

THE FRINGE SERIES

BOOKS 1 - 5



RACHEL AUKES

THE FRINGE SERIES OMNIBUS

Five Novels Plus a Bonus Short Story

RACHEL AUKES



WAYPOINT BOOKS



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Fringe Runner

Fringe Series, Book 1

Prologue

After the successful colonization of Mars and Europa, it took us fewer than five generations to reach beyond our solar system and discover a planet hospitable to human life. That world was Myr, and the single ship of three hundred and eleven colonists flourished as they created Earthlike ecosystems on the untouched world.

After that, it took less than a generation to reach Myr's water-covered neighbor, Alluvia. Colonization was nearly as swift on the temperate world, but friction between the two planets was even swifter. Within decades, Myrads stated that Alluvia was their colony, while Alluvians countered that both planets were Earth's colonies and thus, should follow Earth's interstellar directive—that all colonies were ordained to govern themselves.

The friction grew worse over the next two hundred years until the inevitable happened. The first interplanetary war erupted, a war so horrible that history came to refer to it simply as *the War*. After decades of carnage, Alluvia and Myr had pushed themselves to the brink of annihilation. To save themselves, the pair sacrificed their rivalry and created the Collective, an alliance that established the people of both worlds as citizens and equals in all ways.

Under the new order, each world governed itself, while their Collective oversaw such things as interplanetary trade, security, and exploration. Alluvians led interstellar commerce activities while Myrads commanded the newly-established joint navy—the Collective Unified Forces, or, CUF—created to protect the citizens of both worlds.

Hostilities faded as the Collective thrived.

Over the next few centuries, four additional planets were terraformed and colonized by the Collective. First came Terra, a black desert planet

abundant with rilon—a durable yet lightweight metal. Second came Darios, the warmest of the planets, with lush fields and rich soil. Third came Spate, a bleak world with harsh storms and even harsher microorganisms. The most recent was Playa, a massive ice world in the farthest reaches of the Collective. These four colonies, far from the comforts of Myr and Alluvia, came to be known bluntly as the fringe.

Each colony had a single fringe station—a trading post with space docks—that made interplanetary travel and commerce affordable. The fringe's resources brought untold wealth and capabilities to Myrads and Alluvians, but the colonists reaped few benefits. Instead, the fringe was heavily regulated and taxed. To make matters worse, Myr and Alluvia, having long since forgotten that they had each started as simple colonies themselves, refused to grant citizenship to colonists across the fringe.

A new divide formed, and history seemed doomed to repeat itself.

When exports coming from fringe stations reached optimum levels for Myr and Alluvia's elite classes, the Collective began to lay additional laws upon the fringe. Of all these new laws, the one colonists hated most was mandatory service to the Collective for any able-bodied colonist upon reaching adulthood. The colonists had become little more than slaves to the Collective's ruling class.

Exhausted, hungry, and angry, the colonists stood up to their oppressors. Torrents—rebel colonists—across the fringe banded together and closed off fringe stations in demands for equality. Strikes and protests led to bloodshed.

The Uprising had begun.

Instead of listening to colonists' demands, Myr and Alluvia sent in the CUF's great warships and armies. Torrent rebels were slaughtered alongside hapless innocents. The Uprising was quelled, and the few remaining torrents faded back into the fringe.

That was twenty years ago.

Today, colonists labor under the watchful eye of the all-powerful CUF.

Unknown to the fringe, ancient tensions have sprung back to life. Alluvia's economy has now surpassed Myr's, and the Collective Parliament has staggered to a standstill under bipartisan leadership. The CUF has become fractured and segregated, with many warships operating with either all-Alluvian or all-Myrad crews.

Myrads crave control, and Alluvians have acquired a taste for power. As the two worlds face one another again, they fail to take into account one important factor, one that could bring the entire Collective crashing down...

The torrent spirit is very much alive, and has been waiting for the right time to strike.

ONE

The Package

“**G**uys, just a friendly reminder that we have only seventeen minutes until the star swarm obliterates us.” Throttle’s words came through all too loud and clear in Aramis Reyne’s and Jeyde Sixx’s spacesuit headsets.

