



Revenant

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Ryan completed the checklist again while he waited. Everything was ready, just as it was the four times before that. Repeating the routine task helped him cope with the stress of the situation. He had to be sure his equipment was perfect 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 extensive scarring on the dreadnought's hull. 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 one of them.

“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 seven years ago with the dream of taking humanity to the stars. Designed to function autonomously, the fleet of ships 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.

Rows of cylindrical cryo-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 the cryo-chamber's 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. It would have been called Haven at the time of your departure, but a lot has changed since then. Your ship, and all 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 sent Kassandra's heart rate soaring, and caused the man to pause while he studied 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 Kassandra 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? Cassandra 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.”