

The Agrippa Encounter

by Kyle Heuer

Chapter 1

Drennon sat anxiously at his station aboard the *Translucent*. He had a feeling something was happening out there. Normally, scanning background radiation for carrier waves bored him. He wished some Maverick gang would set up an automated station out here. Besides, most dims found being this close to the sun uncomfortable. Today, though, Drennon had an impressive find.

The *Translucent* wasn't much to look at, if you could see her at all. The one thing she had in abundance was stealth. She had been recently refurbished, but since the Hellcats were low on creds, all the upgrades she needed weren't completed. She looked like some kids had run around the corridors and pulled wiring from the walls at random intervals. A missing wall plate here, and some plasteel piping there. The important parts were all there, but she sure didn't have any creature comforts.

The *Translucent's* crew had received reports of Earther ships making runs in and out of a nearby sector. It was Drennon's responsibility to find and crack enemy transmissions and see what they were up to. Hidden on a frozen chunk of rock just on the Sun side of the Belt, his crew found what they were looking for. A bloated Earther vessel entered the area. Earther vessels weren't as stylish as Maverick ships. Sleekness went right out the airlock when corporate interests meddled. Drennon couldn't see the ship through the port in front of him, but it sure stuck out on radar. Earther cruisers were not the type of ship they wanted to take on head-to-head. Besides, they were only supposed to track enemy transmissions.

Captain Fox came running into the control room and slid into her command chair, quickly punching up the sensors on the Earther ship.

"She's hiding something..."

"Yes, Captain."

"Have you cracked the transmissions yet?"

"Coming in now..."

"...One Level assistance. Repeat, Priority One Level assistance. To any CISyn ships in the area, forward research base Agrippa has been compromised. Possible "Q" entity involved. Must re-acquire sensitive research. Coordinates follow. Priority One Level assistance. Repeat, Pri..."

"The message repeats after that, Sir."

"Interesting. Get the crew in here. I want them to hear this message. And have the coordinates cracked and ready when they get here."

Spinner, Rake, and Saffron quickly finished up what they had been working on and made it to the command deck. They knew Captain Fox was not to be kept waiting.

Spinner, the crew's youngest member, had just been brought aboard by the captain. Talk around the ship suggested Captain Fox liked his bluffing skills when she witnessed them first hand in a game on

Titan. It's a big first impression when you take a sizable chunk of creds from your new captain. He was also still healing from the new mech hand he needed to get to join the crew. All members of Captain Fox's crew had to have mechanical hands with built-in blowtorches. She found the multipurpose tool handy for tight spots and hand-to-hand combat.

Rake and Saffron made the ultimate odd couple. A double threat of great mechanic and network specialist, Rake was a brutal and calculating workhorse. Saffron was the picture of feminine Maverick beauty, and the best pilot Captain Fox had ever served with. Rake, in addition to his mechanical arms, had strength enhancing mods to his skeletal structure. He could run fast, jump high, and lift more than a ton. Saffron always joked that she's his lover because she'd rather be with him than against him. Saffron's mods included enhanced cognitive acuity — bordering on pre-cognitive — and the addition of several muscle boosters for faster reflexes. Lastly, she had her pigmentation modified so she can darken the color of her skin at will. Not completely dark, but undetectable in a shadowed hallway.

The crew settled in and Drennon punched up the transmission and the Agrippa base's coordinates. Once the sequence played, Captain Fox stared at the crew for signs they heard what she had.

"First of all," Fox declared, "This is a trap. Secondly, can any of you tell me why we are still going to disobey our scan and report orders and head out there?"

Rake spoke up first. "Because sitting on this ice ball is boring as hell?"

"True enough, but not what I meant. Remember the Quay ship scans we had last month? Well, two things lead me to believe at least half that message is accurate. The Quay ship went to and from those same coordinates from the transmission, and the transmission referenced the "Q" entity."

"Then why do you think it's a trap?" Spinner questioned.

"I don't trust CISyn. They would normally be more careful, concealing their transmission. I think they are up to something, but this ship should get us in and out of that sector quickly. If there is truth to this nearly abandoned secret research facility, I want us to be the first ones to get in there. This is strictly a snatch and run mission."

The *Translucent* crew set to work on a stealthy plan, but prepared for the worst. They had an hour of prep time as they waited for the Earther vessel to move out of sensor range. They probably wouldn't be detected anyway, but didn't want to take the chance of being found and attracting reinforcements.

