

Crypt Hound

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As another plasma shell from the Federal armada somewhere beyond the moons ripped a skyscraper from the horizon, Victoria released her meal, the bloodless body dropping to the alley's filthy floor. Ah, nothing like feeding under the cover of war – all the feral humans with their burning blood, wild and untamed – so unlike the soft-eyed humans that were raised for food and service back home. Aeneas Colony would soon fall but not before Victoria and her hunting party had their feast and this sweet, sweet nectar was merely the start.

Victoria's fangs ached in anticipation as she slipped unnoticed back into the throngs of humans scurrying to escape the invasion. Under the city's blue flames, her red hair and red, silk dress shimmered in violet hues while her midnight opal eyes perused the panicked crowd like items on a menu. *Mmmm*, decisions, decisions.

Across this surging humanity, stillness caught her eye; it was *him*, Roland, the rogue vampire. Rage surrounded her black eyes in grey flesh but Victoria managed to wrestle her fury down before it engulfed her face. Unchecked, it could turn her into a grey monster with the mind of a rabid dog, dangerous to everyone including herself.

Roland spotted Victoria and gave a respectful nod before running off toward the spaceport. Without telling the others, Victoria followed. This prize was too good to share. As she pursued Roland through the human herd, Victoria saw a short sword bulging through his leather trench and smelled an ion handgun hidden in the small of his

back. Disgusting, turning to the weapons of mortals. Swords were noble but guns were for pussies.

Victoria still saw Roland as that pathetic human that had been used to insult her. A few years before, he'd been Victoria's personal guard and her pawn in a coup that brought the throne to Victoria's House Ahnaux. One vampire died in the coup and they held gladiatorial games to choose a replacement from their human cattle. Laurence of the dethroned House Kotamkin chose Roland as his human champion – Victoria's own guard! After winning his immortality, Roland ran off, making himself a threat to the secrecy and thus the survival of the Twenty Houses. It also left Kotamkin one short and humiliated for a thousand years or until Roland was brought back dead or alive... of course, dead meant just his fangs, the only part that wouldn't turn to dust... and "alive" was a relative term. Victoria preferred dead.

At the spaceport, the human tsunami overwhelmed security and crushed through the gates. Roland pushed through like a juggernaut while Victoria clawed her way after him, leaving bodies to be trampled. The horde burst through the bottleneck and spread across the field, Roland vanishing amongst them. Victoria stopped. Her cold, narrow eyes combed the crowd. Where the hell had that prick gone? Laurence should've caught this disgrace by now... and he would've if he hadn't sent out his little crypt hounds instead of going himself. Victoria had called the hunters "crypt hounds" right to their faces but they didn't get the insult; they were too young to remember back before the Houses left Earth, back when the humans would send vicious, mangy dogs into their lairs to chase the vampires out into daylight. Not that Victoria had been around back then but she'd been around long enough to learn about it.

Victoria spotted his black trench running up a ramp into a military ship – like that would save him. As the ramps closed and the engines fired, Victoria bolted across the field bashing anyone in her way. She couldn't let the bastard escape... but the ramps were almost closed and the desperate ship was already lifting off. A searing blast of engines pushed Victoria, slowing her stride. She could feel her skin cooking and peeling. If she didn't reach the ramp before the thrusters ignited... or before that last ramp closed... In one final effort, she lunged.

Streaks of fire and smoke crossed in front of Sergeant Myers as some ships escaped Aeneas and others fell in flames. Still, Myers stayed focused on landing his fighter on the hospital ship. He'd bluffed his way onboard by saying that he couldn't do reentry with a smashed canopy and dead pilot, which wasn't really true; he'd made harder reentries but his wife was on that ship and that's all that mattered now.

He'd met Helen on a ship like this. She'd been doing triage in a hanger when his unit had limped back after losing Mindoro. He'd been young, not even Special Forces yet, and had believed that the war would be over soon. Foolish youth.

The fighter bucked through the shuttle bay's force field, bounced off the ceiling and slammed to the floor. Leaving it to smolder, Myers ran to the nearest infirmary where he found a tempest equal to the one outside. Frustrated, he grabbed the first familiar face and barked, "Where's Helen? Where's Dr. Myers?!"

