

Morbid Silence

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The computer contemplated the light levels for a moment before sliding back the glossy, black lid of the sarcophagus. As it opened, Victoria cringed from the daylight but not enough seeped through the dense fog to do more than sting her skin. Pulling herself up, Victoria found that the outer armor was still warm from reentry; she hadn't been unconscious for long. As Victoria stepped out, placing one high heel and one bare foot into the cold mud, her broken ribs squeezed the air from her lungs. Wincing, she fell back against her armored coffin.

Victoria needed a moment to breathe and to figure out how the hell she got here. Ah yes, Luke. About a year before, Luke had fed on her. Feeding on a fellow vampire was taboo but few of Victoria's contemporaries understood why. They only saw power stacked upon power, a god over gods, but the more likely outcome remained power warring with power, gradually ripping the battlefield apart. Luke had learned the hard way; his body was tearing itself in half while his appetite had turned from the thirst for blood to a hunger for flesh, the ghouls' hunger. Despite his deteriorating state, tradition dictated that Victoria hunt him down but Victoria didn't need tradition telling her what to do; the bastard had taken her blood and she was going to wring it from his ashes.

After months of searching, Victoria had finally caught up with Luke in this ribbon of space known to the humans as Sector Silence. Flying a borrowed shuttle that had no weapons, Victoria had no choice but to ram Luke's vessel. She boarded and they then beat each other from one end of his ship to the other, destroying it from the inside out. When the atmosphere spewed into space, Victoria got out because even vampires need air. As for Luke, maybe the void got him but Victoria hoped not; killing him was something she planned to savor.

Now, Luke was gone and here she stood in the mud, minus one shoe. Victoria needed to get back to Midnight and start the search again. She reached down and activated the rescue beacon on her sarcophagus. Its light blinked slowly but reassuringly. A fast blink would be more reassuring; a fast blink meant that rescue was imminent. Still, Victoria wasn't worried. It wouldn't be long before the others came rushing to save the favorite of House Ahnaux and Princess of Space Station Midnight, their home hidden beyond the edge of the Milky Way.

In the mean time Victoria needed to find some sustenance. Without fresh blood, her ribs were going to stay broken. But that was just the beginning. If her hunger overcame her, she could devolve into a grey, mindless beast that was as dangerous to herself as it was to anyone around her. Only her willpower kept it inside.

Victoria looked around. In every direction, the mist gathered like the edges of a dream, drifting by in clumps like silver muslin. Neat rows of dead stalks vanished into the grey. Toppled solar magnifiers lay beside them, no longer feeding the plants light. This was a dead farm. Was this also a dead colony? She hoped not. Her fangs ached.

In the distance, one cloud seemed to move against the grey herds, drifting closer and closer until it coalesced into a lone, human figure. Victoria told herself to wait to sate her hunger... at least, until she found out what this place was. As the dim figure cut the fog, its drooping walk told her this was no human. Luke! With what strength she had, Victoria got ready to fight but the closer it got, the less it looked like Luke. Another ghouls?

The creature in the mist caught a whiff of Victoria. Realizing what she was, it croaked, “Second chance.”

Victoria stared at the thing, trying to unravel the meaning of its words. The ghoul loped ever closer, gradually coming into focus. The split between its inner vampires cut diagonally across its face – each fang a different size, serving a different master.

“Second chance,” it croaked again, ripe with desperation.

A vile shiver slithered down Victoria’s back as she realized what it meant. The thing had it in its head that it could balance its battling blood with more blood – her blood. The creature intended to feed on her!

“Yeah,” growled Victoria as she tightened the strap on her one remaining shoe, “good luck with that.” The shoes had been specially made just for her. They had leather wrapped titanium straps with steel stiletto heels sharpened into pointed blades. She had left the other one in Luke’s femur.

Victoria steadied herself against the sarcophagus, her head spinning for want of blood. And standing with one high heel in soft mud didn’t help either. The ghoul broke into a hobbled gallop, still chanting, “Second chance!” as if the words were magic. Victoria stood firm, waiting, aiming. The thing dwarfed her in every dimension, but so did a lot of things. She was not afraid.

The ghoul was almost upon her. It reached out with jagged, black nails, still shrieking, “Second chance!”