The base's coordinates intrigued Drennon. They sat in the exact opposite orbit around the Sun from Gongen. If you had to hide a base from your enemies that didn't show up on sensors, but you needed to find it easily, that's the perfect place. As they approached the coordinates, they drew a blank. Rake moved over to the secondary sensor station to scan for incoming ships, while Drennon concentrated on the area around the Earther communication's coordinates. Drennon began to believe there was no station at all when something faint appeared on mag scanners, with no power signature.

"An Earther ship, Captain. Wait, two Earther ships!" Drennon added hurriedly.

"Are they moving in on our location?" Captain Fox barked back, keeping her attention on the forward viewer.

"No, Sir. It appears as if the ships are powered down. It's unlikely they can read us yet with such low power readings."

"Interesting... how close can we get and maintain comfortable anonymity?"

"About another two clicks."

"Saffron, move us in. Rake, keep a close eye for incoming or anything else odd."

"Captain!" Dante spun around bringing his attention full to the command chair. "There's something else at the coordinates" He paused for a moment, spinning back around for a second look at the readings. "A large rock mass, very faint power signatures. I believe it's a base hidden within a small asteroid."

"And the two Earther ships?"

"They are completely powered down, moored to the base. I don't think they pose any threat."

"Very well. Saffron, move us in. Spinner, take over for Rake while he preps the assault gear."

Efficient as usual, Saffron docked them faster than most pilots could try to brag about. Her piloting skills got them in and out of tight spots and saved their lives on more than one occasion. Drennon could feel himself shaking slightly, but he would never show it. That's a sign of weakness. He ordered the mod in his head to up the amount of adrenalin his body produced, which set him straight.

The hatch hissed as the pressure equalized between the *Translucent* and the cold and dark research base. The door swung wide and the crew entered without Saffron. She needed to stay onboard to monitor for incoming vessels and keep the engines hot. The small station looked every bit like a laboratory. Captain Fox made their objective clear, so they headed straight for the offices.

Rake took lead, followed by Captain Fox and Spinner, with Drennon bringing up the rear. Rake made a motioning movement and Captain Fox moved to his left with Spinner moving up behind Rake. As Drennon crossed the Station Manager's office threshold, the world went insane. Before Drennon knew what happened, Captain Fox was on fire and Rake exploded...

Chapter 2

Drennon woke in a groggy haze... they came to talk again. The room was bright and clean with monitors and instruments layed out in a meticulous fashion. Metal brackets locked down his four mechanical arms securely and similar restraints held his legs. The cold metal examination table he lay on tilted slightly downward. If the restraints weren't in place, he would slide onto the floor feet first. Several dozen tubes and wires pumped fluids in or out, or carried electronic signals into Dennon. He assumed one of them had awakened him so abruptly.

A series of mirrors ringed the ceiling and let Drennon survey the room. He assumed that from behind them, others surveyed him. The heavy door to the room opened and two men entered, locking the door behind them. One elderly man went about checking monitors and readouts. The other man oozed confidence. He was tall, carried himself like a soldier, and looked grimly serious. He walked directly to

Drennon and stared down at him a moment, surveying the situation. Then, like someone switching gears, he smiled and politely spoke.

“Good evening Drennon, how do you feel?” There was no answer... the elderly man punched a few buttons. “I want you to tell me again how you came to me.”

“Yes, Mister Rathe... The situation was all wrong from the start. We came to the Agrippa facility for a quick ‘snatch and run’ mission. I intercepted a transmission between a couple of Earther ships. Something about a covert base in an opposite-Gongen orbit that stopped reporting in. They wanted to get someone over there and check it out. Obviously, we could do that for them.

“Captain Fox immediately changed our orders and we got here as quickly and quietly as possible. I should have known from the moment we landed things weren’t right. Two abandoned Earther ships parked near the base, but we saw no sign of their crews.

“Four of our five-man crew crept around the base, looking for valuables we could sell easily that weren’t tied down. Saffron stayed aboard to keep an eye on the ship and alert us of any trouble. Finding truginium was the first priority; second was confidential files. This looked like a covert research base. Lots of computers and lab equipment. If whoever set up this base stumbled across something that will give us an edge in the war, I would be the richest Maverick I knew.”

“Tell me again what you found.”

“Rake took lead as we slowly moved through the corridors. The Captain and Spinner followed him. I took the rear as my four mech arms could hold a lot of firepower. My head felt fuzzy, like a fog was trying to move in, so I’m not sure how things went to hell so fast. We entered an office of some sort and just as I stepped across the threshold, the Captain screamed out in terror. Something attacked her, but I didn’t get a good look at it. Spinner moved over to help when Rake pulled his gun up to his chest and fired. The shot hit his power cell and exploded, ripping Rake apart and sending shrapnel into Spinner.