"I think she's in engineering handling spillover."

With the elevators all jammed with wounded, Myers made his way to the service lift – a small, open cart meant for working on power conduits. It couldn't fit a gurney.

As the cage descended, Myers hung his head; he should've done something about his dead pilot; what was that kid's name? He'd lost so many. He promised himself he'd go back as soon as he saw to Helen.

As the elevator neared the power room, Myers heard something odd... like... animals fighting? Flashes, sparks and growls filled the shaft. The elevator shuttered to a stop and Myers inched out into the gloomy maze of giant batteries and converters. A fire flickered above the metal hedges casting the room in dancing shadows. Pistol in hand, Myers crept toward the fire, following the strange sounds. If he had any brains at all, he'd go around this, find Helen, then get some help – but what the hell was that noise? He had to see, at least a peak at whatever the hell...

Peering around a giant battery, he saw something crouched beneath a burning transformer. He stared hard through the shadows at this... this thing... this monster with the skin of a rhino and the face of a demon. Glistening black talons clacked along the steel floor sending needles skittering down his spine. Its mouth opened revealing a cage of daggers as it released a low growl that crawled into the back of his mind, chilling his entire body. A red, silk dress, wet with blood, clung to its nearly human form while its long, red hair floated on invisible currents. Myers followed its glimmering black eyes to the far end of the small clearing where a crouched man in a long coat held a dripping sword in one hand and a cannon in the other.

Myers fell into the man's eyes, eyes as black and icy as the monster's, only these had a depth and beauty that Myers couldn't explain; they called to him like the vast, lush valleys of his home colony, something he hadn't seen in a decade, something he longed to return to... only this was more powerful... magnetic...

The monster lunged at the man only to be flung back, smashing Myers against a battery. Myers sank to the floor unconscious.

As the unexpected human lay unconscious against the batter, Victoria clung to lucidity beneath her monstrous form but the blood dripping from the gash along her ribs threatened to devolve her into a mindless animal. She leered at the visitor – his strong, healthy body promising so much blood – but she had to finish this; she had to kill Roland.

Under the flickering flames, Victoria stalked Roland, watching his gun, planning how to rip that arm from his body. She hadn't decided whether she'd tell Laurence after she killed Roland; maybe she'd leave Laurence and his crypt hounds in ignorance; maybe she'd hide Roland's fangs until the last day of the thousand years and then... Victoria smiled at the thought.

Roland aimed. Victoria charged and Roland pulled the gun back like a matador's cape, slashing Victoria as she dove past. Victoria held her forearm but it was too late and too deep; half her arm vanished in a flurry of dust. She roared in anger as Roland shook her blood from his blade. Bastard!

Victoria lunged again and Roland fired. The blast ripped her thigh in half, sending her crashing into a capacitor. But, she'd gotten a claw in him and flayed his arm from wrist to elbow. Blood trickled over his gun, pooling at his feet while Victoria lay in her own pool, eyes sunken and aching with hunger – so much hunger. Her mind faded, threatening to forget everything but the hunger and the rage. She wanted to attack Roland, to feed on his blood but that wasn't going to happen and Roland knew it.

Roland sheathed his weapons and gave his former mistress a Roman salute, one that had been with the Houses since before the humans had used it. “Sorry, Princess,” he said, “but I can’t have you following me.” Roland lifted her by her throat, her blood dripping over him like rain. He then hurled her across the clearing. Victoria landed hard, crushing a control hub. It fired a surge through the ship’s engines, liquefying the coils and leaving the vessel adrift. Abandon ship sounded as the emergency power kicked on. Roland headed for the escape pods while Victoria lay bleeding, scorched, and very, very angry.

As soon as she could feed, thought Victoria, she’d turn him to dust one limb at a time. From her fire-encircled alcove, she saw Myers lying motionless but she couldn’t drag herself that far, not yet. Her body struggled to heal with what blood it had but it needed a lot more. How could she let that bastard – if he hadn’t gotten in that lucky swipe!

