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about 10200 words

Mysteries of the Frontier: Made Manifest

By: Jonathan Carpenter

The acrid smell of smoke burns at my nostrils as I tread through shadows of buildings ablaze. The streets blur together like water color as one leads into the next, connected by scenes out of my memories. The surreal reality of the dreamscape appears ethereal in the way it shifts and flows. I look to the first memory. A man with sad grey eyes and a lab coat stands next to a younger me. Beside us is a decorated casket I'd much rather forget. Mom.

"I'm sorry Locke…" His voice echoes as if it's distant.

The memory fades into the next as an aide speaks to the scientist in his office years later. His eyes look so dead now...

"Doctor Vandyne, the contacts' arrival is relatively imminent. We have maybe thirty years before they cross the galactic boundary."

"Then we must prepare however we can. Reach out to Io Interstellar. We'll need their resources."

"And the specimen?"

“Gather blood samples. We will need them. Keep it alive.”

The office fades into a sterile lab as I look through the eyes of my younger self. Heavy straps hold me down as fire courses through my veins. The pain intensifies as the masked scientist above me finishes injecting a glowing crimson liquid into my arms and legs. I scream at the pain, and look through a window at emotionless grey eyes.

“Please, make it stop!”

He remains unmoving. The smell of ozone fills the air, accompanied by a surge of electricity along my arms. The energy builds up before releasing in a wave of electrified power, pulsing throughout the room. The scream of the scientist next to me cuts out abruptly as he fades into a cloud of cinders and ash, the straps following suit. Everything aches too much for me to do more than curl up in a fetal position, the screaming turning to sobbing.

“Locke,” a muffled voice says.

The world around me begins to fade to black, the voice mixed in with the distant clamor of warfare, screams, and death. The word *guillotine* repeatedly rings out of the chaos, mocking me as scenes of my crimes play out before me, the faces of past victims fading in and out before me. It’s like a film reel in fast-forward, reminding me of the blood on my hands… It all fades, and another scene flashes before me. My adopted daughters lie before me, Rika and Shinobu, sickly and frail, bearing the same surgical scars I do. I fall to my knees as my heart sinks once more, tears welling up in my eyes. The scientist never stopped with me...

Vandyyyyne… Kill… says an eerily unified myriad of voices. I feel a chill run down my spine, fear mixed in with rage as I feel a strong desire to fulfill the wish of that terrifying voice.

“Wake up Locke.” It’s louder now.

The last of the scenes begin to disperse entirely into a watercolor mist until nothing remains but a void.

“Locke Edwards, wake up!”

I sit upright with a gasp, finding myself in the co-pilot’s chair of a small attack shuttle. Outside the cockpit canopy loomed the shape of a massive carrier, at least 5 kilometers long. The

Fyrebyrd. Right. I'm on my way home. In the pilot's seat is my commanding officer, Staff Sergeant Sydney Morgan. He switches on the autopilot and focuses his brown eyes on me.

"You alright? You were havin' a hell of a fit."

"I'm fine Morgan," I say. The sick feeling lingering in my stomach says otherwise, but I bite it down.

"Yeah, and I'm the tooth fairy. Go see Doctor Zumwalt when you get the chance."

"I have two daughters who are expecting me to cook dinner for them tonight. I'm okay. Really."

Morgan sighs. "Right. Don't wanna keep them waiting, do you? Fine. Let's get you home." He turns off autopilot and gets us underway.

#

October 17th, 2342. 1934 hours Galactic Standard. Multirole-Carrier PCS Fyrebyrd.

"Dad! Dad! Come check out what I just figured out how to do."

I turn away from the task of meal prep to look at my daughters. The younger of the two, Rika, is bouncing in place, grinning widely. Her sister, Shinobu, stands behind her, watching with a look of mixed trepidation and anticipation.

I chuckle as I kneel down to her. "What is it Rika?"

She holds up a small steel ball bearing. "Watch this!" She looks at the ball, squinting as if to concentrate on it.

"Careful Rika," her sister says.

"Hush. I'm concentrating."

I raise an eyebrow at that, wondering why she would advise caution. Then, the ball bearing begins to levitate above Rika's hand. I double check to see if there is any string, nothing. *So, she is like me to an extent.* It's a melancholy feeling. She shakily guides the ball to the round, plastic surface that serves as our coffee table. I'm shocked as the small object slowly passes the restroom door.

Once the ball touches down, Rika releases her focus on it. She cheers as she looks back

up at me. “Did you see that?! Pretty cool huh?”

The melancholy feeling grows stronger as my surprise fades. Regardless, I return a warm smile. “I did. That’s some power you got there.”

“Right?!” Her mop of short, brunette hair bobs about as she jumps excitedly. “I wonder what else I can do with it!”

“I keep telling her she should be careful with it,” her sister says.

Rika gives her a deadpan look. “Oh, come on Shinobu. You’re no fun.”

“Rika.” I give her a pointed look. “She is right you know.”

“Told you so.”

Rika pouts, an adorably silly expression on her fair face. “Killjoy.”

I shake my head and smirk. “Don’t be like that. You don’t need to stop using it outright, but you should make sure that when you’re practicing, it’s in a place that is safe, where you can be supervised until you have better control. Shinobu, this may apply to you too sometime.”

Shinobu averts her gaze in response to that, hiding her eyes behind her raven black hair. Her panther ears splay out atop her head. My heart sinks a little as I remember where she got them from, and my gaze drifts to the faded surgical scaring on her neck.

My attention is drawn by a buzzing from my comms unit. I head over to the counter to pick it up.

“Everything alright Dad?” Shinobu asks, one of her ears twitching at the sound.

I unlock the device and have a look at the message. *New Intel Available. Expect briefing October 19th, at 1200 hours.* That usually means an impending mission. “Yeah. Just a message from work.”

Rika and Shinobu share a look. Is that recognition? Concern?

“Hey. Don’t worry too much about it. It’s dinner time, come on.” I pick up our bowls of ramen in one arm and bring them from the small kitchenette to the coffee table, using my free hand to ruffle their hair as I pass. This earns a few giggles from Rika and a small groan and pout from Shinobu.

“By the way,” Rika says, “we heard Miss Gates talking about you today, Dad.”