“The blast knocked me off my feet and back into the corridor. I could hear the screams from the Captain before I got back in the room. She yelled for ‘them’ to ‘get off her.’ *Oh God, get off me! Get them off of me!* She screamed as she frantically brushed at her clothes. Insane with panic, she lit the blowtorch built into her hand, and went about burning something off of her. I didn’t see anything on her. I only saw her clothes and skin going up in flames.

“I looked around to see what attacked us, but I saw nothing. My brain felt like it was being squeezed, and I had a tingling sensation at the back of my skull. I didn’t know what to do or what we faced. I darted for the closest door, dove inside, and slammed it behind me.”

“When did you realize what had killed your crewmates?”

“Reports have come to us recently about strange things going on during skirmishes with those big four-legged aliens.”

“They call themselves the Quay.”

“Something about a few of them being able to make your worst nightmares work against you? I didn’t stand much of a chance in hand-to-hand combat with one of them. They are big and mean. If it had any kind of ‘powers’ besides, I was done. But why didn’t it make my nightmare come after me? Or was

that the tingling I kept feeling? It tried, but couldn't make it happen? Maybe what it did to the others had fatigued it, or maybe it just couldn't get inside my head.

"My only theory was that the thing must not have been in the room. Somewhere else close by, but not in the room. It would have seen me dart in there and crashed through that door instantly. It was so dark in that room. I could smell the bodies from the outer room. I felt the cold metal desk pressed up against my cheek, and the prefab floor and wall I curled up against. My eyes started to adjust now, and the soft green workstation glow from the other room seeped in under the door crack."

"You must have been terrified, alone in the dark. Tell me what you did next."

"I could still hear Spinner out there, barely alive. He didn't have much time left. The bleeding must have been extensive, and us dums don't have a lot of blood. Too much machine and not enough meat.

"The creature was in the other room now, I could see a shadow moving in the low green glow under the door crack and could hear the clickity-clackity of its feet-things on the metal floor plates. It hadn't finished off Spinner. It kept him alive as a trap for me. It hunted me."

"But you confronted it."

"Yeah... I still had all my guns and I figured my only chance was the element of surprise. I hoped only one of those things was on that rock. Besides, it was only a matter of time before it opened the door, looking for me. I maxed out my adrenalin production and got to my feet, then slowly made my way over to the door, feeling my way through the room. I could still hear it in the next room, but I didn't know where. Those things are fast, so I needed to find it and get my shots off the second the door opened.

"I holstered one of my guns and got a firm grip on the door. Wrenching it from its hinges, I rushed into the adjoining room and started to fire as I looked for the demon. Nothing! It wasn't there! The gurgling noise Spinner made got my attention, and as I turned to see him, I could instantly see my mistake. Spinner pointed at the ceiling behind me.

"The monster hung from the ceiling just above the door to the room. Spiked legs imbedded into the metal, holding it there like a reverse trap door spider. In the blink of an eye, it crashed down and knocked two guns from my hands. I flew across the floor into the charred remains of my former captain.

"Ash and cinder from the captain exploded when I hit her body. My eyes clamped shut as that would have made the situation worse... being blinded by the remains of my former Captain. With the one gun in hand, I fired in random directions, and reached for another. I suddenly felt an intense heat. I thought I was on fire from hitting the Captain's charred body! I rubbed at my eyes and rolled over and over away from the Quay until I hit something, not only because it was likely I was on fire, but because that thing must be moving toward me.

"My eyes cracked open to see the beast in the middle of the room, its arms outstretched, getting bigger! Its body heat was intense, and in the recessed parts of its body it glowed increasingly bright red-orange. This thing had just doubled in size before my eyes!

"I cracked off a flurry of shots at it. Some shots seemed to deflect, but those that didn't sprayed magma-like shrapnel from its body. The demon rushed at me and speared its two front feet at me, hard. I caught one and deflected the other. I stuck my gun up under its belly and unloaded a shot. The monster

lurched back, and then swung its arm at my chest quicker than I could comprehend what happened. I knew it was going to be bad, but I still lived. That was what mattered most.

"I rolled backward and planted two of my arms on the ground behind my head, pivoted my body back and swung upward with my feet as hard as I could. At the last second, I decided to only make contact with the monster's chin with one of my feet. I figured his "goatee" might be bad for a foot with more flesh and bone than not. My one heel landed squarely between his two chin-horns and snapped his neck backward. Pity I couldn't use both feet, but I doubt I would have done much more damage. Having him off balance, I continued my roll backward and pulled his leg out from under him.