“Working on it,” Reyne shot back as they continued to cut through the damn-near-indestructible rilon hull of Myrad hauler M4029LW, which was proving to be thicker than they’d estimated, throwing off their timetable.

“I think we should go with Plan B. Tell Genics Corp that we couldn’t get to the ship in time, and let’s clear out of here,” their pilot countered.

“Not your call.” Using a quick burst from his suit’s propulsion system, Reyne moved to the side, giving the other man room to secure a pry bar that resembled a spindly, long-legged spider. Sixx hit a button on his suit, and the tip of each pry bar leg thrust into the four-square-foot outline they’d burnt through the outer hull.

“Usually I enjoy a bit of excitement,” Sixx said before hitting another button on his suit. The bar’s legs slammed deep, and both the pry bar and the square section of the hauler’s outer hull shot out into space. “But I’ll be damned if star swarms don’t scare the hell out of me.”

Reyne gave him a wry look. “Worse than that woman you hooked up with on Sol Base?” he asked as he pressed through the hole and into the cargo bay of the dead hauler.

“Double-jointed Sally? Now, she was scary. The things she could do with—”

“Hey, you guys are still transmitting. And, we’re down to sixteen minutes until bingo.”

“We’re inside.” Reyne watched his arm display as he scanned the

large, round room with rows of crates fastened onto every open wall space. His scanner was weak and wouldn't register the package unless he was within a dozen feet of it. As he completed a sweep of the cargo bay, his scanner flashed red.

He grimaced. "Package isn't in the cargo bay. Must be deeper in the ship."

"Hey, Reyne. Check this out. Those viggins' Myrads get all the best hauls."

He turned to see Sixx shining his light on crates strapped against the far wall. The words *Genics Corp Biome Kits* were emblazoned on each crate.

"These guys were hauling enough kits to jump-start a new colony. You know how many credits we could get for these?" Sixx asked.

Reyne frowned. "Why were they hauling so many kits? I haven't heard of any new colonies being started."

Sixx shrugged. "It's not like they'll be able to salvage this hauler once the swarm hits it. What do you say, boss? Knowing that we're taking from Myrads feels just as good as seeing the credits we'll get for these kits."

Reyne held up a single finger. "One crate. You get it back to the *Gryphon*, and I'll grab the package." Reyne could see Sixx's wide grin through his helmet, so he tacked on, "We don't have time to mess around, got it?"

"Got it, boss."

Reyne turned, grabbed a railing, and thrust himself through the gravity-free bay toward the interior door. "Throttle, tell Boden to prepare for incoming cargo."

"*Already done. Fifteen minutes, gentlemen. Take your time.*" Her sarcasm made him chuckle though he quickly sobered. Anxious to be done with this job and back on his own ship, he hit the door with more momentum than planned, and the impact rattled his joints.

He wrapped a leg around the railing for leverage, reached for the manual gear below the panel, and cranked open the door. He grunted with each crank, frustrated that ten years earlier he could've done the same thing without so much as a bump in his heart rate.

With the last crank, the door swung outward, and a large object was sucked past Reyne and into the cargo bay. The object, which turned out to be a frozen crewmember, bounced off Sixx's back.

"Holy shit!" Sixx scrambled out of the way before shoving the body away. "How about a little warning next time?"

Reyne watched the body rebound off a wall and slow to float listlessly

around the bay. He furrowed his brow after he noticed the dark stain on the body's chest. "He didn't die from exposure."

"Huh?"

"This man was shot. He didn't die from exposure."

"*Maybe someone spaced out and killed the rest of the crew?*" Throttle asked.

"Maybe," Reyne said before pushing into the now fully-depressurized hallway. The ship had suffered a cat fail—a catastrophic failure. They happened from time to time on fringe junkers, but they were unheard of on modern, high-tech Myrad haulers.

As he floated down the hallway as quickly as he safely could in zero-g, he reported in. "You were right about the systems, Throttle. No life support of any kind. Even the emergency backup failed."

"*Why do you ever doubt me?*" she replied. "*And you're down to fourteen minutes.*"

"I'll be there. Just be ready." He pressed through the hallway. Something had clearly happened beyond a standard cat fail. That fact became more and more clear as he passed the crew quarters, counting five more crewmembers, each staring out into nothingness with frozen, glassy eyes. More importantly, each bore a dark gunshot stain on his torso or head.