That drew my attention. “Oh? Is that so?” Captain Melissa Gates is the leader in charge of everyone aboard the *Fyrebyrd*, and the whole Sixty-Fourth Phoenix Corp. To hear that she was talking about me is intriguing.

“She keeps praising your hard work. It almost sounds like she really likes you,” she says with a cheeky little smirk.

I blanch and give her a bewildered look in response, cheeks burning slightly. “She’s my boss! Seriously Rika, come on.”

She and Shinobu both start giggling, and I can’t help sighing and smiling softly at their antics. Kids will be kids.

#

October 19th, 2342. 1015 hours Galactic Standard. Fyrebyrd Training Deck.

The expansive and modular training deck is a far cry from what my girls and I are used to. A little over the size of a football field, it serves as a stark reminder of the size of our flagship. Right now, it’s in its flattest configuration, all segmented panels and platforms are retracted into the walls and floors since it is not currently in use by any but my daughters as a play space and an area to safely exercise their abilities.

As I watch my daughters romp and play from the sidelines, I hear bootsteps approaching from behind, accompanied by the muffled clicking of a prosthetic within one of those boots. I hardly take my eyes off the girls. I knew that uneven gait, and the prosthetic confirms who it is.

“Doctor Zumwalt.” My greeting is short and terse, given where my focus is at the moment.

The gravelly voice of an elderly man answers me with a soft chortle, like one might hear from a kindly old grandfather. His reply is tinged with a German accent. “You always have been very situationally aware Locke.” I feel his gaze before I see his green eyes. “Their powers have finally started to manifest I see.”

“Yeah.” There isn’t much heart in my reply. The same mixed emotions from before resurfaced once more.

“I sense the concern of a father. You seem to have really stepped up to the role in the three years since you took them in. You fear for them, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“You fear their powers will make them subject to being ostracized and ridiculed, will make them feel isolated. You feel what Vandyne did to you three may endanger them?” Zumwalt says. Damn codger is more observant than I give him credit for… I can feel his analyzing gaze on me.

Vandyyyyne… Kill…

Ice runs through my veins. What is that voice? It’s like a mix between a growl and an ethereal hissing, yet it bears a hint of desperation... A quick glance at our surroundings confirms we’re alone however. Is that in my head? Is it my nightmares returning to haunt me? I shake my head clear, worried I might be losing it.

“Please don’t say that name.”

“Fear of the name only increases fear of the man Edwards. That will not help you quell your rage. He’s a fundamental part of your past. You will have to come to terms one day.”

“Don’t psychoanalyze me doc. I didn’t call you here for a therapy session. I called to ask you a favor.”

“Did another lead present itself?”

“It did. I’ll know more after today’s briefing.” I turn to face him. “I need you to look after the girls while I’m gone. You can ask some of the crew to help if you need to. I know they’d be happy to lend a hand.”

“Oh, I’m certain of that, given the girls’ endearing reputation. But you will come back to them, won’t you?”

“I dunno.” I look back out at the girls Rika laughs heartily while Shinobu watches her practicing juggling small ball bearings with her powers. Some of the crew joined the cat-eared sister in cheering the girl on. “I dread leaving them. I don’t know what will happen. It’s not like

we can head back to the core worlds, half the mega-corporations would love to dissect us. Can't think of any safer place for those two than here among the Phoenix Corp."

"That's ironic to hear." The tone of the doctor's voice matches his deadpan gaze. The worry lines on his forehead crease as he turns to watch the girls. "But it's unsurprising given what they… acquired from their ordeal. I don't need to remind you what the darker side of the scientific community might do if they caught wind."

"You mean they might try to capture them."

I see him nod out of the corner of my eye. "After all, they tried to do the same with you, Sergeant Edwards." He sighs softly. "We're practically a nomadic PMC out here. This ship is hardly a place to raise children…"

"I know." He's right. As much as I hate to admit it, being aboard the roving flagship of a private military contractor, no matter how large or well supplied, is no place for a couple of kids. And yet... I stare down at my hand and focus just a little, gazing as little brilliant sapphire arcs of electricity jump between my fingers. If Io Interstellar's allies went after me over this, they'd certainly go after the girls. *Damnit, there are too many variables. They're way safer here.*

"Dad? You alright?"

I cut the power, and the sparks vanish as I turn my head up to meet Shinobu's concerned gaze. I smile at her. "I'm fine kiddo. Don't you worry about me."

"Are you going away again?"

Of course, she knows. I should've figured. "Yeah. Tomorrow. I should be back again soon though. Uncle Hans will look after you again, okay?"

Shinobu nods quietly before crossing the distance between us, and hugging me tightly, her head resting on my chest. "Make sure you come back safe."

I can't help the pang of guilt and the pain in my heart as I gently wrap my arms around her in turn. "I'll do my best. Make sure you look after your sister, okay?"

She nods quietly, holding on for a good minute longer before letting go and turning to rejoin her sister. Rika meets my gaze with a look of understanding. She knows I do what I do to

protect them. Regardless, it hurts to see the fear that flashes to the surface behind that understanding.

"Keep an eye on 'em for me Doc."

"They'll be safe in my care old friend. You need not worry. Now go, or you'll be late."

I roll my eyes, smirking a tad at the grandfatherly tone he took with me. I hesitate as I take one more look at my daughters before departing.

#

October 19th, 2342. 1200 hours Galactic Standard. Fyrebyrd Starboard Briefing Room.

A cacophony of hushed chatter surrounds me as everyone prepared for the intel briefing to start. There must be at least fifty separate officers and NCOs in here. The space is a little too large for all of us as everyone stands or sits scattered in small clusters amongst the rows of chairs. At the front of the room, a large round table with a holographic projection array built into the center displays the globe of an unfamiliar world, large enough for everyone to see. The noise of the room and the light of the fluorescent fixtures and holographic globe all blur together however as my thoughts begin to wander.

In my mind's eye, I see cold grey eyes looming over the starved, scrawny forms of my little girls three years prior... I remember when we found them, abandoned and alone, starving to death. They had survived two months in the jungles of Elysium II, discarded as failed experiments… *Never again. He won't hurt them again.* I clench my fist as the memory of their cries and whimpers echoes in the back of my mind.

