

Revenant

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Ryan completed the checklist again.

Everything was ready, just like the four times before that.

Repeating the routine task helped him cope with the stress of the situation. He had to be sure of his equipment before wading into trouble.

The buzz of servo motors vibrated the floor as docking clamps established a seal on the airlock. A slight ping in his ear indicated his ship was now linked with the computer on the floating hulk. Century old protections were simply no match for modern counter-measures.

Core system diagnostic information appeared in his visor, confirming that communications, navigation, engines, and environmental controls were all offline. Thankfully structural integrity remained at 100 per cent despite the dreadnought's age. With no immediate concerns showing in the diagnostics, he ignored the remainder of the data and ordered a search through the derelict ship's passenger manifest. The results appeared instantly, listing over a hundred names, with one, a Doctor Cassandra Evans, flashing red in his display.

His heart raced. Finally, after a decade of searching, he might have found her.

“It’s just a name on a list, Ryan, don’t go nuts,” he said. “There’s still plenty that can go wrong.” Perhaps talking to oneself really was a sign of madness, you’d have to be crazy to do what he did.

Still, finding the doctor would be a huge step, and if she turned out to be clean humanity might finally be able to go home.

He set his excitement aside and reviewed the ship's log. The *Francis Drake* was a sleeper ship, one of nineteen such ships, launched a hundred and thirty-seven years ago with the dream of taking humanity to the stars. Designed to function autonomously, the fleet left Earth for the Gliese system with enough equipment and supplies to start a new life for their cryogenically preserved passengers.

Unfortunately, that dream became a nightmare.

Just like the other ships, the *Francis Drake* turned back toward Earth when its computer detected genetic anomalies in several of the colonists. It began as a bold step toward colonising another world, but resulted in the loss of Earth, and the near extinction of the human race.

With what's left of humanity barely clinging to life on a single space station orbiting an infected Earth, finding the doctor was a matter of survival. She was more than someone to be saved, she was the embodiment of hope. The hope that human beings might one day be able to reach for the stars again.

The lights above the airlock showed green, his ship was now firmly attached to the dreadnought's side.

Implants embedded in his brain allowed him to control ship systems with a thought. With the two ships now linked, that control

could also extend to the derelict once he restarted the reactor. Until then, he'd have to do things the old fashioned way.

Schematics appeared on his visor; the *Drake's* engineering section was about fifty metres away, and getting there was his first priority. Preliminary scans indicated that, apart from the cryogenic storage units in the ship's hold, there were no other life signs aboard, but he'd been on sleeper ships before.

It wasn't the living he needed to worry about.

Ryan shouldered his weapon and initiated the command to open the airlock. His finger hovered over the trigger; these first few seconds could be deadly.

A slight change in pressure told him the doors were open, and he fired immediately. The barrel of his rifle flaring as the husks attacked, their naked, desiccated bodies charged toward him with a primal need to kill.

The first one fell, its legs vaporised by the superheated plasma. Well-placed shots to the head and chest dropped a second just a heartbeat later, while a third closed quickly, arms extended, its emaciated legs pumping.

“Damn, these bastards are fast.”

He stepped to the side and let his attacker's momentum carry it past him, then finished it quickly with a tight burst into the husk's back.

Without pause, he flung the rifle away and spun around, releasing the monofilament blade built into his gauntlet. His arm whipped around, neatly decapitating the fourth as it loomed over him.

As quickly as it began, the fight was over.

Four of the *Drake's* once human occupants had been stilled. It was important for him to avoid thinking he'd killed them for, in truth, these unfortunates were dead the moment the contagion took them.

He recovered his rifle, and tagged each of the bodies, comparing their corrupted DNA against the passenger manifest he downloaded earlier. He had to make sure that the doctor was not among them, this ship would be useless if she'd been turned.

She wasn't.

Then, with his weapon once more braced against his shoulder, he took his first step onto the ship.

Without the benefit of artificial gravity, he relied on magnets built into his shoes to secure him to the floor. It was slow going, walking with them was never easy. He carefully picked his way forward, ever vigilant, as he negotiated several sealed bulkheads to reach the engineering section at the rear of the ship.

No matter how many times he'd done this, Ryan never failed to marvel at the sheer impressiveness of what these ships represented. The colony ships were the pinnacle of human engineering. Built at a time

when humanity was capable of imagining something grander than mere survival. When these ships launched, it was a civilization at the peak of its technological brilliance, and at the height of its audacity.

All nineteen colony ships were identical, each fitted with multiple redundant systems. That way, parts from other ships could be used to repair any damage, or to restart failed systems. The one thing they weren't equipped to deal with was a biological nightmare like this.

But now, with humanity on the precipice of extinction, these ships serve another purpose, no less significant than their previous goal. They now represented the last best hope for its salvation.

Ryan lowered his weapon to approach the control console. Normally, three people would be needed to restart the reactor but, either through good fortune or good design, it was possible for him to reach both the ignition switches and his cerebral interface could issue the commands. Unfortunately it required him to be pressed against the reinforced glass of the display with his arms fully extended.

He always hated this part, it left him completely exposed.

His implants interfaced with the *Drake's* computer via his own ship, and he mentally entered the restart codes while his outstretched hands maintained contact with the switches. Until the ignition sequence is accepted he was entirely at the mercy of fate, and she was ever the fickle mistress.

Three of the four commands had been entered when his proximity sensor went off. Suppressing a shudder, Ryan called up a schematic of the local area and overlaid it with the movement signatures. There were five of them; two approached from behind, one from the left and right, and one more from above. Without the artificial gravity he could expect attacks from all angles, but thankfully the zero-g also slowed them down.

He was able to issue the final command when the first one slammed into his back. His armour protected him from serious injury, but the bone jarring impact almost caused him to release the switches before the computer could process the instructions.

The magnetic locks in his boots held him in position while the mindless creature pounded him with its fists; each punch felt like a hammer blow. The restart process engaged seconds later, but it seemed like an eternity before Ryan was able to lower his arms. He released the boot locks with a thought, and pushed back hard against the console. With no gravity to hold him down, he flew across the room, avoiding the second husk as it bore down on him.

The bulk of his armour crushed the husk grappling him against the wall. The now broken mass of flesh stopped moving, but four husks stood between him and the rifle which he'd left behind. Still floating by the console.

He pushed himself up engaging the magnets again when he neared the roof of the engineering section. Concepts of up and down meant nothing in zero-g, and he needed every advantage to overcome this threat. Without the rifle, he had only the monofilament to fight with, but in these conditions using such a blade could be dangerous.

With slow, deliberate, steps he walked along the ceiling, each lumbering stride bringing him closer to his weapon. It was a massive gamble. Husks might be incapable of complex reasoning, but it would only be a matter of time before one of them thought to jump.

The husk that started above him now floated closer, its distended mouth opened wide. Ryan stepped forward and grabbed the creature's outstretched arms, swinging it around to collide with the three below. They crashed together in a tangle of flailing limbs, all of them silently mouthing their rage as he passed by overhead. But they recovered quickly, and seconds later they were flying at him, an expression of primal hunger on their faces.

Ryan released the magnet locks again, and kicked off the ceiling, twisting as he dived for the gun. He came up firing. At this range he barely needed to aim and gobs of superheated plasma spewed forth to punch holes through their unprotected bodies, vaporising heads, chests, and arms.

With this latest threat dealt with, Ryan turned his attention to the progress of the restart. Diagnostic readouts showed that the reactor had finally reached operating temperature, and core systems would soon come online. Barring any failures, he would have complete command of all ship systems in less than five minutes.

He spent the intervening time verifying the identity of the husks. Once again, the doctor was not among them, which meant that his mission on the *Drake* remained viable. Ryan knew it was far too early for hope, there was still plenty that could go wrong, but he did allow himself a moment to reflect on the possibility.

Three things confirmed the proper working of the artificial gravity systems. First, the indicator in his display turned green, then the tangled mass of stilled husks fell to the floor with a sickening crunch, and finally the weight of his armour settled on him like a mother's embrace; familiar, somewhat awkward, yet comforting nonetheless.

Atmospheric pressure and ambient warmth would take longer, but the environmental systems had also restarted smoothly. More than a century had passed since their last restart, followed by a decade lying dormant, without the slightest bit of maintenance. It was amazing that anything still functioned.

Soon, a procession of green indicators danced across his vision as one after the other, ship's systems came online bringing the Francis Drake back to life.

With the ship now fully under his control, Ryan hoped to avoid most potential threats as he made his way forward. Leaving engineering, he passed through the hold with its extensive supply of machinery and equipment, some of which would be worth a fortune in this post-earth economy. For all the mechanical wonders stored here, the *Francis Drake's* true worth would be known in the cryogenics section.

Ryan was forced to exit the hold via a maintenance shaft, when sensors reported movement in the corridor ahead. He crawled through the narrow passage for almost the entire length of the ship, emerging finally at the computer and communications core. Only one door now separated him from his destination and confirmation of the doctor's potential.