Mercy kills, or something else?

Throttle's earlier comment made the most sense. Someone on the crew must've spaced out, killed the crew, and busted the ship. Space psychoses sometimes happened to crewmembers who spent too many years in the scalar void. It wasn't uncommon to hear of ships where one or more crewmembers went into full-out psychotic rage.

"May you find peace in the eversea," he said softly.

"*Thirteen minutes. Please tell me you've found that vigg'in' box and are on your way back.*"

"Working on it." He stopped at the captain's quarters and peered inside to find the room empty. He held his scanner up. Still nothing. "Shit."

"*What's wrong?*"

"I thought the package would be in the captain's safe." Reyne looked around. "I'm running out of places to search." He pushed off the wall and flew toward the open entrance to the bridge, his mind racing, along with his heart rate.

In the case of a breach or electrical malfunction, even in a cat fail, all doors were set to close automatically, sealing off non-critical areas to buy time for the crew to hail for assistance. Standard protocol on all ships. An

open door meant someone had to manually override the system. That the bridge door stood wide open was an ominous sign.

He had no doubt now the cat fail had been intentional. If someone hadn't spaced out, someone had definitely done *something* to the ship and crew.

"I'm dropping off the cargo now," Sixx reported. "Then, I'll head back over for one more crate."

"Negative," Reyne said. "There's not enough time."

He was already holding his ship and crew too damn close to a swarm, but they desperately needed the money. The Collective kept lowering its run rates while increasing taxes, making it near impossible to break even, let alone make a profit.

And so he pushed himself to keep going, adrenaline surging through his muscles.

"Twelve minutes," Throttle said. "Don't make me come and get you."

"Don't even think about it," he snapped back.

When Reyne reached the bridge, he found the remaining two crewmembers. The pilot was still strapped in at his seat. He sported a sizable hole in his head, and the ship had frozen his corpse in a slumped position. Where the pilot's death would have been instantaneous, the captain was likely the last of the crew to succumb to her injuries. Her body lingered near the ceiling, with a single shot to her abdomen. She would've died from freezing hypoxia long before internal bleeding took her.

His scanner beeped green. Good news. He'd found the package. Only one small problem. The gray box with a Genics Corp logo on it was lodged smack dab in the middle of the fractured view panel, with nothing but the blackness of space on the other side. The panel looked like it could shatter under any pressure, leaving nowhere for Reyne to place his feet for leverage.

He blew out a breath of frustration. "I've acquired the package."

"About viggins' time," Throttle said. "Grab it and hurry the hell back here."

"Trust me. That's the plan."

"Oh, and you have eleven minutes until bingo."

Reyne focused on how to get the package free from the view panel. It didn't make sense for something so important not to be secured in an encrypted safe. Yet, there was the small crate, stuck halfway out of the view panel, space sucking at it with her cold breath. Multiple shots dotted the pane around the box, and cracks webbed across the panel. Instead of smashing through, the package had crashed into the panel in such a way

that it had somewhat sealed the breach, keeping the pane from fully shattering back when the ship still had pressure.

“Ten minutes. Reyne, we’re getting nervous over here.”

The pieces of what had happened on this ship started to fall into place, but Reyne shook them off, not having the commodity of time to dwell on the crew’s story. He pushed off and bumped against the view panel. New cracks formed. Fearful that it would float into space, he grasped for the package, his thick gloves sliding right off the securely wedged box.

A twinkle in the distance caught Reyne’s eye. Through the pane, he watched more and more glimmers appear as starlight reflected off the millions of space debris entangled in the asteroid’s gravitational pull. Star swarms were basically space tsunamis on an orbital schedule. No one saw swarms up close like this. No one was that stupid.

The *Gryphon* was about to become slivers in this swarm if it didn’t get out ahead of it.

“Throttle,” he began. “You’d better be ready for jump speed by the time the counter hits zero.”

“I’m ready to go now. You keep lollygagging, and I might decide to leave you behind, old man.”

“I knew I could count on you,” he said drily, tugging at the box. His fingers slipped, but he kept pulling.

“That’s an interesting place to put a valuable thingamajig.”

