection team the task of bagging and carrying the bodies back to the shuttle.

She had had more important things to negotiate: She needed to coordinate everything, from the diplomats to the arrival of the Earth Alliance Military Guards. She also needed someone who spoke both Standard and the Eaufasse's language well. Fortunately, that person wasn't too far away.

Unfortunately, that person wasn't really a person at all.

That person was Peyti, which was why she had set the non-standard section to Peyti normal. The

Peyti had arrived quickly.

Its name was Uzven. She had no idea what its gender was. The Peyti were unusually reticent about gender. It was considered offensive to ask. The names certainly didn't give a clue either.

She wasn't a big fan of the Peyti, but she had to work with Uzven because there was no diplomatic unit anywhere near Epricom. And she wasn't going to let the Earth Alliance Military Guards anywhere near Epricom until she had diplomats and translators in place.

Which meant that she was on her own until she figured out what was going on here. She preferred that way. Her experience had taught her that most things could be resolved with very little work, as long as the parties involved understood each other.

The first thing she had to understand was what happened to those corpses. And the first step toward figuring that out was determining what killed them. She knew no one better than Lashante Simiaar, the best forensic director in the entire FSS.

Simiaar ran the forensic lab on the *EAFS Stanley*. The lab was the most important part of the ship. In fact, a well-stocked forensic lab had become one of the most important parts of *all* FSS ships. Often the problems that marshals ran into could be resolved with the right kind of forensic analysis. Or they could at least be understood.

Uzven, the Peyti, was in the forensic lab, along with Simiaar. As Gomez entered the lab, she smiled at the two of them standing side by side, watching the last of the corpse removal on a gigantic flat screen. Uzven wore a human-style business suit, which had the effect of making it look like a child wearing its parents clothing.

The illusion wasn't helped by Simiaar's presence. She looked large next to the Peyti. She was a tall, broad woman with extra flesh that held a surprising amount of muscle. She could lift and move and carry better than almost anyone on the team, but she was no good in a fight, and she probably hadn't run anywhere in the past fifteen years.

"What a mess," she said to Gomez without looking at her.

"Yeah," Gomez said, knowing that neither of them was referring to the corpses. Both women knew that something was amiss here, something they didn't understand yet. "May I borrow Uzven now?"

Uzven looked at her. It looked like every other Peyti she'd ever known. It wore a mask over its face, because it couldn't breathe oxygen. Its eyes were huge, but the rest of it looked like it could easily fall into pieces.

The Peyti were fragile, and they tired easily. Plus, Gomez didn't like them on principle. Most of them had gone into the legal side of the Alliance justice system, and a startling number of Peyti had become defense attorneys.

She wasn't fond of defense attorneys. Every time she had had to testify about something they made her seem stupid.

She expected no less from a Peyti translator, since it did have the upper hand. After all, it knew the

Eaufasse language, and she did not.

Simiaar sighed. "I guess you can borrow Uzven. But when those corpses get in here, I'm going to need Uzven back. I don't know what they got contaminated with, and so I need to ask the Eaufasse a lot of questions."

Simiaar had already set up part of the forensic wing as a quarantined area, just in case the dead had contracted something or been infected with something that wasn't obvious to the collection team.

Gomez beckoned Uzven to move with her to a different part of the lab. Gomez wanted to keep Uzven here in case Collection had more questions for it.

Uzven walked beside her on its spindly legs. It hadn't said more than a handful of words to her since its arrival. She didn't know if it was naturally reticent or if it disapproved of the *Stanley's* presence here.

"First," Gomez said, "I assume you understand the Eaufasse culture since you speak their language. Maybe you can answer a question for me."

Uzven put two fingers against the breathing mask that covered the lower part of its face. It adjusted the mask as if the mask were uncomfortable, then said, "The assumption isn't a good one. We have just begun to understand the Eaufasse. Our language is more compatible with theirs than yours is. That is why I am somewhat fluent."

"Somewhat fluent?" Gomez didn't like the sound of that. She had asked for someone fluent.

"I am as fluent as anyone in the Earth Alliance," Uzven said. "But that is not saying much. I understand quite a bit of Fasse, the Eaufasse language, but I do not have much jargon for technical details."

"Like murder?"

"Death is a universal," Uzven said. "However, I am not entirely sure of what constitutes murder to the Eaufasse. Not that it matters here. We do not have Eaufasse corpses. We have human ones. I will keep the discussion focused on the human side of things as much as I can."

"I don't want you to make unilateral decisions," Gomez said. "If I have a question that needs an answer, I expect you to ask it. And if you cannot get an answer from the Eaufasse, I don't want you trying to find a way to force one. I want to know that they didn't answer my question. This isn't a court of law, so I don't necessarily need something on the record. I need information, and if we can't get that information without a cadre of diplomats working the case, then I need to know that as well."