Kassandra Evans supposedly rested in cryogenic chamber 207, roughly fifty metres from the door in front of him. The computer showed that the doctor's chamber remained functional, and that all readings were within normal operational parameters.

So far, so good.

He lifted the rifle to his shoulder, and took several calming breaths. From here on in, every shot was critical, just one stray plasma blast and

the entire mission could be blown. The future of the entire human race hinged upon the next few seconds.

Ryan commanded the door to open.

A mere forty paces, separated Ryan from his goal. Forty steps between success and failure.

“Don’t fuck this up,” he said as he stepped into the room.

Cylindrical cryogenic chambers lined the walls, stacked five levels high to his left and right, like coffins in some ancient mausoleum. About a third of the delicate medical devices had been compromised, their reinforced glass lids smashed when the husks forced their way free. That meant there were forty of their once human occupants now loose on the ship.

One of those now leapt from a platform above him.

Ryan raised his gun, aimed, and fired, vaporizing the mindless creature before it hit the ground.

Ten paces down, thirty to go.

Two more approached, one from the left and one from the right.

He spun left, sending a short burst of plasma into the creature’s flesh, and continued moving forward. The second one lunged, just as Ryan skipped away before stilling it with another burst from his gun.

Twenty paces. Half-way there.

Another husk leapt from the platform above. It crashed heavily onto Ryan's back, knocking him to the floor. He struggled to push himself up, but a series of heavy blows sent him down again. His gun was useless with the creature this close, so he twisted and turned until he could flip around to face it. Fists rained down on his chest and hammered his helmet. His armour sorely tested by every blow.

Ryan extended the monofilament blade and moved his arm about in an arc, slashing at the creature's abdomen. Entrails spilled onto the floor as he pushed the stricken monster aside. His legs became tangled in the grizzly remains, while a second husk came in from behind, its fists poised to strike.

He dodged sideways and it pummelled the floor where he'd laid only a heartbeat earlier then slashed at it with his blade, sending its forearms spinning away. The creature's suddenly shortened limbs caused it to over balance, and Ryan had time to bring the rifle around. A squeeze of the trigger at each, and both vile creatures were sent to hell in a cascade of burning plasma.

Ryan spun completely around, the rifle held ready as he scanned the area for more husks.

He saw none.

The doctor's chamber was close, only ten paces away. From here it looked intact, but Ryan understood the folly of making assumptions. He

needed to be sure, and for that he had to keep moving. His heart hammered with every step, head turning as he observed every approach; up, down, left, and right, leaving nothing to chance.

The monitors above the metallic sarcophagus shone with a cool blue light that assured him of its proper function. His pace quickened, excitement finally winning out over caution.

The end of his search lay before him. After so many years he was almost afraid to look down, as if doing so would wake him from a cruel dream.

“Look at her you idiot!” After a deep breath he forced his gaze downward, and studied the doctor’s supine form.

He’d found her.

She lay on her back, arms by her side with small tubes embedded in them delivering nutrients. She appeared to be intact. His visual observation confirmed the chamber’s assertion that she was free of the mutagen.

Ryan allowed himself a moment to savour this discovery; the doctor was here, alive and viable. He smiled as he commanded the ship’s engine’s to fire.

It was time to bring the doctor home.

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Kassandra imagined it would feel much colder. Though, in truth, she really didn't know what to expect, this was the first time she'd ever been woken from cryogenic suspension. It was not something she was keen to repeat.

Her arms and legs were unresponsive, and her vision was limited to a vague sense of light. She prayed that her paralysis was only temporary. She'd already sacrificed so much to be part of this mission, surely it wouldn't take her arms and legs as well.

Hearing returned along with her sight, and with effort she managed to turn her head slightly to take in the sights and sounds of medical equipment flashing, beeping, and humming all around her. Tubes attached to the machines fed liquids into her bloodstream, while wires carried biometric information back.

Where was she? Had something happened to the ship?

As she contemplated her situation, an unfamiliar man entered the room, carrying a glass of water and a straw.

"Welcome back, Doctor," the man said. "I'm afraid I have some rather disturbing news."

"For your protection, and ours, you've been placed in a medically induced paralysis until we can be sure you are free of the mutation."

Kassandra opened her mouth to speak, but found herself unable to form the words. A knot formed in her stomach, the machines beeping faster as her breathing and heart rate quickened.

The man's gaze flicked briefly to the monitors. "I expect this must be quite overwhelming for you, but please try and remain calm while I adjust the paralysis so that we can talk. There's much we need to discuss."

He placed the glass down on the bedside table and reached across her to adjust the flow on one of the many tubes before sitting down. He looked her in the eye for a moment, wearing what she imagined was his version of a reassuring smile.

"If you don't mind, I'll begin with a bit of history while we wait for the medication to wear off enough for you to ask questions. It is the 9th of April in the year 2467, and you are on Purgatory Station."

Kassandra's confusion must have shown through the effect of the paralysis.

"It would have been called Haven at the time you left, but a lot has changed since then. Your ship, and all its surviving crew have been placed in quarantine pending a thorough evaluation of their condition. I expect that quite a few of them will have to be euthanized, but some, like you, are showing promising signs."

The word euthanized set Cassandra's heart racing once more. The man paused to study the monitors closely for several seconds.

“You see, Doctor Evans, humanity is teetering on the brink of extinction. This station is all that remains of our people. It's almost funny when you think about it.” He snorted and shook his head. “A civilization that once dreamt of colonising another world, now clings to life in a metal box orbiting a planet that has been lost to it for nearly a century.”

Kassandra's mind reeled. Her mission departed an overcrowded Earth, now only one orbital station remained from a population of almost ten billion. She struggled to ask what happened but managed little more than a faint croaking sound.

“Don't push yourself, Doctor.” The man took the glass of water and held the straw to her lips. “Your body needs time to recover from the cryogenic stasis, please relax and I will explain everything.”

He held the straw to her lips and Cassandra took a tentative sip of the water. The liquid felt wonderful in her mouth, and she savoured the feel of it flowing down her throat. It felt good to be able to drink again. To think that a mere sip of water could give her so much joy helped to put her situation into perspective. She was alive, for now at least, and she couldn't afford to succumb to fear. No matter what the future held, she resolved to face it with her usual strength and determination.

The man's eyes narrowed, and he studied her face closely. "I can see you are a fighter," he said, placing the glass of water back on the bedside table. "That is good. You will need such determination to survive the world that your mission created."

What? Kassandra turned her head slightly, the paralysis was starting to wear off.

"That's right, Doctor, it is because of the work you did that we find ourselves in this predicament."

"I... I don't understand," she managed. Her voice little more than a croaking whisper.

"Something went wrong. The changes you made to the colonists to prepare them for life on their new home didn't proceed as planned."

"But that's not possible. We tested the process for years."

"Not enough, Doctor, not enough."

Kassandra's jaw dropped, if what he said was true then her life's work was in ruins. "How can this be?"

"The increased bone density, greater muscle mass, auto-immune, and respiratory changes you introduced to help the colonists survive the higher gravity and exotic atmosphere of Gliese 581 g worked perfectly. Unfortunately, in 90% of cases, something in what you did also impacted their minds."

“When the on-board computers detected the error they aborted the mission and returned to Earth, unleashing a very fast, very strong, and very resilient killing machine on an unsuspecting population.”

It was impossible to believe. Potential genetic models ran through her mind while she processed the information; nothing in testing even hinted that something like this could happen.

“How does it spread?” she queried. Perhaps understanding the means of transmission would shed some light on the cause.

The man shook his head. “I’m afraid we don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” That made no sense, knowing how a contagion spread is crucial for containment. It was biology 101. “What have your scientists been doing all these years?”

“They died,” the man said simply. “The fact is, we no longer have anyone with sufficient skill or experience to tackle it.”

Now she understood. “Which is why you need me.”

“Which is why we need you.”

Not only had she caused the apocalypse, she was now the only one capable of fixing it. The realisation settled like a weight on her chest. Breathing became difficult as the burden of responsibility threatened to drain what little strength she had.

She forced herself to breathe. “What do you need me to do?”

The mechanical whine of the engines replaced the roar of re-entry as the drop-ship breached the atmosphere. Ryan looked across the cramped compartment to the Doctor. She sat there, eyes fixed on a spot on the floor, idly scratching her arm where the nano-machines were injected. She must have sensed his scrutiny, because she lifted her head and gave him a kind of half-smile.

“Explain to me again what we’re doing here?” she asked. A slight quiver in her voice betrayed her anxiety.

“You don’t know?” One of Ryan’s eyebrows cocked. “I was told this was your idea.”

Kassandra let out a long sigh. “Technically yes,” she said, leaning back until her head rested against the wall. “It all still seems so unreal.”