Reyne glanced over his shoulder to see Sixx fly onto the bridge and grab an instrument panel to slow his speed, nearly dropping the armful of biome kits he held.

“Nine minutes. Are you on your way back?”

Reyne motioned to Sixx. “Get your sticky fingers over here. This thing’s wedged tight in here. I need leverage. I can’t operate my jets and hold onto it at the same time.”

Sixx gave a longing look at the biome kits in his arms before letting out a drawn-out sigh. He released his prizes, flew over, and wrapped his hands around the package. “Ready,” he said with the biome kits floating around them. “Did I mention how much I dislike star swarms? Watching one coming right at me isn’t exactly reassuring.”

Twinkling reflections from the swarm’s debris spread across much of the view panel’s width now.

“Then, we’d better grab this and get out of here,” Reyne said.

Wrapping an arm around Sixx, Reyne used his free hand to control his propulsion system. As soon as the package moved, cracks filled the panel before it shattered, creating an opening from the bridge into space. Shards

of panel floated around biome kits. Sixx scrambled and grabbed for a kit.

“Leave ’em,” Reyne ordered.

“Just one,” he said as he tucked a biome kit atop the package and began to strap them to his suit. “Consider it my bonus for saving the day.”

“Three minutes. Did you hear me, guys? Three minutes.”

Reyne shot Sixx a harried glance before responding. “What happened to four through eight?”

“I may have forgotten to take into account the star swarm’s leading buffer impact on our acceleration. Don’t mess around, guys. I’m not joking on this. Get back here now.”

Reyne’s mind rushed through options. He grabbed onto Sixx. “We’ll go faster using our propulsion tanks together.” He pulled out a carabiner and hooked their suits together. “You hold the package. I’ll run both our jets.”

“Faster is good.”

They kicked off from the bridge and flew through the shattered pane and out into space. Clear plastic pieces from the view panel scraped against their helmets.

With Sixx clutching their payday and Reyne holding onto him, Reyne shot alternating full bursts from their suits to propel forward. Unfortunately, even with both at max output, their civilian-grade pressure suits were designed for slow, safe travel through space. As they moved through the blackness between the dead ship and the *Gryphon*, the star swarm closed the distance in a terrifyingly deadly sort of way—like a huge, sparkling chimera coming to swallow them.

“Two minutes. I’m running through the pre-jump protocols now.”

“We’re on our way,” Reyne said, trying not to sound like his heart wasn’t pounding out of his chest. He wished their suits to go faster, but wishing didn’t seem to help.

Every second was too slow as the distance between them and the star swarm disappeared faster than the distance between them and the *Gryphon*, which floated like a rilon angel waiting for them.

“Sixty seconds.”

“Can’t these things go any vigg’in’ faster?” Sixx complained.

Reyne racked his brain for ideas, but nothing would get them back to the ship in time. As they moved through space, his muscles shook with adrenaline and fear.

“We’re at bingo.”

The *Gryphon*’s Flux Whisper engine roared to life. A second later, the airlock door began to close.

TWO

A Ship Caught in the Swarm

Even with both suits blasting at full propulsion, Reyne figured they needed at least ten seconds more to reach the *Gryphon*. He continually hit their thrust buttons, only to have the suits chime negative responses at his attempts.

“Ah, shit.” He grimaced before giving the order he dreaded. “Get out of here, Throttle. You’ve got to leave us.”

“Don’t you dare leave us, Throttle,” Sixx countered.

“*Like hell I’m leaving you idiots.*”

Through the window on the other side of the airlock, Reyne noticed the ship’s mechanic. Boden had stopped the door once it reached halfway down, and was now motioning wildly with his hands. Unfortunately, Reyne couldn’t speak to him through his comm link, since the channel at that chamber had fried months ago and he didn’t have the credits to fix it.

“I can’t make out what he’s—oh.” A retention cable shot out from the chamber and straight toward them. Reyne had only an instant to comprehend Boden’s intent and prepare for the incoming object. “Hold on.”

Reyne collided with—more so than caught—the heavy tow hook. The impact knocked the air from his lungs, and sharp pain stabbed where the hook had hit his chest. His suit blasted an alarm. Their forward movement instantly reversed. A single carabiner held the two men’s suits together, and Sixx was yanked along like a raggedy doll. The cable jerked to a stop, and it felt like Reyne’s arms were snapped from their sockets as their now-backward propulsion was halted.