"I understand," Uzven said. "I am at your service."

Gomez thought she heard sarcasm. It wouldn't surprise her. Peyti always thought themselves superior to humans. Working with a human boss had to be difficult for a Peyti. But Uzven had signed up to work with the Earth Alliance, so it didn't get to choose who its boss was on any particular job.

"We will be speaking to my initial contact with the Eaufasse," Gomez said. "If we need to speak to someone of higher rank or with different knowledge, then we'll do that."

Uzven nodded, always a strange movement from a Peyti. The mask didn't really bend, so the head moved without any mask movement.

With Uzven's help, Gomez contacted the Eaufasse. She did not have this conversation through an audio-only link, but used both audio and visual, so that the Eaufasse could examine her body movements. She didn't move a lot, though, just in case some movement might be offensive.

Still, the Eaufasse had had interactions with humans before, so they were somewhat familiar with the way that humans did things. She stood as casually as she could when she began the conversation.

The Eaufasse had blacked out the area behind it, so she couldn't see where it was standing. The Eaufasse looked like it floated against a black background, unmoored by anything. Privacy concerns? An unwillingness to let humans or the Earth Alliance see what the interior of Eaufasse offices looked like? Or something else entirely?

It didn't matter, since the interior of an Eaufasse building or even the exterior of an Eaufasse street was not her concern. She didn't care where the Eaufasse was, so long as it talked with her.

She thanked the Eaufasse for the initial contact, and confirmed that she would be removing the enclave. She also told them that it would take time, since the enclave was so big she couldn't do it without a larger force. She asked for permission to bring a larger group of humans onto Epricom for the sole purpose of removing the human enclave. She promised that the force would leave as soon as the enclave left.

The Eaufasse said it understood and had been expecting such a thing. It did not offer any help from its own people, which, Gomez knew, was a good thing. She had no idea what that enclave would do if it saw a group of Eaufasse approaching it. She certainly didn't want weaponry fired at the Eaufasse on their own land, which—she also knew—was a possibility.

She didn't want to be the person who inadvertently started a war between some humans and the Eaufasse.

After dancing around the topic for a while, she finally asked the question that had been the real point behind this conversation. She always began pointed and possibly offensive questions with an apology first, having learned the hard way that translators did not add politeness in the cultures that required it, but always subtracted politeness when it didn't serve the needed purpose.

“Please forgive the intrusive nature of the remainder of the conversation,” she said. “But I need information to help my people understand what has happened here, so that we might remove this enclave quickly and easily.”

Uzven translated, its fingers tapping against its suit jacket.

“It seems like the enclave has been on Epricom for quite a while,” Gomez said. “Did something recently bring it to your attention?”

Uzven continued to translate, then looked at Gomez, clearly waiting. Then the Uzven bowed its head and closed its eyes, listening.

It had not been doing a simultaneous translation from the beginning of the conversation. Uzven did not think itself fluent enough, which worried Gomez.

Uzven translated after the Eaufasse finished. Gomez wondered how much Uzven missed just by waiting. And Gomez didn't entirely trust a summary. Sometimes the Eaufasse said a lot, and Uzven translated it into very few words.

Gomez didn't know if that was because Fasse used more words than Standard or if Uzven felt the need to shorten long thoughts or if Uzven was actually leaving out important details.

"The ambassador said the enclave applied for permission to build on the land sixteen years ago. Permission was granted with minimal fuss. This is a remote part of the Eaufasse nation, and so the Eaufasse do not pay it much mind. In fact, they did not hear anything more from the enclave until it started attacking itself."

Gomez cursed silently. She wished she spoke Fasse. There were so many areas that could be misinterpreted in just that one little reply.

But she was a veteran at this. She'd had more first- or second- or third-contacts than most diplomats in the Earth Alliance.

"Okay," she said to Uzven. "Before you translate for me, answer me a few questions. Tell them that's what you'll be doing, for clarification."

Uzven spoke rapidly to the Eaufasse. The Eaufasse raised its arms and wrapped them over its shoulders, which made Gomez look away. She had no idea if that was a relaxed position or if it was the same as nodding in her culture.

"Proceed," Uzven said to her.

Proceed. She took a deep breath. She didn't like its tone, but Uzven was all she had. "The Eaufasse I'm speaking with is an ambassador?"

"That is how it identifies itself," Uzven said.

Crap. That created all kinds of problems for her. Technically, she was supposed to interact with a counterpart, someone of equal rank—if, of course, the alien/native culture had a ranked system. Conversations with ambassadors were supposed to be conducted by diplomats.

Still, this ambassador was her contact, so she could argue that she had no choice about who she talked to. And of course, the argument would be true.

"Do you understand the governmental rankings within the Eaufasse?" she asked.