Ryan could appreciate that. Only five months ago, this woman had been entombed in a derelict colony ship floating in the middle of nowhere. It took guts to do what they were attempting and, despite his reservations, he couldn’t help but to admire the woman’s courage.

“Things will get plenty real soon enough,” he said, his tone a little harsher than intended. He’d worked alone for so long that dealing with other people was an effort. “It’s not too late for you to change your mind, you know. I can collect whatever you need and bring it up to Purgatory.”

She shook her head. “The station is far too important to risk bringing in contaminated samples. You need me to make sure they’re

clean, and that's not something I can do remotely. It looks like you're stuck with me."

"The station's not the only thing that's important; you could have sent one of your assistants."

"Perhaps, but unlike me, they're not immune to the contagion."

"I spent a good many years looking for you, Doc. Having you down here with me now makes me wonder if all that effort is about to be wasted."

Kassandra let out a long breath. "Yeah, about that... I'm not sure if I should thank you for bringing me back, or kill you."

Whatever response Ryan might have made was forgotten when the pilot's voice sounded over the intercom telling they were two minutes away. He checked his equipment with long practiced ease, then kneeled down to check that the doctor's armour and helmet had been fastened securely.

"Hand me your weapon," he said after adjusting an armoured panel at the base of her skull.

"Don't have one," she replied. "I've never fired a gun before, and I didn't think a zombie infested building was the best place for me to start."

"I'd argue that it's the perfect place."

She threw him a sideways glance. “Be that as it may, you’ll agree that guns aren’t so useful up close and to hit anything at a distance requires a skill I don’t possess.”

“I can’t have you down there unarmed.”

Kassandra rummaged about in her pack and took out a rounded length of steel.

“I won’t be unarmed,” she said then slammed the bar down on the bench beside her, leaving a sizable dent in the reinforced metal frame.

“The genetic enhancements I developed actually worked on me.”

“Okay then,” Ryan managed, the clang from her demonstration still ringing in his ears. “Be sure and go for the head. Broken limbs will slow them, but it takes major head trauma to put one down.”

Kassandra nodded. “Good to know.”

Ryan place a hand on her shoulder. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

“No,” she said, holding his gaze for a moment before turning away. “But it needs doing, and whether I like it or not I’m the only one who can. Quite frankly I’m shitting myself.”

“Fear is good. It tells me you’re realistic about our chances.”

The ship lurched as the landing thrusters engaged, causing Ryan to grip a strap on the ceiling to keep his balance. A dull thud reverberated

through the hull followed a few seconds later by the opening of the landing bay door.

“We’re here.” Ryan shouldered his pack and turned to face the doctor.

Kassandra flipped the visor down on her helmet and hefted the steel bar.

“Okay,” she said with grim determination. “Let’s do this.”

The pair stepped onto the roof of the NaviPharm building, a pharamacogenetic research centre where, more than a century ago, Kassandra and her team developed the genetic modifications that so devastated humanity. The research centre consisted of a single building, arranged in a star shape with each of its seven three storey arms connected to a five storey hub, which is where they stood right now. The roof afforded them a wonderful view over the now overgrown grounds and out to the city beyond.

Ryan braced the rifle on his shoulder and moved to the side, all the while scanning the sight line for any sign of movement. Kassandra, steel bar in hand, jogged along beside him in silence.

As soon as he was certain the roof was clear, he signalled to the pilot who immediately lifted off. With luck, they’d be back in a few hours with the samples so that Kassandra could get to work on the cure.

To a man born and raised in space, accustomed to the constant hum of generators, the complete lack of any noise was eerie.

Their destination was several hundred feet below ground and the pair had a long way to go. All completed research projects ended up in what Cassandra called the vault.

A huge underground warehouse, strictly temperature controlled, and hermetically sealed, designed to keep their discoveries and their failures safe. It was a veritable biological fortress, thankfully Cassandra had the keys.

When she first proposed this plan Ryan was sceptical, but Cassandra assured him that the vault would still be secure. It was built to survive disaster, with multiple redundant power plants to keep the machinery running without the need for human intervention.

Ryan was pretty sure that a zombie apocalypse wasn't in any of the engineer's minds when they designed the place. He just hoped that Cassandra's faith in their abilities wasn't misplaced.

He led them across the roof to the central hub and entered a fire escape stair that descended to the ground floor of the research facility. The augmented reality display built into their helmets kicked in to compensate for the low light of the interior, and they made their way down one cautious step at a time.

It was slow going.

Ryan took the lead, the barrel of his weapon moving from side to side as he went, ready to deal with any husks that may be lurking in the stairwell. The zig-zag of the stairwell was the perfect place for a surprise attack, but they made it down without incident.

They exited the stairwell into a large, high ceilinged foyer, and Ryan allowed himself to relax a little. Thick panes of glass rose from floor to ceiling letting in plenty of light, and the sparse furnishings meant there were few places where danger can hide. Still, Ryan had been at this long enough to know that looks could be deceiving.

The building's main doors caught his eye and, activating the visor's zoom feature, Ryan focused in on them. A chain had been wrapped tightly through the handles to keep the doors from opening. Looking closer, he saw signs of violence on the doors and adjacent windows. This building had definitely been swarmed, but years ago judging by the piles of leaves against the glass.

“What're you looking at?” Cassandra queried.

“The door's been secured with a chain,” he pointed out. “That means people must have taken refuge in here, and where once were people...”

“Now there are husks.”

Ryan nodded, his eyes scanning the foyer one more time before he stepped into the expanse of light. “Stay close.”

They moved swiftly across the seemingly deserted space to an elevator lobby twenty metres away. When they reached the door Ryan lowered his gun and removed a small breaching pod from the pouch at his waist. He jammed the wedge shaped device into the seam of the doors and pressed the button. There was a brief high-pitched squeal followed by a whoosh as the heavy metal doors were forced apart by opposing gravitational fields.

“Do you want to go first?” he said, inclining his head toward the exposed elevator shaft.

Kassandra swallowed. “Can’t we just take the stairs?”

“Too risky. You said it yourself, there are husks in here and a stairwell is a god awful place to have to fight.”

Kassandra motioned toward the gaping hole behind him. “So instead you want us to go down there?”

“That’s right. We anchor a line and drop right past any trouble. We’ll be standing outside the vault in no time.”

“Gee, you make it sound so easy.”

“That’s because it is.”

Kassandra took a step forward and peered into the darkened lift well. “I’m not convinced.”

Movement in the corner of his eye caught Ryan’s attention and he spun around to face the threat.

“Get down!” he said and fired twice. The first shot missed, hitting a wall behind the fast approaching husk. The second struck it high in the chest, vaporizing the creature’s left arm and part of its jaw.

Still it kept coming, and behind that lurched three more.

Ryan squeezed the trigger a third time, finally dropping the approaching husk once and for all, before turning his attention to the other three. He settled himself, taking a moment to adjust to being planet-side again, then let out a breath and fired, moving the gun smoothly between targets.

Each shot struck home. The oncoming creatures’ heads disappearing in a flash of superheated plasma.

Beside him, Cassandra stood rigid, jaw clenched, her face a mix of terror and disgust. Ryan certainly knew that look. It was one thing to imagine the husks in the abstract, and quite something else to see them for real. Cassandra might be strong, but this was something she’d need to work through on her own.

A pity they didn’t have time.

“Stairs or shaft?” he said. Clicking his fingers in front of her face to get her attention.

“What?” she said, absently.

“Do we take the stairs or the shaft?”

Kassandra finally tore her eyes from charred bodies and looked at him. “The shaft. Definitely the shaft.”

Ryan nodded and set to work.

He drilled two belaying pins into the floor about a foot in front of the door and tested them both for purchase. “Okay,” he said once he was satisfied. “There should be a karabiner in your pouch. Take it out.”

“A what?”

He fished around the pouch at his belt and took out a light weight metal loop with a spring loaded clasp on one side. “One of these.”

Ryan nodded when Kassandra retrieved hers. “Now clip it onto that plate in the centre of your chest.” He said, tapping her armour to indicate where he meant.

He waited for her to do as he instructed. “That’s right, now pull on the loop like this.” The ring came away from his armour trailing a thin line of metal wire. “This is high tensile steel. You’ve got about two hundred metres of it spooled up in there.”

“It’s so thin,” Kassandra said, looking at the wire.

“Don’t be put off by that,” he said while looking her up and down. “It can support up to eight hundred kilos.”

She looked at him flatly. “You’d best think carefully about what you say next or I’m liable to shove you into that shaft.”

Ryan smiled. “Take the hook and clip it onto the eyehole. Then we can begin our descent.”

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Rappelling down the darkened elevator shaft was actually much easier than she expected, and, she had to admit, far quicker than taking the stairs.

The stairs would have been horrible. Especially if they had been attacked. Cassandra shuddered, imagining an encounter with those four husks in the narrow confines of the stairway. No, this was a far better option.