A flashlight swung low over the steel hedgerows. “Anyone in here?” called a man’s voice. “Betty, go around while I check that fire.”

Victoria’s eyes ignited. She wouldn’t have to crawl after all. Even over the burning batteries, she could smell the guard’s blood as his flashlight moved slowly closer. Waiting, Victoria drew herself up like a crossbow.

The guard stepped in something sticky and unmistakable, blood and lots of it. Following the morbid trail of red, his flashlight parted the swaying shadows to find a man lying still under a burning battery. The blood did not belong to him. Clearly, something bad had happened here and someone out there might need help. After checking the unconscious man, the guard cautiously continued into the curtains of flame. The place

looked like a wrecking ball had had its way. A soft groan, like a fearful little girl, reached out from the dark. He inched forward and found himself lost in two black orbs glowing in the shadows. As he stood breathless and frozen, the face of death flew out of the shadows and tore at his throat.

Blood filled Victoria's mouth infusing her body with borrowed life. Her new arm sprouted across her victim's back while her new leg grew under her. As the guard's face sank into his skull, Victoria's warmed with a pink glow, returning her to her preferred self – a sensual, young redhead. But even after the masticated guard hit the floor, scars still braided her new limbs. Hunger demanded more. She eyed Myers but then a more lively meal approached.

“Herbert?” called a woman's voice. “You find any... What the hell?” The nurse gazed around at the fire and blood. Fear rolled up her spine. “Herb?”

Victoria stepped into the light and purred, “You look delicious.”

Betty froze, shocked by the sight of the beautiful woman smeared with blood, but all else fell away as she lost herself in those black eyes, eyes more vast than the Milky Way, eyes dancing with every star that ever was. Carried on currents of sultry heat, Betty floated toward the woman with the universe eyes, coming closer and closer until she could taste the bloody breath. Their lips met and she surrendered to the viscous tongue invading her mouth. Sexual fire slithered between them, merging their bodies like rivers of molten steel.

Victoria's lips slipped off Betty's mouth and slid slowly down to that delicate throat. She lifted away just enough for her fangs to grow, then plunged them into the giving flesh. Betty gasped in horror and ecstasy, unable to pull away. Victoria's rosy

skin glowed ever brighter as she drank deeper and deeper. Betty held Victoria tight and faded into silence.

Victoria let the empty body drop, her limbs and skin now fully fed, but there was still a rumble in her tummy. A little snack would take care of that and one just happened to be lifting its head. Too bad she had more pressing matters to attend.

Propped on his elbows, Sergeant Myers peered through the dark. A red pool wound around him, glistening under the flames while sirens echoed through the ship. Nearby, he found two bodies splayed across the floor. Then he saw that dress, the little, red dress from his nightmare... at least he thought it was a nightmare... what else could it have been? The dress was no longer on a monster; instead, it was on a breathtaking woman with long, red hair much like the monster's. The woman in the nightmare dress tossed Myers a smile of desire and regret then vanished into the maze. As soon as she was gone, Myers wondered if she'd been there at all.

Gradually, his head cleared and his memory kicked in. Helen! He had to find her! Myers checked his watch. He'd lost only minutes... but how did he lose them? It didn't matter now. Myers jumped to his feet and ran.

He caught up with the vanishing woman as she entered the spillover ward. They both arrived in time to see the last elevator heading for the escape pods. Inside it, behind two gurneys, stood Helen. Their eyes met; her mouth moved but the closing doors stole her words and took her away.

Myers saw someone else in that elevator, someone who didn't belong, the man from his nightmare. His heart sank as he stood alone with the woman in red surrounded

by abandoned medical equipment and bloody bandages. He hoped he was still dreaming. He hoped he'd wake up back on the carrier and Brian – that was his name, the dead pilot, Brian – he'd be there to make fun of his nightmare and everything would be normal again or as normal as war could get.

The other elevator opened and the woman in the nightmare dress said, “That’s our ride.” She entered then, eyeing him like a chocolate truffle, bade him to follow. He did. “I’m Victoria,” she purred as the doors closed, “and you look delicious.”