Vandyyyne… Kill...

I freeze again, eyes widening. There it is again. Damnit Edwards, get it together.

"Locke?" a deep, English accented voice calls out to me.

I jolt from my thoughts as my immediate surroundings come back into focus. I look to my right. Looks like I worried Morgan again. To be fair, I'm worried too. *What the hell is that voice?*

"You alright there, Sergeant? Looking a little pale."

“Sorry sir. Just remembering why I’m here is all.” I smile, but it must’ve come off as half-hearted.

The look in his eyes tells me he isn’t buying it.

“Morgan, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you. And I got more important things to worry about.”

“Your kids?”

I nod. “I’m hoping this briefing means we’re getting closer to ending their nightmare for good.”

“We’ll get there. Primary objective is to keep everyone alive until we do. Look alive Edwards. Keep your head in the present.”

I let slip a short laugh. “Solid copy, Staff Sergeant.”

We then hear the door in the front corner of the room slide open and look to see the two top brass of the ship stepping in. My eyes widen. No one could mistake the imposing emerald gaze of Captain Gates, much less the mountainous figure of her executive officer, Commander Anthony Dubias. One glare from him is enough signal for near everyone to shut up and take a seat. His reputation as a gentle giant is contrasted by his tendency to smoke the hell out of anyone who steps out of line. He gives you that look, you shut up and listen, end of story.

“Didn’t think we’d get a visit from the top dogs,” Morgan says.

I can only nod. I catch Melissa’s gaze lingering on me for a moment, wearing a neutral, stoic expression. She averts her gaze a little too quickly when our eyes meet, focusing on the crowd instead. What was that about? The earlier teasing of my daughters comes back to mind, and my cheeks burn again before I shake my head clear and focus up.

“Thank you for coming,” the captain says once everyone had fallen quiet, her smooth voice projecting clearly across the room. “Time is short, so we’ll keep this brief. On September 15th, at roughly 0930 hours, we managed to finish decrypting the data recovered from the raid six months ago. Special credit to Sergeant Locke Edwards for its retrieval.” She looks to me with a smirk.

My ears heat up as I rub the back of my head. It's not because of the praise being thrown my way.

She continues. "After initial datamining, we were able to extrapolate the location of one of the main black site laboratories of Io Interstellar Dynamics. Since then, covert reconnaissance has confirmed this site to hold one of the main lab suites of Doctor Matthias Vandyne. We also confirmed the presence of several living victims of experimentation."

That information raised eyebrows, and a wave of murmurs passed throughout the room. Mention of the IID is clearly cause for concern, even anger, given the vengeful looks on some of the faces here. While not the only adversary we face, they're the Phoenix Corp's primary opponent in the galactic theater. And they're harboring the man that hurt me and my girls… Lovely.

"We have been provided a rough map of the facility, but our operative was forced to bug out before they could access any of the more secure areas. That is where you all will come in. Commander Dubias?" She gestures for him to take over.

He heads to the holoprojector table and manipulates it to zoom in on the northern hemisphere of the globe. An area along a mountain range is highlighted with a rough underground 3D map of our target. Anthony's deep, baritone voice echoes across the room booming with an authority that commanded attention.

"This world is 3257A, a snow-covered ice-ball at the outer edge of its star's habitable zone. It's located along the inner edge of the Crux-Scutum Arm, just inside the observation shadow of the galactic core."

"Nice hiding place," Morgan says with a grimace and a begrudged hint of admiration.

"Indeed." Dubias gives Morgan a look before continuing. "This part of the galaxy is largely unexplored, given it cannot, be seen from Sol or surrounding core systems. Assume our intel is always incomplete out here. Dress for the cold, it's mostly tundra and sprawling snow drifts outside the base. You'll insert by drill-pod. This is a one-way trip if you don't secure the hangars, so do that first. Your force will split into three groups, alphas, bravos, and charlies. Alphas, your objective is to sweep the facility and begin rescuing and evacuating the IID's

captives. Bravos, you will make a diversionary push for the command-and-control center. Make it convincing. Charlies, you will secure and hold the hangar for exfil by dropship. Make sure their anti-air is down."

Okay, that covers a good chunk of what we typically do. Textbook lab raid. However, there is one element yet to be discussed. "What about data retrieval?" I ask.

Dubias' critical gaze bores into me. "You will handle that while the enemy's attention is drawn by the main force. You have specialist training well suited to this after all."

That is true, and to be fair I'm already eager to start. "Hoorah."

He acknowledges me with a terse nod before continuing. "Their military presence will be light. This is a hidden black-site, not a base. Regardless, do not let your guard down. You all have thirty minutes after landing before the Fyrebyrd opens up with a creeping bunker busting barrage."

"Classic torch and burn." Morgan chuckles. "Should be a blast."

This elicits a few chuckles from the crowd.

"Be advised, we will maintain a high altitude to ensure rapid response to any IID Navy forces that show up. Do not expect accurate fire support. Staff Sergeant Morgan, your Second Squad is with Charlie. Once the last of the evacuees have been flown out, your team will move to locate Edwards. Support him as necessary, then evac. Edwards will insert at the lab wing. The rest of you will insert at the main and peripheral corridors. Maps have been sent to your HUDs. Consult them as necessary. Get your squads ready to deploy. You launch at 1400 hours. That's it for the briefing. Dismissed!"

#

October 19th, 2342. 1300 hours Galactic Standard. Fyrebyrd Armory Deck

The din of organized chaos around me is par for the course among the thick racks of guns and gear that filled every corner of the long, wide space of the ship's armory. Wide blast doors are set at each end of the room and either side of the middle space. I sit near the bow end of the armory, closer to the forward drop bay, my gear strewn neatly across an armory workbench in

front of me. My armored and pressure-sealed battle dress uniform, R-333 Bullpup Carbine, and P77 slide action pistol are all painted a matte black for the op. I check the holographic sights on each weapon before going over the rest of the gear. Grenades, ammo, and an Icebreaker data knife are all prepped.