“Hey,” she said as they dropped from floor to floor. Numbers on the closed elevator doors made it easy to track their progress. They’d just passed sub level nine, only five more to go. “I was just wondering how we are planning to go back up.”

Ryan just smiled and continued his descent. Once they were both at the bottom, he reached into the pouch again and removed something that looked a bit like a stapler with an oversized handle.

“This will help us ascend,” he explained as he clipped the contraption to the cable and squeezed the lever to cut the wire while leaving the handle thing attached. “When we’re ready to climb up we

release the handle lever it up and then lock it in place so we can pull ourselves up.”

“And I suppose it’s got some fancy name as well.”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“Well that’s disappointing.”

Kassandra severed the cable and prepared the handle for their ascent like Ryan showed her, while he set about getting the lift doors open. He reached up to the corners, lifted the locking clamps, and eased the door aside. The process took a little more time but was much quieter than using the breaching pod.

When she was done Ryan stepped into the corridor, gun at the ready, and scanned the area for threats. The green of night vision gave the scene an eerie edge, which added to a sense of dread Kassandra didn’t notice before. It gave her an idea of what Ryan must have gone through, and she shuddered at the thought of him fighting his way through all those derelicts in the dead of space, alone, for her.

“It’s clear,” he said. “Let’s go.”

The passage to the Vault was short, roughly twenty metres of straight corridor led from the elevator to the reinforced steel door. Last time Kassandra had walked down here the way was clear of obstructions. Now their way was blocked at regular intervals by large metal crates that forced them into a zig-zag path. Ryan led the way, his gun always moving

left, right, up, and down. Her heart pounded in her chest and she found herself holding her breath as they rounded each crate, until slowly, carefully, they reached the massive metal door. A panel to the right of the door glowed slightly.

Kassandra's heart soared. The power was still on.

Kassandra took a step toward the panel, but Ryan placed a restraining hand on her shoulder. She glanced at him questioningly and he shook his head while pointing toward the door.

It took her a minute to figure out what he meant, but then she understood. In her excitement she failed to notice that the door was already open. Only a crack, but it meant that the vault had been breached. Her earlier relief drained away, and was replaced with a knot in the pit of her stomach.

"What now?" she said, trying desperately to keep the despair out of her voice.

"We go in," Ryan said.

"We go in," Kassandra repeated absently. "Of course we go in. I mean, that's why we're here isn't it? Just because the door is open doesn't mean the samples are contaminated. Nothing has changed. We go in, collect the samples, and leave. Right?"

Ryan just looked at her.

She nudged him. "Right?"

“Are you done?”

She took a deep breath. “Yes, I think so.”

“Good. Get behind me, move when I move, and stay close.”

Ryan reached forward with one arm and pulled the vault door open, then raised his weapon and stepped into the room. Cassandra followed closely, still a bit flustered by her little meltdown.

Inside, the Vault was lit.

A lot had changed since the last time she was here. The long rows of shelves had been cleared and heavy tarpaulins were draped over them. Tables, chairs, and other equipment had been brought in from above, all of it littered with personal odds and ends. Clearly this room had served as a refuge for a large number of people.

What happened, and where were those people now? The knot in the pit of her stomach told her she already knew the answer to those questions.

“Contact right side high,” Ryan’s called as he fired. His shots burned a hole through the first of the husks and the creature fell, but there were at least two others behind it.

Sound to the left caused Cassandra to spin around. “Two more coming in from the left.”

Ryan’s second burst of fire took out another one. “Range?”

Kassandra's mind reeled. She did have a well-developed spatial awareness, but she'd never been forced to make such a calculation with monsters bearing down on her. "Umm, it's about –" the words died in her mouth when both husks dissolved in a glittering cascade of plasma. Stunned, she looked over her shoulder at Ryan. He stood there, gun still at the ready, with the beginnings of a smile tugging up the corners of his mouth. "Sorry about that," she said.

"I bet you're wishing you took that gun now," he said.

"Why would I need a gun when I have you?"

Ryan chuckled. "Fine. But next time make sure you tell me how close they are."

Kassandra raised an eyebrow. "But we're in the vault, I don't think there'll be a next time."

He put a hand on her shoulder. "There's always a next time."

Kassandra shuddered, she didn't know how many more 'next times' her heart could take. "Wow. You really do know how to show a girl a good time."

"So, where to now?"

She took a moment to get her bearings. "The restricted storage area is this way. You know what I don't get?" she said, as she picked her way between the tarpaulin covered shelves. "Earth has been effectively lost for about a hundred years, right?"

“More or less.”

“Then how is it that these husks are still alive?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call them alive.”

“What else could you call it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never really thought about it.”

“There’s no way the genetic enhancements I designed could be responsible for such longevity.” They arrived at a break in the shelves which formed a kind of crossroads. Cassandra paused for a moment, looked left then right, and chose the left hand path. “My work aimed to give the colonists the physical capability to survive in a high gravity environment. This is something else entirely.”

“Is that really important?” Ryan asked. “It’s their strength and speed that makes them dangerous.”

“True, but strength and speed isn’t what robbed them of their humanity. We find what did that and we find what caused this damned mess.”

“What do you propose?”

“My samples alone won’t be enough. I’ll have to study one of them too.”

“You’ll never be allowed to bring a husk to Purgatory. It’s far too dangerous.”

Kassandra shook her head. “We need to take risks if we’re serious about beating this thing.”

“Perhaps, but not that.” Ryan shuddered. “Never that.”

Kassandra stopped walking and looked at Ryan. The look on his face sent a shiver through her. “I can understand your concern, Ryan, really I do, but we can’t solve a puzzle with only half the pieces.”

“Purgatory is all we have left,” he said. “Find another way.”

“There is no other way.”

Ryan’s jaw tightened. “Then, Doctor, until we find one, we continue the mission as planned.”

Kassandra pursed her lips. She thought about trying to push her point further but decided against it. She could see that Ryan would not be moved on this. “Come on, the storage area is this way.”

#

Ryan followed Kassandra through the maze of shelves, still thinking about her idea to bring a husk up to purgatory. He knew what she was saying made logical sense, but the *Fall* was just history to her. While she journeyed through space in cryogenic sleep, the people of earth were fighting for their survival. And they lost.

Kassandra didn’t know anyone who’d lived through the end of days. The horrors that Ryan’s mother had endured were something

nobody should ever have to face. Humanity had a long road back, and Purgatory needed to be kept safe no matter what.

Kassandra paused at another intersection, she turned her head from side to side, and after a moment's thought, led them down the right hand passage. Ryan followed, always on the lookout for any sign of trouble. Though, in truth, he didn't expect to find any more husks in this room. The creatures were an unsubtle enemy, preferring to charge in blindly at their first opportunity rather than lie in wait. But Ryan had been at this long enough to never take anything for granted. It's one of the reasons he was still alive, when so many of his fellows were not.

They slowed down when they turned another corner, Kassandra taking time to read the reference numbers below each of the grey metal containers that filled the shelves.

"This is it," she said, tapping one such container on the third shelf. "Now let's hope my emergency override codes are still recognised."

Kassandra leaned down and entered a series of numbers into a keypad located on the container's side. For a moment that seemed to stretch for hours nothing happened, then a small light above the keypad changed from red to green.

Kassandra moved her hand around to the front and opened the door, letting out a long breath as she did so. "We're past the first stage."

Ryan peered over her shoulder. It looked like the interior of a refrigerator, only instead of food items the shelves were filled with sealed bags, tagged with barcodes and labelled with what to him were a meaningless list of numbers. They must have meant something to Cassandra, who ran her finger along the codes, moving back and forth as she read them.

“What is that?” Ryan asked. “It doesn’t look like genetic samples.”

“It’s not.” Cassandra said as she decided on one of the bags and pulled it out. “This is the emergency catalogue for this line of shelves. This bag holds the access codes for the storage container we need.”

“I thought you already had the codes.”

Kassandra shook her head. “The codes I know are definitely obsolete, they changed them every few weeks. This catalogue exists to allow access in the event of a major disaster. The work we did here was important, and if everything went sideways we needed a way for any survivors to get hold of the research materials. The directors were smart enough to understand that concepts like secrecy and competitive advantage were worthless when measured against survival.”

“How surprisingly forward thinking of them.”

“I know, right,” Cassandra said with a slight chuckle. “It’s one of the reasons I started working here in the first place.” She cracked the seal on the bag and retrieved the folded sheet of paper inside. Her eyes

scanned the document. “Okay, we need to find container 37 dash 1 dot 4 dot 6,” she said, turning her head from side to side before pointing to their left. “That’s the one, just over there.”

Ryan looked over to where she indicated. Just another brushed metal box with a keypad and a light, though much larger than the one they’d just opened.

Kassandra took the paper with her and approached the box. She held it in one quivering hand, while she entered a long series of numbers into the keypad.

Crash! A loud clang echoed through the vault.

Kassandra’s head snapped up. “What was that?”