"Not entirely, no," Uzven said. "If you are asking me if you are conducting an inquiry above your pay grade, then I cannot answer that. For all I know, all Eaufasse who deal with non-Eaufasse in minor matters are called 'ambassador.' Remember that we are filtering through two languages here, one imperfectly known."

Two?

It took her a moment to understand what Uzven meant. It meant that it was translating into Peytin

first before translating into Standard. Just great. Yet another way to add in misunderstandings.

“I want to double-check the number,” she said. “Sixteen years? Not six?”

“Sixteen,” Uzven said in a tone that definitely showed it was insulted that she checked.

“Because Epricom had just applied for Earth Alliance membership sixteen years ago. We hadn’t had much contact with any of the species here before that,” she said.

She knew this because she had investigated it before she had gotten here. It took a minimum of twenty-five years from application to approval to become a full Earth Alliance member. And that was if everything ran smoothly.

“Sixteen,” Uzven said again.

“Damn,” Gomez muttered. This group of humans was even more private than she imagined.

Uzven did not move, and neither did the Eaufasse on her screen. The ambassador. If it was a real, high-ranking ambassador, then she was screwing up by holding it up—at least under Earth Alliance protocol.

“All right,” she said softly to Uzven. “Let’s continue.”

Uzven bowed a little, then turned slightly.

“Forgive me, Mr. Ambassador,” she said. “Mister” and “Sir” in Standard had become gender-neutral. She hoped Uzven translated them that way. “I still need clarifications of some of what you’ve told me. Did the enclave predate your application to the Earth Alliance?”

Uzven dutifully translated. The Eaufasse’s arms came down to the position they had been in before. Its eyes shone whitely for a moment. Gomez had no idea what that meant.

“Why is that important?” The Eaufasse asked. The question sounded defensive, but she wasn’t sure if that was the Eaufasse’s defensiveness or Uzven’s.

She was going to act as if every emotion belonged to the Eaufasse. “Sir, I am trying to understand the enclave from a human-to-human perspective. If the enclave’s arrival predates our contact with you, this tells me that the enclave was looking for some place not affiliated with the Alliance to form its community.”

That whiteness flared, then disappeared. The ambassador’s arms flopped over its shoulders again, elbows—if that’s what they were—pointing at her. She wasn’t even going to try to understand the body language. It unsettled her, and she didn’t want to be unsettled.

“Their arrival predates the application by six months,” Uzven said. “And before you ask me, the ambassador is referring to months as the Earth Alliance calculates them.”

“Thank you,” Gomez said, and before she could ask her next question, the ambassador continued.

“It was their arrival that made the Eaufasse and the others on Epricom aware of the Earth Alliance. It was in the researching of the humans that Epricom decided that joining the Alliance would be a good idea.”

That was interesting.

“Why?” she asked.

“The Earth Alliance is a trade and protection organization, facilitating business throughout several sectors. It would bring much-needed revenue to Epricom while providing many opportunities to the various local groups here.”

Gomez almost laughed in surprise and relief. The ambassador was selling her on Epricom’s final entry into the Earth Alliance. As she realized that, she relaxed slightly.

“So,” she said, “the enclave have been good neighbors until they—as you said—started attacking themselves.”

“Slang,” Uzven muttered loud enough for her to hear. Then it tilted its head slightly—a Peyti sign of disgust—and translated for her. Apparently it didn’t approve of “good neighbors,” which she didn’t consider slang at all.

The Eaufasse ambassador brought its arms down again. She wished now that she had left this on audio. The movements were distracting. It turned its head away from her for just a moment. She got a sense that it was not alone. She wondered if it had another translator or if it had someone of higher rank just off camera.

Then it turned toward her and spoke.

“They needed supervision in their first year as they built their enclave,” Uzven translated. Then it added in a more confidential tone, “You should know that the ambassador may have used the word ‘crafted’ here. I chose ‘built.’”

Gomez nodded.

Uzven continued its translation. “The supervision included monitoring the materials they brought to Epricom, transporting them to their location, and overseeing their building. They have a dome, although they do not need one because Epricom’s atmosphere suits humans, but the Eaufasse appreciate the dome nonetheless.”

She expected Uzven to continue, but it didn’t. She glanced at it, then at the Eaufasse. Apparently that was all it had said.

“Why do you appreciate the dome?” she asked.

“Because the humans have landing ships. Those ships go into and out of their dome, and do not do anything except transverse our airspace.”

Uzven started to explain all the words it changed, but she didn’t care.

“You don’t mind the ships?” she asked, feeling cold.

“They are small. They must be scanned for weaponry. They have none. We see no threat.”

“Weaponry?” She turned toward Uzven. “Does the ambassador mean external or internal weapons?”

Uzven asked and received a quick answer. “The ships are weaponless. The interior scans, done in a cursory manner, do not show weapons either. But you know that part means nothing—”

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