Part combat knife, part security slicing and data gathering tool, the Icebreaker can fit just about any standard 2-inch data card slot. It's suited to overcoming most security systems. They're rare, but given my specialist role, I'm not surprised to have priority. At the very least, doors and the actual data retrieval might not be an issue. I got the gear and training. The problem would be getting in and out alive. If I run into Vandyne…

Vandyyyne… Kill…

Ice again fills my veins. That damn voice. Is that my personal vendetta talking? I don't remember ever being *this* vengeful or desperate. No. This feels like another's voice. But whose voice? How and why are they speaking to me?

"Sergeant Edwards. A moment?"

I snap back to reality and turn to face Captain Gates. Her eyes bear the fatigue of over a decade of conflict, hidden to all but the most observant. There's immediate concern behind the fatigue too.

I acknowledge her with a quick salute. "Captain. How can I help you?"

"Dispense with the formalities Locke. Are you alright? You're looking a little pale."

"Just nerves is all. Nothing I can't overcome. I've been conditioned for this. I'll make due."

"Very well. There is a chance you'll run into *him* down there today. Are you prepared for that eventuality?" I can hear worry in her voice. I know she means well by asking that. She's always seen her crew as family, though few may know it. I have to assure her that I'll be okay. This mission is far too important to let my personal feelings get in the way.

"I'll manage. This mission is a big next step."

Melissa gives me a calculating look, then heaves a sigh and nods. “Alright.” She takes on a more professional stance. “Be warned, there are other unusual artifacts down there, some of potentially alien origins. If true, that might mean Io Interstellar hid first contact from humanity. That’s damning evidence on its own. Confirm what you can, and keep your helmet camera online. Understood?”

“Aye Captain.”

“Excellent. Do the Phoenix Corp Marines proud, Sergeant. Good luck. We will ensure your daughters’ safety until your return.”

I feel a sense of relief wash over me. “Thank you, Captain.”

She flashes a small smile at me. “Make damn sure you come back to us Sergeant.” There’s another firm reminder that, hidden beneath all the intensity and professionalism, a mother figure is watching out for us all. And yet. I can’t help but notice the undertone of something else in her voice. Damnit Rika, you just had to put those thoughts in my head.

“I won’t let you down.”

“Good,” she says before turning to leave. It sounds more like *you damn well better not.*

What are you, my wife? My ears burn again at the thought. No. She’s my boss. I shake my head clear and finish assembling my gear. I need to be in the drop bay soon.

#

October 19th, 2342. 1403 hours Galactic Standard. Drill Pod orbiting 3257A.

The space in the small metal pod is cramped and insanely hot. If it wasn’t for my conditioning, I’d say I’m cooking alive. The others descended ahead of me to establish the diversion and initiate the other elements of the op. Now it’s my turn. I stare at the screen as flames of reentry lick past the external camera. They fade to reveal a vast mountain range and wide snow plains, all ascending rapidly to meet me. 10000 meters, 8000, 6000, 4000. My heart is pounding. The pod lurches at 2000 as the brake thrusters kick on and the flaps deploy. 1000 meters. 500 meters. The flaps eject and I hear the drill spinning. I brace for impact.

The next few seconds are a cacophony of rumbling earth and screeching metal as I bite my mouth guard. I quietly thank whoever invented these holy saving graces that protect our precious tongues during drop. The pod shudders for a few seconds more until it slams to a halt, the inertial dampeners cushioning the impact. It still rattled my bones. I shake off my daze before slamming my fist against the release. The door is sent flying off by the explosive bolts. I disembark from the pod, drawing my R-333.

The ghostly wail of klaxons assaults my ears as I assess my surroundings, my sight disrupted by the constant flash of spinning amber lights. Dark, polished steel and fluorescent lights give my surroundings an eerily sterile and uniform appearance.

A hiss to my left draws my attention. I whip around, rifle leveled, only to freeze at the sight before me. Contained in a large cylindrical cage of armored glass and electrified wire, surrounding which is an array of terminals and lab equipment, is something I can only describe as utterly alien. What's visible of its skin is dark as the void of space. It bears a reptilian appearance, four powerful legs, and a build reminiscent of the panthers of Earth, complete with a long, slender tail. Its elongated head is like that of some alien raptor, and its reptilian eyes glow crimson. It must be at least three meters long. Midnight black mist lazily flows upward from its body, fading mere inches from its form and wreathing it in an ethereal aura.

I step back from the opening my pod created, noticing I slammed into one of the lab suite doors. I hear the echo of wind coming down from the opening. The sign thankfully survived. *Xeno-Science Suite*. Looks like Captain Gates was on the money. I step forward cautiously, and the creature's gaze follows me. As I approach, the incoherent whispering of numerous voices invades my hearing. Is it my comms? No… It's in my mind.

The creature takes a step towards me, stopping shy of the wire.

Freeeeeee… uuuus…

My eyes widen as I recoil from it. It's the voice from before. But it's louder, more direct. Is this thing the source?

"What are you?"

Guard… the void…

Guard the void? Is it saying it's some kind of sentinel? I rack my brain for possibilities, thinking back on the other times I heard that voice before looking at the creature again. "Is it you I've been hearing?"

It nods slowly.

"How?"

Blood…

"My blood? What the hell does that mean?"

Ask…. Vandyyyyne…

My eyes widen at that. I turn my gaze to my hand again, noting the sparks of electricity as it shakes slightly. A maelstrom of emotions rips through me as I shudder at the implications. Another deep breath, get it under control… I turn my eyes back to the creature.

"The serum he made came from you, didn't it?"
The creature nods once more.

"That was five years ago. Why now? Unless…" I think back. The stars hidden by the observation shadow of the Galactic Core have always been a mystery to scientists in the Orion Arm. There were never any documented alien encounters revealed to the public. It was always speculated there might be other intelligent life out there, maybe hiding in the shadow. This must be the first time I've come within range of one of these creatures perhaps. But it was all just speculation, and I don't have time for that. I have a mission. I check the clock in my heads-up display. 1439 hours.

"If I let you out, how do I know you won't come after me or my people?"

Vandyyyne… Io… Shared enemies…

That didn't require much thought to understand. Hesitant as I am to let this terrifying creature go free, allies are in short supply, and I didn't have time to debate it. It doesn't appear aggressive. It even seems calm, bearing some degree of sentience. No sentient deserved to be a victim in Vandyne's schemes. A distant explosion draws my attention to the corridor outside the broken door. Time to make the choice.