“I’m married,” grumbled Myers, impatiently gripping the doorframe as he waited to run out.

“Then it’s a good thing I already ate,” she giggled. “Was that woman your wife?”

“Yeah,” answered Myers as he glared at the slowly ascending numbers. What the hell had happened to him? How was he knocked out? Who was that man in the elevator? Somewhere, reality had blurred with his nightmares and all he was sure of was that he had to get to Helen. If anything happened to her!

The doors opened. Myers exploded into the hall then stopped, a body sprawled at his feet. Overturned gurneys and dead patients blocked the hall. The other elevator gasped like a dying fish as its doors closed over and over again on a dead orderly. Only two passengers were missing – Helen and that man.

Myers tore down the hall lined with empty escape tubes. At the very end he found the last few pods. Inside one he found Helen beating her fists on the portal and screaming silent screams. As Victoria sauntered up behind him, Myers fought the controls but the door wouldn’t open. Then Helen was yanked away and the man from his

nightmare peered through the round glass. The man looked past Myers to Victoria and gave her a solemn nod before launching.

“No!” screamed Myers as the pod rocketed away.

“Come on,” said Victoria, opening another pod. “Let’s follow.”

Victoria and Myers rumbled out of the crippled hospital ship and back into the war. The war quickly ebbed away and they were just two, tiny pods drifting through the blackness. Myers stood vigil at the portal, only looking away to bark at Victoria, demanding to know who the hell she was and what the hell she knew about all this. She convinced him that she was just a refugee and Myers returned to his portal.

“I’ll kill him. If anything happens to Helen, I *will* kill him,” brooded Myers.

A light flashed in Victoria’s eyes as she looked closer at Myers’ uniform.

“You’re Special Forces? I bet you *could* kill him.”

Myers stared out into the dark. “I’d hunt him and kill him and make a fucking jacket out of his skin.”

Victoria’s smile deepened. Though her hunger growled, she’d be skipping this snack, at least for now.

As the pod followed radio waves to the nearest colony, Victoria cringed in the shadows, hiding from the light of the nearing star. With each hour, her hunger swelled, threatening to swallow her body and mind. The grey crept across her eyes as her wild self struggled to be free. Victoria closed her eyes and focused. She had to hold on. She had to keep from ruining her little game.

While the wild Victoria battered its cage, Myers felt his guilt crawling up his throat. He’d never spent enough with Helen, just leave and moments stolen from the

battlefield. He'd been waiting; first for the end of the war, then for his discharge, then maybe a crippling wound, anything to escape this endless fighting. He should've gone AWOL long ago; he should've taken Helen somewhere safe, somewhere far away.

The pods neared the dark side of a planet, sheltering them from the distant star. Free of the shadows, Victoria found herself drifting up behind Myers, his heartbeat thundering in her ears like war drums calling her to the kill. She could smell his marrow. She could taste his skin opening to her fangs. The grey swallowed her. She ordered herself to stop but drifted ever closer to that delectable flesh. Standing inches away, her breath slithered over his shoulder, tickling his ear.

"I told you," said Myers bitterly, "I'm married. Now, strap in for reentry."

Victoria stepped back. Finally, reentry. She'd made it!

The two pods dipped into the atmosphere together and burned across the night sky. Minutes later, they ripped through the thick canopy of Earth trees, plowing hard into the muddy forest floor. Myers only spared a moment for Victoria before racing off to find the other pod, which billowed smoke not far away.

Victoria didn't follow. She already knew what Myers would find, a corpse and a vendetta. Besides, she'd had enough hide-and-seek with Roland for one trip. Her game finished, she strolled off into the dark and awaited the music.

"No!" screamed Myers as Victoria drank it in. His roars of fury and pain rumbled over the trees silencing the nocturnal chorus. "Helen! What did he do to you! Helen!"

Victoria chuckled. Laurence kept sending out crypt hounds to get Roland; now, she'd released a crypt hound of her own. If hers found Roland before his did... This was

too good. She flipped open her communicator and called her hunting party. “William, come get me... and bring food... and *do I have a story for you.*”

“Yes, Princess.”