The cable began to retract, the metal line sliding through Reyne’s hands, and he scrambled to get a grip. He wrapped his hand around the hook just as the cable picked up speed. A lot of speed.

Reyne tried to find his breath as they were dragged to the ship. “Tell me you still have the package.”

“I have it, plus a nasty case of whiplash.”

“Good. Keep hanging on because we’re coming in hard and fast.”

It took them only a couple seconds to close the remaining distance. They flew into the airlock and slammed into the door on the far side of the small pressurization chamber.

The outer door clanged shut behind them, and with a low hum, the ship’s EM field cycled up the gravity in the room. The men dropped to the floor with grunts.

Reyne pulled himself to his knees, seeing stars through the pain. “*Hell,*” he ground out.

Sixx sat up. “That wasn’t so—”

The *Gryphon* shot into jump speed with no warm-up. Reyne and Sixx were lifted off the ground for a tiny instant before smashing against the back wall.

Reyne couldn’t breathe for several long seconds before he realized Sixx was lying on top of him. He managed to unhook their suits and roll the other man off.

The red light by the door switched to green. He twisted off his helmet and sucked in cool, fresh air. “You...were saying?”

Sixx came up on his elbows and tossed his helmet. “Now, that was a wild ride. *Shit.* That hurt.”

Reyne dragged himself into a sitting position and leaned against the wall. “What are you complaining about? You used me to cushion your fall.”

“Yeah? Try having a biome kit smash through your helmet.”

Reyne looked to see Sixx gingerly touching his bloody, broken nose. Dark circles were already forming under his eyes. “You good?”

Sixx touched his forefinger and thumb tips together to form an O, for *Okay.*

Reyne continued. “How’s the package?”

Sixx set aside his biome kit and rolled over the metal box. “A few scratches, but still sealed.”

“Let’s hope the contents are secure and that they survived a scalar freeze, or else we won’t be seeing a paycheck. It’d be a whole lot easier if I knew what was in there.”

“As long as they pay us, I don’t care,” Sixx said.

“Agreed.”

Reyne winced, tentatively rubbing his tender chest. “Hell, it feels like

I've bruised or broken half the bones in my body."

"Only half?" Sixx asked as he climbed to his feet and helped Reyne up. "We pulled out pretty good, then."

They kicked out of their suits and hooked them up to charging stations.

Sixx bent over and picked up the single biome kit. "This baby's all mine. I've already got a nice piece of property on Spate picked out for it."

"You about got yourself killed for it." Reyne shot his friend a hard look. "I ordered you to stay put on the *Gryphon*."

"What? And let you have all the fun?"

"There are several women who would be very sad if you died in a swarm."

Sixx smirked. "How right you are."

The inner door to the pressurization chamber opened, and Boden stepped inside. The sandy-haired Alluvian took a quick look at each of them and gave a reassuring nod. "I was beginning to think you two weren't going to give up your front row seats to the star swarm."

"Nah. That show's overrated," Sixx replied.

Reyne nodded to the mechanic. "Quick thinking with the cable. You saved our asses back there."

"Throttle would kill me if I left her father out there to die," Boden said.

"Hey," Sixx chimed in. "Don't I count, too?"

Something clanged against the outer hull, quickly followed by another something that sounded like it tore a hole through the ship.

Boden spun on his heels and sprinted away.

Reyne pointed at the box in Sixx's arms. "Get that package secure." Then, he took off at a run, or at least as fast as a battered, arthritic man could move.

"Status," he called out as soon as he reached the bridge.

Throttle didn't look up from her instrument panel. "We were too late going to jump speed. We're getting dinged up by the leading edges of the swarm, but the jump shields are holding. We'll get through it in time." She paused. "I hope."

"You *hope*?"

She didn't reply.

He turned his attention to the view panel. A cacophony of tiny collisions sparked against the jump shield and chewed at his raw nerves. Glimpses of debris lit up space like tiny stars. Many chunks were smaller than an inch in diameter, but each was capable of piercing a view panel without jump shields as easily as a knife tip through a sheet of paper.

A larger metallic shard skidded off the jump shield, and he