I look for the terminal linked to this creature's cell, finding it at the edge opposite the main door. Pulling out my Icebreaker, I pop off the maintenance panel with the blade, look for the card slot, and slip it in. The holographic display in the pommel lights up, numbers scrolling by as it starts its work. I look towards the door when I hear new voices.

"Check the lab," someone says. "Intruder might be there!"

I note their gear as the first one turns the corner. Pale grey color schemes adorned their advanced, armored battle dress uniforms, complete with open-face helmets. I raise my rifle, line up the shot, and squeeze the trigger as I move to kick over a thick metal table for cover. The first body hits the ground. The other three scatter for cover, one taking a shoulder hit before return fire forces me to duck behind my impromptu shield.

A beeping spherical object bounces off the wall behind me. I catch the live grenade and lob it back over my cover. It doesn't even hit the ground before it detonates, the loud *wump* of the explosion rattling my skull. Noticing the lull in enemy fire, I lean out to fire and notice one is wounded from the blast. He's the first to go down, followed by the one next to him. The last rushes right around the cage in an attempt to flank me while I'm occupied. Bullets whiz past me as I dive over my cover to put more solid steel between me and him, barely evading in time.

That's when my data knife beeps twice, followed by the hiss of heavy hydraulics.

There's a loud, vicious snarl, followed by a scream. I wince at the noise. Peaking over my cover, the sight that greets me shakes me to my core. The cage isn't even done opening, but a tendril of the creature's black mist is extended outward, the last enemy soldier impaled upon it. The creature glares at the IID trooper before retracting the tendril. The body drops, blood pooling as the alien turns its gaze towards me.

Gratitude…

It then fades entirely into the midnight mist before it flows fluidly up the opening my pod had created, escaping into the freezing wastes.

#

October 19th, 2342. 1452 hours Galactic Standard. IID Blacksite Facility.

I can feel my heart racing, but my mind is deadly calm as I advance down the corridor, my hands wrapped firmly around my rifle, left index finger just shy of the trigger. I advance through the wide corridors of the complex, searching for threats as I go. The signs by the heavy hydraulic doors intermittently lining the walls have the alpha-numeric designations for laboratory suites. Each serves as stomach churning reminder of what this place is.

I zero in on the soldiers that turn the corner to intercept me. My rifle burps twice as I squeeze the trigger, the suppressor reducing the noise to but a whisper. Bodies drop, grey combat uniforms spattered and stained with crimson, and I move on.

I find the door they had been trying to keep me from and check the label, nodding with a grim satisfaction. *Suite 32-B, Mathias Vandyne.* I pull my data-knife from the sheath on my belt, use it to pop off the outer panel of the door's touchscreen security controls, and slip it into the maintenance card slot. It lights up and begins working.

"You're not going to find what you want in there," says a near-monotone, Spanish accented voice.

My blood runs cold in the brief instant before I whip around to level my rifle at the source, finger squeezing the trigger as soon as I register an acquired target. The weapon burps out a burst of supersonic lead. Rather than staining the body red, the silhouette flickers as the bullets pass through. The glitching digital apparition soon resolves into 3D projection of the man I so desperately wanted to kill. The digital copy tilts its head at me to mimic the real-world version that stood well beyond the range of my sight, probably somewhere off-world.

"Are you truly that eager to end my life?" he asks, his tone almost mocking me with its monotonous cadence.

"Take a wild guess Doctor Frankenstein," I bite back with an icy venom.

He removes his glasses and wipes them with his coat before setting them back on the bridge of his nose. "An astute analogy considering what I've done with you and many of your colleagues in the… What was it called? The Sixty-Fourth Phoenix Corp? If I am Doctor Frankenstein, then I suppose that you are all my monsters."

His uncaring glare grated on my nerves, threatening to fully unleash the rage barely held in check behind my wall of calm. “Where the hell are you? I got a bullet with your name on it.”

Vandyne sighs and shakes his head in disapproval. “So uncouth… You just missed me. I left this facility roughly thirteen hours ago. Feel free to set an appointment.”

I grimace at him as the data-knife beeps twice behind me. The doors shudder and hiss as they split and slide apart. Remembering where I am, I whip around to sweep the opening with my rifle, not worried about being harmed by a mere hologram. The cavernous space has more hydraulic doors leading deeper into the suite, two along the back wall, and one centered to the right. The room is dominated by an elevated central platform, around which are walls of holographic display screens, all seemingly connected to a computer system stored somewhere under the suite and an array of terminals lining the far-left wall. On the platform are three surgical tables arranged in a half circle, each equipped with robotic surgical equipment and heavy straps for restraining the victims this mad dog likely had there. I note the relatively fresh dried bloodstains on far-left table.

“Still at it huh Mathias?” I retrieve my data-knife, then cautiously enter the suite.

The door hisses and booms shut behind me, but I can still hear the faint shimmer of the hologram, hairs standing up on the back of my head as I feel his piercing gaze reaching me from an untold distance. I make my way to one of the terminal stations, again popping or breaking open panels to find a slot for my data-knife.

“Progress does not rest Locke Edwards. Or should I call you Guillotine?”

I round on Mathias almost instantly. “*Don’t,* call me that. I’m not your mad dog anymore.” I’m practically growling at him like a vicious hound regardless. Talk about irony.

“Much to my disappointment. And now here you stand. Not much closer to killing me than you were five years ago. My, how time flies.”

I scoff. “So you think. Since we’re talking, would you actually care to answer a question for me, *Dad?*”

He grimaces slightly. “You relinquished the right to call me that the day you changed your surname.”

“Like I care. You relinquished your rights as my father the moment you put me under your fucking scalpel.” I raise my left fist between us, letting the sparks I send running up and down my arm serve as a reminder of his crime. I focus and take a deep breath to get my anger, and my unwanted power, under control. “I’ll never forgive you for what you did to me… and you just couldn’t stop there could you?”

“Do you mean the two failed subjects you took in?”

“They have names you rat bastard! Rika and Shinobu! If Doctor Zumwalt hadn’t gotten to them… Do you even care at all about the suffering they would have gone through before they died? You left them stranded with aggressive mutations you sick fuck.”