“Only one thing it could be,” Ryan said, turning toward the source of the noise. He closed his eyes for a moment while his implants accessed the vault’s surveillance feed. “We’ve got company. At least a dozen already inside, with more behind them.”

Kassandra sucked a breath. “Dear god.”

“How much time do you need?”

“Um ... maybe another minute.”

Before Ryan could respond, the first of the husks rounded the corner at a run. Ryan swung the barrel of his rifle toward it and squeezed the trigger. The creature’s torso vaporised, and its limbs hit the floor with a wet slap.

“Try and work faster,” he said, as a second husk came into view, followed a heartbeat later by two more.

Ryan fired again and again. The narrow gap between the shelves made it impossible for him to miss, but each time the creatures got closer. He glanced behind him at Cassandra, who – to her immense credit – worked furiously at gaining access to the storage unit that held their prize. He was about to turn back when he spotted movement at the end of the line of shelves behind her.

He shot the husk twice, sending it sprawling backward until it crashed into a second one. The husks were coming at them from both directions.

They were surrounded.

Alternating sides as he fired, Ryan kept their attackers at bay. It couldn't last long, the noose was tightening about them. In a matter of seconds they would be overwhelmed.

“Got it!” Cassandra cried as the storage container door opened with a hiss.

Ryan fell back to stand beside her, the barrel of his gun delivering bursts of glowing death to the oncoming husks. “I can't keep this up for much longer.”

Kassandra had her pack open on the ground beside her while she transferred the contents of the storage container to it. As soon as she

finished, she pulled the pack closed, threw it over her shoulders, and stood up hefting the steel bar. “Which way?”

“Hold on,” Ryan said, still firing as he unhooked a plasma grenade from his belt and tossed it into the growing mass of undead before them. The small metal tube hit the ground about twenty paces away and exploded in a burst of searing heat and light that obliterated any organic matter in the vicinity.

The air was rank with the stench of burning flesh.

“Holy shit,” Cassandra said. “Do you have any more of those things?”

“A couple,” Ryan replied as he mopped up the remaining husks with his gun. “Let’s go.”

They moved back the way they came, navigating the stacked shelves carefully as they picked a path out. They made good time, having the vault’s surveillance feed in Ryan’s H.U.D. allowed them to avoid the biggest threats, but once outside the main door they were on their own.

Pausing at threshold, Ryan kept his weapon up as he scanned the darkened corridor to the elevator shaft. The zigzag pattern of crates along its length added dangerous twists and turns to what would once have been a short walk.

“Stay close,” he said and stepped into the corridor.

“The stairs are over there on the right,” Cassandra said as she walked behind him.

“We’re not taking the stairs.”

“Then what—”

“Elevator shaft,” Ryan said before she could finish. “All the husks that just attacked us likely came from the stairs. Trust me, we do not want to go in there.”

Somewhere behind them, something screamed.

A second scream sounded a heartbeat later, this time from the stairwell.

“Banshees.” Ryan’s blood ran cold.

“Banshees? What’re they?”

“Like husks, only smarter. They often work together, using their calls to drive the husks before them. Come on, we don’t have much time.”

Ryan moved quickly through the maze of stacked crates with Cassandra close behind. They passed the door to the stairwell and entered the elevator shaft they’d used to reach the vault.

“Now what?” Cassandra asked, looking up at the rappelling lines still dangling from the ground floor a hundred metres overhead.

The Banshees screamed again. The piercing wail followed by the sound of running feet.

“Cover me,” Ryan said, handing Cassandra the plasma rifle. He then took hold of the short length of line that dangled from Cassandra’s chest plate and yanked on it to reveal more of the impossibly strong rope. He fished around in the pouch at his waist to remove what looked like a sheet of skin. “This is a molecular bonding agent,” he explained as he grabbed hold of the hanging rope wrapped the film around the two ends. “This stuff will join them like they’d never been cut.”

Kassandra’s looked past Ryan’s shoulder. Her eyes went wide and she squeezed the trigger several times in quick succession. “Hurry, Ryan!”

She fired blindly into the oncoming wall of withered flesh. One of her shots struck a husk in the face, knocking it backward into the one directly behind it, sending them both to the ground. The rest of the horde didn’t slow down. They trampled the fallen pair into the concrete floor as the chilling cries of the banshees spurred them on.

“You’re doing great,” he said, impressed once again by her ability to keep a cool head. He’d seen trained soldiers wither under less stressful conditions.

The two seconds that it took for the bond to seal felt like an age.

“Use your legs to control your ascent,” Ryan said as he let go of the line.

“Wha—”

Ryan interrupted Cassandra's response with a slap to her chest plate that released the ratchet clamp on the spool and sent her shooting upwards, taking the gun with her.

He immediately wrapped another of the bonding sheets to his own line, just as the mindless creatures piled into the confined space of the elevator shaft, all of them intent on tearing Ryan to pieces. He could do nothing but wait. Trusting his armour to keep him safe until the lines were joined and he could follow Cassandra up to safety.

Fists pounded against his back, and teeth broke on the plates covering his arms as the ravenous husks struck. Ryan twisted his body to try and soften the blows, but there were too many and he could do little except weather the storm.

As soon as the bond was complete he thumped at his chest and felt himself being pulled upward. One of the husks managed to grab hold of his legs as his shot away. A well-placed kick to its arm snapped bone and it fell back down to the mess of writhing bodies below.

When he reached the top, he found Cassandra dangling over the middle of the shaft.

Ryan smiled as he came up beside her. "Are you okay?"

She didn't turn to look at him, instead she had the gun raised and was scanning the area outside the lift for threats. "You could have given me some warning."

“I didn’t have time.”

She turned to look at him, thrusting the gun in his face. “I think this belongs to you.”

“Keep it for a second. There’s something I need to do first.”

Ryan unclipped another grenade, armed it, and dropped it down into the shaft below. For a second or two nothing happened, then the base of the shaft erupted in a flaming ball of light.

“Are you ready to get out of here?” he asked once the blast had subsided.

“You bet I am.”

#

“And you are certain that there is no other way?” Terry Anderson, the chairperson of the Purgatory governing council, said from behind a thick pane of hermetically sealed glass. A tall, thin man, with bulbous eyes, a receding hairline, and a hooked nose, the Chairman could never be considered attractive, yet he exuded a powerful charisma that perhaps explained his popularity among the people of the station. If Cassandra could convince him of the merits of her plan, then she knew for certain that the rest of the council would fall into line.

“I assure you, Mister Chairman,” Kassandra replied. “I have exhausted all other avenues of research. Without access to the infected I have reached the limits of what I can do up here.”

The Chairman looked at her. “But this plan of yours ... I don’t know ... it seems needlessly risky.”

“I agree that it is risky, but I do not accept that it is needlessly so. I had hoped that the samples recovered from the NaviPharm vault would shed more light on the nature of the contagion. Unfortunately all they have done is confirm my belief that the genetic modifications I designed are not the source of the plague.”

The man tapped his chin with his eyes unfocussed.

Kassandra had seen that look many times before when the Chairman was considering his response. Conservative the man might be, but over the past months she has learned to respect his process.

“Very well, Doctor,” he said after a brief pause. “I will allow this, but I insist that anyone who goes must be a volunteer. I will not have the deaths of any of our people on my conscience.”

“Of course, Mister Chairman. I wouldn’t dream of sending anyone to Earth against their will.”

The man nodded. “Be sure and let me who it is.”

“Actually, Sir, I was planning on going myself.”

“Absolutely not. I forbid it. You are just too important, Doctor.”

“I’m sure I don’t need to remind you that I’ve been to the surface before.”

The chairman rolled his eyes. “I am well aware of that, Doctor. And even if my memory were to fade, then this massive glass wall between us is an effective reminder.”

“Then why?”

“Last time you were the only one who could go. You knew where to look, you had the codes, and only you knew what we needed to recover. That is not the case now.”

“I understand that, Mister Chairman, but there is one thing that you might have overlooked.”

“And what is that, Doctor?”

“I am still the only person that we know for sure is immune to the effects of the contagion. Even allowing for the fact the study will be done under strictly controlled conditions, there is still the possibility that they could become infected.”

“I see.”

“Like you said, Terry, I don’t want anyone’s death on my conscience either.”

The man’s mouth opened and closed a few times. “Well, yes, I ... what I mean is....” His words tumbled out in fits and starts, and Cassandra waited for him to regain control of his diction.

Eventually, he sighed. “Very well, Doctor. I can see that your mind is quite made up on the subject, and I have to admit that you make some very valid points.”

“Thank you, Mister Chairman.” She fought to keep the triumphant grin from her face. “I knew you would agree with me once presented with all the facts.”

The Chairman pursed his lips, and Cassandra realised she had gone too far. “Though capable of conceding to your superior arguments, Doctor, I am still petty enough to take offence at being condescended to.”