"Now, I know this isn't the time for something funny to happen, but you should see it when a Quay loses his balance. Sure, their feet can dig into most surfaces, but when their legs aren't under them properly, they scramble with legs flying in all directions until they trip or crash into something."

"Doctor, check the levels of his medication. We may need to up the dose. Drennon, continue telling us your encounter with the Quay."

"Back on my feet, and with a moment to get a handle on things, I made for the door and bolted down the corridor as fast as I could. He'd be up and back at me in a second, and my guns hadn't been doing much to slow him down so far. My guns weren't working and I needed to find something else I could use against him.

"The pain overwhelmed me. Looking down, I saw a ten-centimeter long hole in my right chest. My metal hands reached up to survey the damage and much to my surprise, I wasn't bleeding. The heat from its arm-spike cauterized the wound the second it happened. At least I wouldn't bleed to death.

"I turned to look back at the room I just left. I could still see a bright red-orange glow emanating from the doorway. Heat! The Quay was fiery hot and I knew how to fight heat. This research station had to have some sort of lab equipment I could use. I was sure there was liquid nitrogen around there somewhere. I turned corner after corner, trying to lose the massive Quay and find what I needed. I could hear him behind me, just out of sight. The clickity-clackity of his legs really scared the crap out of me... and it got louder.

"*Advanced Biological Warfare* etched into the plaque on the door. Seemed promising enough. I put my shoulder into the door and smashed it open. Bingo! This room had a massive walk-in freezer with all the beakers a scientist could have hoped for. I opened the door to the freezer and backtracked across the room to pick up a large metal cabinet filled with lab samples of some sort.

"He got very close. I could feel the heat.

"My cabinet slammed on his left side before he even made it through the doorway. Pushing hard as it struggled, the Quay and cabinet came crashing down in the freezer. I ripped open a coolant tube and quickly backed out of the freezer. The heavy metal door swung shut and made a beautiful "whump" sound, telling me it sealed tight. He was either going to freeze to death, or with his body heat he'd burn up all the oxygen in minutes."

"But that wasn't the end of him, was it?"

"No sir."

"What went through your mind?"

“Disbelief! That’s what filled my thoughts. That thing was melting the door to the freezer! I scrambled out of the room and down a few more corridors. I needed to come up with plan C. My breath was shallow at this point. The hole in my chest was killing me. I needed to get to the ship and into the medbed. I was dead any other way.

“There it was, my last chance! Energy cables running down the length of some corridor. The metal plates on the floor provided the perfect trap. Now all I needed was my prey.

“You should already know how the rest of this went down. The monster fell right into my trap. I braced myself horizontal in the hallway so I wasn’t standing on the metal plates. Two of my hands grasped brackets on one wall and two held the energy cables. The Quay sizzled then fell silent to the floor, his red-orange glow dimmed as he slipped into the void. Amazingly, the experience didn’t kill him, but was about to kill me. I figured that Spinner was beyond my help now and it wouldn’t do either of us any good if both of us died. I headed for the ship, hoping Saffron wasn’t already dead and could help me.

“I got to the docking collar, but didn’t see the ship. Stupid girl... she ran in the face of trouble. A stun blast suddenly hit me from behind, and I vaguely remember you walking up to me as I spun to see what was happening. Next thing I remember was waking up strapped to this table with wires and tubes coming out of me in every direction.”

“Thank you for all the generous information. I can see your progress is moving along well.

“To fill in the gaps for you, we had lost contact with Research Base Agrippa some time ago. Several ships sent to determine what happened never returned. We still had access to internal sensors and determined a group of Quay had infiltrated the base and left a lone unit behind to gather intelligence. This Quay seemed exceptional and dangerous as it easily wiped out our first two recon teams. We wanted his special talents, but the problem was capturing him.

“We sent out dummy transmissions to lure other ships into ‘raiding’ the installation for resources or information. We tested the Quay, to see if these crews could either kill the specimen so we could get our sensitive materials back, or, more importantly, subdue him. Thanks to you, it was the latter.

“We now have him in our labs and he is part of the program, just like you. Soon, we will unleash both of you against our enemies.”

“Why me? Why are you doing this to me, Mr. Rathe?”

“Because, Drennon, you’re special... you resisted him. He is the perfect offensive weapon and you are the perfect defensive weapon. Now sit back and let the good doctor inside your head. We have much work to do.”

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