“The fight for the survival of the human race is not without casualties. They are expendable resources that went towards the progress of the important work I’m doing.”

“When did you become such a sociopath?”

“Excuse me?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Progress this, survival that. They had families and your division wiped their colony out! What about their survival huh?!”

Vandyne sighs at that. “A regrettable waste of human resources. My superiors do not have the best grasp of… efficient use of said resources. That said, they have what I need.”

“All I hear is excuses from a failed father. I’ll be a damn sight better dad than you ever were, mark my words.”

“Assuming you can keep my property from me.”

I step towards the digital apparition, my face now only a couple inches from that of my estranged father’s apparition as I glare at him. “Try it. We’ll cut down every hunter you send, and before long, you’ll be next.”

There is deadly silence between us. His cold gaze is as unflinching as ever. It is only about half a minute before he adopts an ever so slight smirk however. I can’t tell if he’s being smug or not.

“There may be hope for you yet, little soldier.”

My surprise drowns out the anger and the sound of my data-knife beeping again. I hadn't heard him call me that since I was a child. It takes me a solid half-minute to register the world around me again before I turn to start copying the files on the lab's system to the storage device in the knife. As I do so, the entire room, no, the facility all around us seems to shudder as a distant and muffled *boom* seems to reverberate through the reinforced steel bulkheads.

"Sounds like my ride is here," I finish copying the data before turning to face the projection of my father again. "Don't think for a moment that I won't stop my hunt." I pull the knife and return it to its sheath without so much as breaking my gaze.

"Perhaps it will lead to you better understanding why I do this at least."

"Does why you do this have to do with that creature you had here?"

He smirks at that. "So, you did meet it. And now you're asking the right questions."

I narrow my gaze. "What do you mean?"

"I did not give you those powers simply to make you suffer. You should ask the creature what's coming to our galaxy, and break that encryption, assuming you can survive long enough to do either."

I hesitate a moment. "Are you saying something worse is coming?"

Matthias nods. "I am."

If I hadn't met that creature, I'd find that hard to believe. However, I recalled the memory of what his aide had said years ago. It always came back in my nightmares. Could that mean an invasion? Another explosion jolts me from my thoughts. I'm running out of time.

"Come hell or high water, I'll find the truth. If there is a new threat coming, we'll stop it. Then I'll come for you."

"Perhaps you will." Vandyne's apparition breaks down into its base digital components, scattering into polygons of greens and blues before vanishing altogether. The small, base-ball sized, drone that had been projecting it from within drops powerlessly and heavily to the polished metal floor with a reverberating *clang*.

#

October 19th, 2342. 1504 hours Galactic Standard. IID Black Site Facility

The facility shudders as explosions shake the superstructure, muffled by distance. If all was going according to plan up to now, the *Fyrebyrd* will be in position, using cannons, missiles, and airstrikes to clear an escape route and bombard the lab complex. The other Phoenix Corp Marines will have finished rescue operations by now, probably already having evacuated the last surviving victims of this house of horrors. I still need to hit the security center for a decryption key.

"Warning. Reactor room breached. Safety systems compromised. Evacuate immediately," a synthetic voice announces over the local intercom.

Aw crap. Sometimes the gun crew's aim is a little too good.

As I turn the next corner, I'm greeted by the sight of more IID marines, supported by a pair of humanoid mechanical infantry units. Sleek and slender, with matte black armor and trapezoidal heads that tapers inward towards the front end, these machines are more akin to malicious shadows as their optics search for targets. The bots react to my presence immediately, and raise light support weapons to open fire, the hot lead of persistent automatic fire bearing down on my position. I barely have time to duck behind the corner again, the incoming rounds pinging off the thick steel wall support that acts as my cover. After cursing the extent of Io Interstellar's military, I take a cursory look at my surroundings for any way to outmaneuver the bots. No way but back, and I couldn't retreat deeper into a doomed lab complex. They'll be advancing while the enemy marines take positions. *I'll have to use that damned power at this rate.*

Before I'm forced to come to a decision though, the sounds of gunfire seem to shift, the addition of fresh staccato rhythms announcing the arrival of another force. The panicked shouts and death cries of the IID Marines suggests the presence of allies. Two bone shaking explosions later and slagged robot parts fly past my cover, trailing smoke. I pull a mirror from my pack and angle it to show me a reflection of the corridor in which I had found the bots and enemy Marines. Standing over the bodies of the enemy were soldiers in the black and forest green gear of the Sixty-Fourth, with supplemental armor plates and sleek, carbon-coated microjet booster rigs on their backs. They're kitted out too. I can see a heavy machine-gun, two heavy, underslung,

automatic grenade launchers, and powered mechanical exo-suits for all those carrying the heavy weapons and accompanying ammo packs.

"Check fire! Friendly coming out," I shout at them.

They raise weapons, but do not squeeze triggers when they see me step out. Instead, two of them sweep past to check the corridors behind me. A total of eight more are spread out in front of me. One steps up and raises the mask of his armored helmet, revealing a familiar face beneath.

"Morgan, damn good to see you," I say with relief.

"Sergeant Edwards." His deep English accent rings with authority as always. He sounds damn glad to see me though. "That's another objective down. Now to evac."

"Hang on Staff Sergeant. I got the data from Vandyne's lab, but it's encrypted. Gotta get the key."

"Hell of a detour Edwards. Didn't you hear? Reactor's in meltdown. We've got ten, maybe fifteen minutes."

"Then we don't have time to argue about it! Raw decryption could take months, maybe years. The data on this drive may be crucial to putting an end to Vandyne!"

"It's out of our hands. We're not sticking around to get atomized."

I curse, gritting my teeth and clenching my fist. He isn't wrong to think that way, but we need this data.

"Staff Sergeant, it is four corridors east of here."

"And it's at least five minutes to get to the hangar from here or from there. We still have to fight our way out! It may have been easy for you to sneak around while we kept these lunatics busy, but the situation's changed. How long would you need to find that key Edwards?"

"I got the Icebreaker, I could easily run a match in under a minute!" That's a gamble at best…

"Not good enough! We still need time to fly out and spin up the FTL drive. We can't just ask a dropship to burrow underground to come get us! I know you want to free those girls from that madman's reign of terror, but you dyin' here won't do them any good. We need to go. Now!"