“I’m sorry, Alex, I shouldn’t—”

“You will have your mission, but you are to play no role in the capture of the infected. Only once the area has been secured, and by suitably capable others mind you, will you be permitted to leave the station.”

“But—”

“Do I make myself clear, Doctor?”

Kassandra nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

#

Light from the blast illuminated the corridor as Ryan ducked around the corner. Once clear of the debris he turned back around, ready

to lay down a burst of suppression fire so his teammate could clear the area.

Three husks emerged, from the flames and smoke. They saw Ryan and charged headlong into a barrage of gunfire that vaporised them completely.

“I’m clear!” his teammate said over the communication channel.

Ryan waited for a second or two, in case any more husks had survived the explosion.

Nothing moved.

“Okay, it looks like this level is secure,” he said.

“Three levels down, only two more to go. At this rate we’ll be home for dinner.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Marcus. We haven’t met the Banshees yet.”

Ryan entered the stairwell, where Marcus waited with his gun held at the ready. The pair carefully negotiated the stairs to the ground floor, pausing to confirm the entryway was clear before they stepped out onto the foyer. The area looked exactly as Ryan remembered from his previous visit.

“You’ve been here before. Which way should we go?”

“The last trip wasn’t a sightseeing tour. We just got in and out as quick as we could.”

“In and out eh?” Marcus said. “That sounds about right. That hot doctor is wasted on you. She needs a man who cares enough to take his time.” Even with the visor completely covering Marcus’ face Ryan could see the man’s lascivious grin.

Ryan sighed. “Let’s start with the East Wing.”

The massive glass panels forming the exterior wall let in plenty of light despite not having been cleaned for more than a hundred years. A luxury after a career spent combing through the narrow confines of derelict starships.

Ryan felt he could get used to such light and wide open spaces. It was nice too, not having to worry about oxygen supply or explosive decompression. Now that he thought about it, Earth really did have a lot to offer humanity. Provided of course, they get to the bottom of this pesky zombie plague.

“I’m detecting movement up ahead,” Marcus’ said. “Second door on the left.”

They took position on either side of the door. Ryan raised his hand, three fingers raised, then two, then one. As soon as his final finger went down, Marcus kicked the door open. He stepped into the room, breaking off to the right with Ryan right behind him going left.

With his head held over his rifle Ryan scanned the room. A husk leapt from behind a nearby partition and ran toward him. Ryan brought

the barrel of his weapon around smoothly and squeezed the trigger. The husk died without a sound and Ryan pressed forward into the room.

Behind him, Marcus did the same but in the opposite direction. Neither man spoke. Their training and experience made them an effective team. They cleared the area in seconds, and when the last husk fell the two soldiers left the room to continue their sweep of the ground level. Most of the rooms were empty, and they cleared those that were occupied with practiced efficiency.

Only the vault level remained.

“Aren’t we supposed to capture one of them?” Marcus asked when they returned to the central hub.

“Yes, but let’s not think about that right now. First we concentrate on clearing this facility. The vault is a maze. Way too easy to get fenced in if we’re not careful.”

Marcus nodded. “You’re the boss.”

“Besides, we can always venture outside to bag one later if we do end up killing them all.”

“So, do we take the stairs or the shaft?”

Ryan considered that for a moment. “Stairs. We avoided them last time to minimize contact with hostiles. It nearly cost us in the end. This time I don’t want to leave any threats behind us.”

“The stairs it is then.” Marcus checked his weapon for charge then motioned to the door. “After you.”

The husk was on him the moment he set foot in the stairwell. Ryan just managed to get his rifle up between them as the feral creature leapt from the shadows to knock him to the ground. He pushed with all his might to keep the thing at bay. Its arms flailed, clawed hands tearing at the armour on his chest and neck.

From the corner of his eye he saw Marcus step in, driving the stock of his gun into the side of husk’s head. The first blow rocked them both but the enraged monster refused to move. Again, and again he struck, until finally he managed to force the creature aside. Ryan rolled in the opposite direction giving Marcus room to turn his gun on the monster.

A staccato rhythm rose out of the darkness, louder even than the sound of Marcus’ gunfire. The first of the undead horde burst out of the narrow doorway before Ryan knew what was happening. He brought his gun around, shooting one handed as he scrambled back and away from the stairwell. Marcus too shot wildly into the growing mass of bodies that spewed from the doorway, but for every husk they felled another appeared to take its place.

“There’re too many of them,” Ryan called. “Fall back.”

One husk leapt over the growing wall of bodies and landed at Ryan's feet. It reached forward immediately, batting his rifle aside as it clawed its way up Ryan's body.

Ryan drew a knife and punched the thick serrated blade into the side of the creature's head. The husk stiffened as the shock of death rippled through its body, then slumped, trapping Ryan beneath its dead weight. The next thing he felt was Marcus dragging him clear of the corpse.

"We passed a security station back there." Marcus said. His words interspersed with bursts of incandescent fire.

Ryan got to his feet and added his own barrage of plasma to the mix. "Lead on."

The pair ran back toward the foyer and darted behind the toughened glass and reinforced concrete walls of the security station behind the reception desk. Ryan slammed the steel door shut behind them, the latch clicking into place just as the first of their undead pursuers struck it.

The door held.

They were safe, for the moment.

Ryan eyed the husks milling about the foyer, their numbers growing with his every heaving breath. "So many."

Marcus stared out the window. “Looks like my dinner plans have been ruined.”

“And theirs too I hope,” Ryan said as the husks threw themselves against the door and walls. The room shook but the reinforced concrete and steel held fast. Ryan reviewed the building schematics in his heads up display while the assault continued.

“What are they doing now?” Marcus said.

“What do you—” It was then that Ryan noticed the silence. The husks outside had stopped attacking the room, they just stood and stared. “Oh shit.”

“Why? What is it?”

Ryan pointed to a spot at the rear of the unnaturally still mass of undead. At a pair of husks, looking back at them with a malevolent cunning. “The Banshees are here.”

Dressed in whatever clothes they died in, they looked similar to the rest, desiccated skin over a muscular frame, their fingers curved into claws, but it was obvious that these were different. These possessed something far deadlier than mere strength and speed.

Reason.

One, wearing the tattered remains of a red dress, cocked its head to the side while its eyes scanned the window frame. The other, a former

scientist judging from the ruined lab coat he wore, appeared to focus its attention on the door.

“We have to get out of here,” Ryan said.

“Already on it. Help me drag the desk over to the wall there.”

Marcus pointed to the southwest corner of the room.

Ryan looked over to where Marcus indicated. Just below the ceiling was the grate of an air conditioning duct. “Good thinking.”

The pair moved the desk and Marcus climbed up to set about removing the cover while Ryan kept an eye on the still silent husks beyond the room. The banshees remained in place at the rear of the group. Red dress’s eyes narrowed, her mouth curling into a snarl as she watched Marcus work. She reached forward to nudge the professor who looked up just as the metal grate covering the ventilation duct fell to the floor.

“Come on,” Marcus said kneeling down with his fingers meshed together. “I’ll help you up.”

Ryan climbed onto the desk, and – using Marcus’ hand as a step – disappeared into the wide metal pipe.

A piercing wail shattered the silence.

Ryan twisted around in the narrow confines of the air vent and reached down to help Marcus up while the undead horde threw themselves against the security station’s window and door. The room

shook with the onslaught but held firm, for now at least. The sheer mass of bodies clamouring to get them would soon find a way through, as he watched a spider's web of tiny cracks appeared in the corner of the window spreading outward with every blow.

Ryan lifted Marcus up, moving deeper into the air duct to give his partner room to wriggle into the narrow space. "Where do we go now?"

"Go straight until you reach a T-intersection, then turn right," Marcus said. "That'll take us back to the central hub."

Ryan pushed himself along the narrow passage, but stopped when he noticed that Marcus remained by the opening. "What are you doing?"

"Just leaving our adoring fans something to remember us by."

Ryan chuckled. Marcus' peculiar brand of humour always did take the edge off his anxiety. "Well don't dick around for too long. The two banshees ran off when they saw me climb in here."

"So?"

"So, I wouldn't be surprised if they figured out what we were doing. We might find the pair of them waiting for us when we come back out."

"Don't be ridiculous. They can scream pretty loud, that's for sure, but they're mindless zombies like the rest."

"No, they're not, and thinking like that could get us both killed."

Marcus shrugged. "We'll deal with them like always do. Now get moving, that door won't hold for much longer."

Ryan nodded and started to move. He pushed his gun out in front and propelled himself forward with hands and knees. At the corner, he took one last look at Marcus waiting by the opening.

“You’d better not get yourself killed,” Ryan muttered, and continued on his way.

Ryan travelled along the air shaft as fast as his bulk and the tight confines would allow. He’d gone perhaps twenty metres when he heard a strange clumping noise from the tunnel behind him. “Marcus? Is that you?”

The communication channel remained silent.

Ryan pressed his body against the wall and dragged his rifle back behind him. The clumping sound grew louder, and a shudder rippled along the tunnel. Ryan’s ears popped less than a second before a flash of searing white light nearly blinded him. Sensors in his helmet compensated quickly enough to save his eyesight, but the wave of heat that followed left him breathless. Ryan lay there, his oxygen starved body gasping for air as a shape loomed out of the darkness. He crawled toward his gun, the blast having pushed it a few metres along the shaft.

“Hope you’re not planning to shoot me with that?” Marcus’ voice said in his ear.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Ryan managed between breaths. “A little warning might have been nice.”

Marcus shrugged. "I told you to get going. Not my fault if you have trouble understanding English."

Ryan glared at him, though he knew that look would be totally lost on Marcus. That man was nothing if not earnest in his self-assurance. "Come on then, let's get out of this air shaft."

Twenty metres further along they turned left, and then right again another five metres after that coming to a halt at a metal grill that opened up into the elevator shaft.

Ryan twisted around so his feet were toward the grill and kicked out. The metallic lattice survived the initial blow, but the second sent it tumbling away into the darkness to land with a clang a couple of heartbeats later.

"Hello again," Ryan muttered, seating himself on the edge of the shaft while he secured his rappelling gear to the wall.

"Talking to yourself again?" Marcus said.

"Why not. It's the only decent conversation I'm going to get down here."

"Are you still upset over what I did back there?"

Ryan shook his head. "No, not really. Just tell me that you got them all."

"Hard to say for sure. I made the blast pretty big, but some of the ones at the rear might have avoided incineration."

Ryan finished configuring his gear and pushed out from the wall to dangle in the middle of shaft. He looked on as Marcus set himself up and a less than a minute later the pair began their descent.

Ryan reached the ground first, surveying the area with practiced efficiency. “Clear.”

Marcus landed beside him and looked at the carnage littering the bottom of the shaft. “This is your handiwork I assume.”

Ryan nodded. “We were rather in a hurry last time.”

“This is the vault level I assume.”

“Only a short corridor before—” A series of loud clangs above them caused Ryan to look up. His eyes widened and he tackled Marcus through the elevator doors just as something dark and heavy crashed to the ground where they’d been standing.

“Thanks,” Marcus said as he climbed back to his feet. “I guess my parting gift did more damage than I thought.”

Ryan peered through the cloud of dust to examine the object that nearly crushed them. “This had nothing to do with you.” Despite the impact damage, the pile of twisted metal was still recognisable as a desk. “That was thrown down here deliberately.”

“Deliberately. Are you saying there are other people in here?”

“Not people, no.”

“Then what?”

“The banshees.”

Marcus leaned back into the elevator shaft and peered up. “If that’s true then what do you have in mind.”

Ryan thought for a moment. “The surveillance cameras in the vault are working. We won’t be totally blind in there.”

“You’re suggesting we lure them inside, and then—”

“—we spring our trap,” Ryan finished. “I’ve had enough of running.”

They entered the vault side by side. The Augmented Reality Display in their helmets flared to life the moment the pair crossed the threshold. Real-time tactical data superimposed their view and it took them a moment to assimilate all the extra information before moving on.

Wordlessly the two soldiers split apart, Ryan going left and Marcus right, using the ARD to keep tabs on each other as they worked their way through the massive underground chamber.

The uniform rows of hermetically sealed storage all bled into one another, and were it not for the map in his head Ryan might have thought he was walking in circles. Eventually he reached the spot where he and Cassandra found the samples. Scorch marks and bits of gore still stained the walls from the plasma grenade he used to clear their path.

So many husks had died in this place already.

Red Dress entered the vault just as Ryan and Marcus completed their sweep. The surveillance cameras let them track the lone banshee's progress as it moved through the maze of stacked shelves behind them.

"It came in alone?" Marcus said over the communication channel. "Doesn't seem all that smart to me."

"Don't get cocky," Ryan warned. "Banshee's like to work in pairs. If Red Dress is in here then The Professor won't be far away." As if to punctuate his point, a scream sounded from beyond the door and a dozen husks streamed inside. "We should take her out before they can link up."

"I'll go."

Ryan tracked Marcus's progress as his teammate ran toward the lone banshee. Ryan also moved, taking a different path through the shelves to set up a crossfire; the A.R.D. making it easy to keep track of everyone and everything.

Red Dress charged between the shelves with none of the banshee's characteristic caution, and it appeared to be holding something.

"Marcus, wait!" Ryan shouted.

Too late.

Marcus stepped out from behind cover, gun raised and firing. Red Dress swayed aside to avoid the shots and tossed the item it carried at him. Ryan looked on, helpless as the small sphere struck the ground in

front of his partner and exploded in a dazzling cascade of fire. The force of the blast threw Marcus back against the wall where he fell boneless to the floor.

The banshee howled.

An answering cry tore through the silence less than a heartbeat later and the vault went dark. The last thing Ryan saw before the camera feeds stopped was The Professor cutting the power to the vault.

This wasn't good.

The world turned black and green as Ryan's helmet switched to night vision mode. His ears still ringing from the explosion, he ran forward determined to reach Red Dress before it could get away, or worse.

He rounded the corner and found it hunched over Marcus, clawed hands tearing his armour away. Ryan took a moment to line up the shot before he squeezed the trigger. The plasma struck the unsuspecting banshee at the base of the skull and burned its head away.

Ryan ran over to Marcus and tossed the banshee's headless corpse aside before checking him for injuries. Except where the banshee's claws had been, the man's armour appeared mostly intact, but he remained non-responsive. Marcus needed time for the nano-machines to work their magic.

He slung the rifle over his shoulder and, with one arm below each armpit, dragged his partner clear of the area, laying him down in a nearby corner of the vault. Walls on two sides limited his options if it came to escape, but Ryan would never leave his friend behind. Besides, he had had enough of running. Fight or die, that's all there was left to do.

He didn't need any camera feeds to know they were coming, the guttural sounds of their approach told him enough. He hefted his weapon, waiting for the husks to show themselves before unleashing a barrage of deadly fire into their midst.

Limbs burned and bodies fell, but all that carnage couldn't keep the rabid horde at bay. Ryan let the rifle drop and drew his monofilament blade just as the first undead thing reached him. He needed little technique to fight the oncoming husks. Their need to kill drove them forward with no regard for their own survival. Ryan slashed the blade left and right, opening one husk's throat while swaying aside to avoid a pair of grasping hands before cutting them off with his return stroke.

Ryan's focus narrowed, the universe reduced to the space around him. Duck, step, block, attack. He didn't think of the numbers. Every husk killed brought their survival closer and that would have to be enough. He held his ground against the assault, leaving a pile of

twitching bodies around him and he almost didn't realise it when the last one fell.

Ryan's chest heaved as he stood over the fallen husks, hands trembling. The Professor stood a few just a few meters away, white lab-coat splattered with gore, its gaze boring into Ryan's skull. Ryan, wrong footed by the creature's sudden appearance, lurched awkwardly into action. The hesitation was enough for The Professor to avoid Ryan's clumsy attack. It swayed aside and stepped forward, striking Ryan's back and sending him stumbling for several steps.

Ryan turned to face the Professor again, now standing between him and Marcus' unconscious body. The creature's lips curled into a macabre semblance of a smile as it raised an arm toward him, and Ryan noticed that it too carried something.

A gun.

Bang!

The first bullet took him high in the right shoulder, twisting his body sideways.

Bang!

The second bullet struck him in the side of the chest.

Bang! Bang!

Ryan's body flopped like a rag doll with each impact. Every hit sent him stumbling backward, bouncing from side to side until he snagged a

foot on a fallen husk. He lost his balance and dropped, stunned, to the floor.

The Professor moved to stand over him and aimed the gun at Ryan's head.

Bang!

#

Kassandra worried she might wear a hole in floor with her pacing. An irrational thought, true, but after nearly four hours she needed to think about something other than what was happening in there. She'd already chewed the nails on both hands to nubs, so walking around in endless circles had to be the next logical choice, right?

Kassandra went to the hangar to greet Ryan's ship but all she saw was him laid out on a stretcher before she was hustled aside by the EMTs. Ryan's partner, Marcus, didn't even look at her as they rushed past on the way to medical, and nobody who knew anything had come out since.

Of course she knew what Ryan did could be dangerous, but understanding is one thing, being the one who sent him out there was something else entirely. Maybe, if she'd been there, she could have done something and Ryan wouldn't have gotten hurt.

Another stupid thought. After all, if a second soldier couldn't keep Ryan safe then what could she have done?

The trauma room doors opened and Miguel Sanchez, one of the station's medical team, stepped out. Cassandra practically pounced on the man as he stepped out.

"How is he, Doctor?"

Miguel shook his head. "He's suffered a broken arm, broken femur, and several cracked ribs serious but not life threatening, the bleeding of the brain is another story. We went in to relieve the pressure, the surgery went well but he's still unconscious."