He has a point. Damnit, I hate it, but he's right. Time is not on our side, and the reactor going critical like that just made most of the sand in the timer outright vanish on us. I'll have to trust the eggheads back on the Fyrebyrd with the decryption. Someone in the weapon crews is getting their ass smoked over this later...

"Fine. Lead on." I could still hear the reluctance in my voice.

"Good man. Second Squad, on me!" Morgan brought the mask of his helmet down again.

I wound up tuning out the orders he barked at the others, knowing full well how the squad operates. It was always Alicia and Harris on point. I saw their name tags as they moved up. I took up position in the center of the group, eyes open for threats as we traveled south, further from the decryption key. I hope we can keep my daughters safe long enough to crack this *Pandora's Box.*

#

October 19th, 2342. 1511 hours Galactic Standard. IID Black Site Hangar.

"Warning, ETA to reactor detonation, six minutes."

The minute-by-minute warnings from the eerily calm synthetic voice in the PA is enough to spur us to push our legs to the point of our muscles burning, and still we pushed ourselves farther. Staff Sergeant Morgan orders the rest of the team onward, shouting explicative words that remind us of our days in training. Ironically enough, I find myself partly wishing we were back there instead of here with an imminent underground nuclear detonation on our heels. Of course, according to the loud bass heavy buzzing of a large caliber automatic weapon ahead makes me wonder if things were about to get worse.

I'm right. As soon as we enter the hangar, we lay eyes on a morbidly unwelcome sight. Our fellow Phoenix Marines are pinned down under a hail of high caliber fire, forced to take cover behind heavy duty crates and armored vehicles to survive the hail. Some weren't as fortunate, lying dead in pools of scarlet, often missing limbs. The source of that hail is what really spurs us to bolt for cover, either back behind the blast doors or further in towards a heavy crate. At the rear of the hangar, a squat bipedal mech stomps about menacingly, seeking new angles to engage us. Its sleek, angular frame and thick metal hide give it the likeness of a cobra

head, rotary guns spewing death from under each side of the hood, just above where the legs attach.

It's fire shifts onto us just as we manage to get to cover, heavy rounds pinging off the blast doors and crates. Our heavy machine gunner takes a glancing hit, damaging the arm servo of the power suit and clipping the feed belt, severing the connection to their ammo pack. He yelps as he only just manages to avoid being mulched entirely.

Morgan grimaces. "Stay down Jenkins!" He then glances around our cover at the mech, only to recoil as rounds pound into the armor, just shy of his face. He lets out a frustrated growl. "We don't have time for this! Grenadiers, put rounds out!"

They follow the order immediately, rounding out of their cover to thump out forty-millimeter grenades from their launchers. The walker stumbles only slightly before fire from enemy infantry forces them into cover again. Those rounds are high explosive, not armor piercing, so they don't do more than scorch the hull.

"Damnit," Morgan says. "Get ready to flank!"

I look at him, wide eyed. "Forty-mil HE won't do a damn thing against that armor!"

"You have a better idea?!"

I rack my brain for options. I note the infantry supporting the mech. There are at least twelve squads compared to maybe six on our end. To my horror, that number is reduced to five when one squad attempts a flank. Their grenades do no more to the mech than our own, and the visceral display of twelve human beings being mulched by a hail of lead sears itself into my brain before I can force myself to look away.

"Fuck! Fifth Squad is gone," someone says.

"I thought they were supposed to have just a token force! Where were they hiding that armor?!"

This isn't good. The squad is starting to panic.

My coms crackle to life. "This is Captain Gates! Emergency evac is thirty seconds out!"

Is that wind on the other end? "Captain, its Edwards! Are you on that dropship?!"

"Affirmative! I'm getting you lot out of there, come hell or high water!"

“Damnit Melissa, don’t do it! They got a fucking mech!”

“I heard the reports! Someone has to take it out! We’re packing heat!”

“You won’t lock on in time! If you die down here too, who will look after the crew?! What will happen to Rika and Shinobu?!”

Poweeeer…

That voice again. The creature?

Destrooooy…

A searing pain overwhelms all sensation. My vision blurs. I almost don’t realize When I fall to a knee.

“Edwards! What’s wrong?!” I can barely hear the alarmed voice of the Staff Sergeant next to me. “Jesus! Back up! That lightning could kill!”

I glance down at my arms, noticing that they’re lit up like tesla coils. The pain only just starts to dull, and I wince as memories begin to resurface, my screams on the lab table, and the sight of my girls, broken and frail, flash through my mind. I have to force it down. “What is this?”

“Locke?!” Melissa’s voice is muffled by pain and static, but her concern rings clear.

Giiiiiift…

It clicks. The creature I freed is somehow amplifying my power. Is it using the blood link it hinted at?

Destrooooy…

I pause. Destroy? I look glance up as my vision slowly starts to clear, noting two more marines getting caught under fire as they flee from a grenade. The mech. This charge could at least fry its electronics, allowing the dropships and marines to handle the infantry. But I’ve never fired this much before. What if I misfire and hurt my squadmates? Again, I hear the screaming of the younger me in the back of my mind, the memories resurfacing. Images of my daughters when we found them lost in the jungle flash by my mind’s eye. I hate where these powers came from. I

hate what Vandyne did to my daughters and I. I'm scared of what damage I could do. But I don't want to die here either. We could get out in time. I don't know how much of a charge I have though. I could only have one shot. I growl and slam a fist into the hull of the crate. Damnit, now isn't the time to let my reservations kill us. I take a shaky breath and steel my resolve. There's no other way.

"Morgan. I need cover. Give me one shot."

"You sure Edwards?"

I nod. "Do it."

"You heard him! Grenadiers, open fire! All marines, cover!"

The order is given, and all weapons light up. Enemy infantry scatters for cover as the thumping of automatic grenade launchers and a cacophony of automatic fire is soon accompanied by the *whump* of grenade detonations. Thrown frags are added to the mix. I have the mind to unclip my utility harness in case the lightning could set off my grenades or fry my Icebreaker, kicking it over to Morgan. He gets the idea, tossing explosives whilst securing the knife. The mech has an overabundance of targets who are now alternating between taking cover and firing to confuse its targeting momentarily while enemy infantry is suppressed.

It's facing the other way. Now's my chance.

"Check fire! Friendly moving in!" I rush from our cover. My allies adjust their aim accordingly.

As soon as the mech is in my sights, I raise my arm and focus. The stink of ozone burns at my nostrils as the electricity surges, its buzz like a severely clipping subwoofer in my ears. The pilot must have noticed. Heavy rotary cannons start swiveling towards me as the energy in my arm builds up like a burning pressure. It's now or never. I recall my training, focus the energy forward, and release.

The next few seconds are chaos as the buzzing intensifies. Light flashes throughout the room as arcs of electricity lash out at the menacing giant. It contacts the nose of the chassis directly. The machine seizes, shuddering as its electronics overload, sending mixed signals to motors, servos, and the guns. The aim skews, cannon fire becomes sporadic, and electricity arcs

across the entire hull in a spectacular, violent display of power. As the bolt starts to fade, the rear armor detonates outward towards the enemy infantry. The ammo is cooking off. I must've overheated the storage.

I stumble to a knee after the exertion. Everything feels seared as my vision begins to blur again. The cheering of my fellow marines fades as I struggle to maintain consciousness. I only barely register Morgan reaching me in time to start dragging me back to cover.

My vision fades, only returning sporadically to reveal different scenes to me. I see the dropships swooping into the hangar like great ravens, their guns spewing hot lead. I witness my comrades in a fighting retreat as I'm dragged up the boarding ramp of one of the ships. I lay eyes on the concerned face of my captain gazing down at me, a helmeted corpsman checking me over as the ramp hisses shut behind everyone. I squint instinctively as a blinding flash shines through the rear viewport. We barely escaped, didn't we?

Reeeest…

The voice sounds much gentler this time despite its eerie cadence. Darkness takes me as I gladly take the advice. It is a dreamless sleep…

#

October 21st, 2342. 1237 hours.

Feeling returns to me slowly as I feel consciousness return. Everything aches, and the first thing I notice is the incessant beep of an EKG. I can tell they lowered the volume, but quite frankly I wonder if I had been drinking last night for a moment. Then the events leading up to my passing out flood back to me. Right. The mission. We barely got away.

No. Not everyone made it out. More dog tags to add to the wall…

I then register another feeling. Wrapped around my right hand are two smaller hands. Opening my eyes slowly, I note the sterile white walls of a *Fyrebyrd* med-bay recovery suite. My gear is missing in place of a white T-shirt, and I'm guessing shorts. Turning my head to the right, I see my daughters gazing back at me, both gripping my hand firmly as relieved smiles play across their lips.

“Dad!” Rika bounds up to wrap her arms around me, eliciting a slight grunt from me. “Sorry,” she says sheepishly, lightening up on the hug.

Shinobu lets out a relieved sigh. “Thank God,” she mutters. “You scared us.”

“Sorry sweetheart. I’m home now though.” I reach over to gently pat her head. “Said I’d come home, didn’t I?”

She giggles softly. “You did. Thanks for keeping your promise.”

The door hisses open behind her, drawing our attention. Doctor Zumwalt and Captain Gates step in. I’d salute but…

“Ah, good, the patient has made a full recovery. I told you not to wind up back in my med-bay, didn’t I Sergeant?”

“Sorry doc. Had to be done.”

“Ah well. I hear you pulled off quite the feat. I expect we’ll have a long talk later. But the captain wishes to speak with you first. I’ll leave you be.” He turns to depart the room, chuckling on the way out.

I turn my eyes to Melissa next. “Captain? I…” Words fail me.

“You gave us all a good scare. How are you feeling?” Her voice is softer than usual.

“Everything feels like it’s on fire. Good sign I’m alive though.”

“It sounds like you’ll be up and about in no time then. I reviewed the mission footage. Some remarkable stuff, and you saved a lot of lives too.” Her expression turns a little melancholy. “We suffered some unfortunate losses, but the situation would have been far worse without you. Thank you.”

My ears burn a bit at that. Rika’s teasing returns to the forefront of my mind, especially with her and Shinobu smirking at me. Given the look Melissa is directing at me, I can’t help but wonder if there’s something to it…

“I saw your encounter with Vandyne.”

I’m brought back to reality, grimacing slightly. “You did huh?”

“I can’t imagine what that felt like. Will you be alright?”

I take a minute to think on it. It’s thoughtful of her to ask. That said, the encounter was… enlightening. “I’m not sure. There may still be remnants of what he was like before he turned into, well, you know. I don’t feel as angry as I did before. Now I’m just wondering why.”

“You think there’s more to what he did to us?” Shinobu asks, drawing a curious look from Rika.

I look at her and nod. “I do. He spoke like there was some kind of purpose behind it, like something drove him to it.” The revelations the creature presented return to the forefront for a moment. And what Matthias had to say... What my father had to say warrants concern.

Melissa hums thoughtfully. “It’s worth exploring. Hopefully the data you recovered will shed some light on that before long, and there is an FTL signature less than a day old leading deeper into the observation shadow. We’ll set course after it soon. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thank you.”

“I also saw the creature you encountered.”

Rika’s eyes widen. “Creature? What creature?” Her sister mimics her curious gaze.

I chuckle softly. “If Captain Gates allows it, I’ll tell you about it sometime” I look back up to Melissa. “Do you think I made the right decision letting it go?”

“What do you think?”

It’s a loaded question. On the one hand, the creature is still a complete wildcard. We know nothing of its greater intentions. Is it really some kind of guardian? On the other hand, it is a victim of my father’s experiments, no denying that. No one deserves to be under Vandyne’s scalpel. At the end of the day, the alien even helped me overcome a major obstacle. I never sensed malice from it; only desperation, fear, or gratitude. We may not have seen the last of it.

“Yeah. I think I made the right choice, given the circumstances.”

She smiles softly at me. “There you have it. Now we must look to the future.”

I rub the back of my neck, my cheeks heating up again. If that isn't approval, I don't know what is. And I note something else there too. She averts her gaze a little, but she is still smiling. Is she thinking about something, or being bashful? Rika's words come back to mind, and I begin to wonder… Oh, what the hell?

"Speaking of the future. Can we talk?"

My daughters share a knowing smirk.