"What's the prognosis?"

"It's touch and go. If he doesn't wake up in the next few hours ... well, you know how it can be."

Kassandra sucked her lower lip. "Can I see him?"

Doctor Sanchez nodded. "He's in recovery room three. Marcus is with him."

"Thank you," she said and walked past the man through the passage door and directly to room three.

Marcus looked up as she entered the room. "Hello Doctor Evans."

Kassandra didn't spare the man a glance as she approached Ryan's unconscious body. He was surrounded by all manner of equipment and displays to measure and stream his vital statistics. The medical

professional in her evaluated the data in an instant. Everything she saw verified what Doctor Sanchez told her outside. Cassandra reached down and took Ryan's left hand and squeezed it slightly. She held his hand like that for a long while, hoping for some kind of response anything that might tell her that he was still in there.

"Tell me what happened?" she said finally.

Marcus straightened and cleared his throat. "I'm not quite sure where to start."

"These injuries," she gestured toward the skeletal images displayed on one of the monitors, "broken arm, several cracked ribs, and shattered pelvis. They're nothing like I'd expect. Did he fall down the elevator shaft?"

"He was shot. His armour stopped the bullet but the impact was still enough to break bone."

"Shot? You mean there are people down there."

"No. A husk did this, a banshee." Marcus walked up to the bedside and laid a hand on Ryan's shoulder. "It's my fault. Ryan said they were different. He warned me not to underestimate them, but I didn't listen. I just charged in like they were stupid and damned near got myself blown up. He got hurt saving me."

Kassandra waited. This was a side of the man she'd never seen before, and she didn't dare speak lest her words bring the cocksure asshole back to the fore.

"I came to," Marcus continued, "in time to see the second Banshee peppering Ryan with bullets. I wasn't quick enough to stop the headshot but I took that fucker out before he could finish the job."

A spark of impotent rage ignited in the pit of Kassandra's stomach. "I'm glad you killed it."

"Oh, it's not dead. I tranqu'ed the bastard." Marcus looked at her, his lips curled in a vicious grin. "He's the one you're going to do your experiments on."

The fire in her burned away. "That's the one you captured?"

He nodded. "We'd pretty much cleared the rest of the building. There's a squad from Resources down there now doing a final sweep. You and your team will be down there in just a few days. Make sure you make the fucker pay for what he did."

It took Kassandra a moment to wrap her mind around Marcus' words. "I needed the specimen for research, not torture."

"I know, I know. Just don't feel like you need to be gentle about it."

Kassandra searched his face. She opened her mouth to respond, ready to chastise the man for his lack of compassion but decided against

it. He wasn't joking, no, but his grin seemed somehow forced. "I won't," she said finally.

Marcus let out a long breath and looked back down at Ryan. He stayed there for a long moment then turned and walked away. Cassandra watched the man leave. Head down and shoulders slumped, like he'd lost something of himself, and for the first time in a long time she felt like she needed a drink.

#

The noise was indistinct, all rolled together as though being heard through water. He focussed on the sound, trying to make sense of it, to pick meaning from the chaos. Too hard. The effort pushed his tired mind beyond its limits and he sank below the waves of consciousness.

Again and again he struggled, what else could he do? His mind swam in a sea of vaguely pleasant numbness but somewhere beneath all that he knew there should be more. A single thread stood out from the background buzz, a lilting sing-song sound coalescing finally into a form his mind could grasp.

Words.

Someone was speaking to him.

"... that the cryogenic process triggered a mu—"

Ryan raised his hand.

“-tation in some...” The stream of consciousness stopped for a moment. “Oh, my, god. Ryan?”

A wiggle of his fingers was all he could manage in response. A moment later he felt that hand wrapped in another’s, much smaller hands.

“I know it’s hard, but please try to stay with me, Ryan.”

The voice spoke truly. Staying focussed took far more energy than he realised, and oblivion beckoned.

“Here, drink.” A small circular tube pressed against his lips. “Your throat must be raw.”

Ryan sipped. The cool liquid filled his mouth and the darkness that hovered at the edges of his mind retreated.

“Thank you,” he croaked. “Where am I?”

“The station medical centre.”

Ryan closed his eyes, the effort of keeping them open proved too much. “How did I ... Marcus! He’s still—”

A squeeze of his hand stopped him. “Ryan, relax. Marcus is fine. You have to focus on yourself now.”

“How long have I been here?”

“Eight months,” she said, giving Ryan’s hand another squeeze.

“I’ve been so worried about you.”

“What happened?”

Kassandra's eyes widened. "You don't know?"

Ryan thought back. "The last thing I remember is finding Marcus unconscious. Everything after that is... fuzzy."

"You were shot," Kassandra began, "several times actually. The doctors patched you up as best they could, but you've been in a coma ever since Marcus brought you here."

"Marcus saved me?"

"He did, and what's more, he captured the banshee that almost killed you."

"The Professor," Ryan managed, the swirling memory of the fight in the vault coalescing somewhat, "yes, I remember now. He came from nowhere, and attacked me with an old projectile gun." He winced as he recalled each impact. "I guess I should be grateful he didn't have a plasma weapon."

"I suppose," Kassandra said with a wry smile, "a charred corpse would lack your sparkling conversation skills."

Ryan's chuckle ended in a weak cough. "Eight months, eh? I guess I've missed a lot."

"Now there's an understatement," Kassandra said with a roll of her eyes. "While you've been recovering, my team and I have been hard at work."

"What have you found?"

“I cracked it, Ryan. I know what happened, and beyond that, I know how to stop it.”

“That’s incredible news. I knew you could do it.”

Kassandra beamed. “You can’t imagine how great it feels to finally do something good.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “What are you saying? Your work was directly responsible for taking humanity into the stars.”

“Instead it almost ended up killing us all.”

“And now you’re going to save us,” Ryan pointed out. “What was it that caused the outbreak?”

“An induced mutation of the extrachromosomal DNA triggered by an—”

“Hold on a second,” Ryan said. “I’ve been in a coma for eight months, Kassandra. My brain’s still getting used to being switched on again so please use only small words.”

She held his gaze for a long moment. “Fine. I’ll just give you the press release.”

“The what now?”

“You know, a press release. Enough information to convey the message without the details.”

“Sure, fine, give me that.”

Kassandra shook her head. “I keep forgetting how much things have changed since I left. Anyway, it turns out that the cryogenic process interfered with the genetic enhancements I developed and triggered the mutation. In the decades it took for the colony ships to return the mutation grew quite virulent, and, well ... you know what happened next.”

Ryan closed his eyes and breathed, his mind alive with visions of the devastation on the planet below him, the billions of lives lost, civilisation brought to its knees. “Can the changes be reversed?”

“No, but I can stop it from spreading further. Nobody alive today will have to fear becoming one of those things ever again. We’ll be able to stop hiding up here and go back to Earth and start rebuilding our society.”

“Those things, as you call them, exist everywhere. Even if we do become immune to the mutation it’s still dangerous down there.”

“I have a plan to deal with that as well, but I’ll need your help to make it work.”

“Unless your plan has me being used as a paper weight I doubt I’ll be much good to you.” Ryan raised a trembling hand to underscore his words.

Kassandra smiled. “It’s great that your sense of humour hasn’t suffered. Physical therapy will soon have you back to your old self, but this time I don’t need you for your brawn.”

“Oh?”

“My team has developed a counteragent that will render the infected dormant. But in order for that process to be effective on a global scale I need the terraforming equipment from the colony ships, and that’s where you come in.”

“You do realise I have no clue how any of that stuff works?”

“I don’t need you to get the equipment working, silly. I need you to help me find it. We have three ships worth of equipment in quarantine, all of which were found by you, but it’s not enough. For the process to be effective I need at least five. When it comes to finding needles in haystacks you’re the best there is.”

Ryan nodded. “That, Doctor Evans, I can do.”

#

The airlock retracted with a loud hiss. Thrusters rumbled for a moment and the colony ship *Ferdinand Magellan* seemed to fall away from Ryan’s much smaller cruiser. His hands expertly moved around the command console and a few seconds later the colony ship’s own engines

fired pushing the gigantic craft toward Earth, little more than a bright speck of light in the distance.

“You don’t seem pleased,” Cassandra said from her seat in the cockpit beside him.

“It’s not as satisfying as it used to be,” he replied, his hands continuing to work the controls.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad that we found the equipment you need, and it’s great that your counteragent works so well, but it just wasn’t any fun.”

Kassandra arched her eyebrows. “I reckon you’ve had more than enough of that kind of fun to last a lifetime. Have you forgotten what happened last time?”

“No,” Ryan’s eyes dropped to the carbon fibre braces strapped to his legs, “I haven’t forgotten anything.”

There was a moment of awkward silence before Cassandra placed a hand on his arm. “I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t apologise,” he said, cutting her off. “You’re right. It’s just that some habits die hard.”