Victoria thrust her stiletto into the ghoul. Her foot sank into the soft meat, trapping it there. The creature howled like a drowning demon and staggered back pulling Victoria with it. Unable to yank free, she took a swing but her knuckles just thudded off its jaw. It stopped howling to turn its angry, sallow eyes on Victoria. With a fat fist, it slammed her dead in the face, ripping Victoria from her shoe. The next pair definitely needed better straps, decided Victoria as she slid on her back in the mud.

Victoria’s high heel protruded from its chest as it stood over her half-conscious body mired in mud. Still mouthing *second chance*, it mounted her, ready to feed. Victoria grabbed her wayward shoe and screwed it in deeper. The flesh gave easily; the thing had been a ghoul for far too long.

After another sickening howl, it pinned Victoria’s wrists over her head. Its craggy lips peeled back to reveal fangs pulsing with anticipation. “Second chance,” it groaned and descended toward Victoria’s throat but Victoria was not about to die like this. She stared defiantly into its sickly eyes, planning to bash its face in with her forehead.

Suddenly, it stopped and stared timidly into the haze. Victoria looked up. All around them, dark figures gathering like ghosts.

“What the hell now?” groaned Victoria.

A rusty squeal scraped the air. The ghoul gasped. Out of the silver soup, something fell, landing with a thunk. Clumps of mud rained over Victoria and the ghoul. About a yard away, a metal cage housing a steel ball with blinking lights had half buried itself in the ground.

Victoria knew exactly what it was. There’d been a bunch of them on a ship that had wandered too close to Midnight about a century ago. The devices had been quite common during the early wars before one went off unexpectedly, taking an entire armada with it. After that, the humans seemed reluctant to play with their nukes.

The ghoul also knew what the ball was and what the lights meant. It scrambled to its feet and ran off, sobbing in fear. Victoria tried to peel herself out of the mud but she could hardly lift

her reeling head. Trapped, Victoria looked at the bomb, its lights blinking faster and faster, eager to fulfill its only purpose.

Exhausted, Victoria muttered, "Okay, incinerate me."

The specters in the mist gathered closer. One, smaller than the rest, came forward, its tiny face materializing out of the haze. Cherub cheeks and ice-blue eyes radiated through a mask of filth covering a little girl's face. She couldn't have been more than ten. Almost nose-to-nose, she studied the strange woman in the mud. The bomb began to beep. There were only seconds to go. Unflustered, the little girl toddled back and turned it off. As the others appeared over Victoria, she slipped away into unconsciousness.

When Victoria woke, she found herself jostling about in the back of a rusting dumpcart pulled down a rocky path by two young humans, not yet ripe for feeding. To one side, she saw the nuke rumbling along in its own cart as if they were two wounded warriors recovered from the field of battle. Behind the nuke rattled an old tractor converted into a catapult; beside it was Victoria's sarcophagus, still blinking slowly. Each cart was pulled by young humans worn beyond their years.

All around them, grave stones drifted by like ghostly ships shrouded in fog. The graves gave way to a small village, much of it built of the vessels that had brought the villagers here. By the look of them, the ships had landed about three hundred years before but hadn't been occupied for more than a generation. This wasn't a colony, thought Victoria. This was only a seed.

That round, rosy face appeared over Victoria once more. The little girl's eyes still radiated cold and bright as she stroked Victoria's long, red hair. In her other hand, the girl carried a long, plastic pipe tipped with a sharpened fan blade.

Seeing Victoria awake, the girl called out, "Up up!"

Another face appeared above Victoria, a man, nearly thirty but with ancient eyes tempered by death. A led pipe tipped with a star of nails rested on his shoulder. Others gathered around, all armed with pikes and poles. They'd clearly been fighting this ghoul for a long time, maybe their whole lives, maybe longer.

"All, back, back, go," ordered the oldest.

The others complied. Only the little girl stayed with Victoria, stroking her hair as the procession resumed. Looking into those cool blue eyes, Victoria realized that the ghoul probably didn't even know about Midnight and that these humans had no idea what they'd been fighting. Few humans knew of the existence of Victoria's kind but, with this ghoul on the loose, that could change. If not for "Morbid Silence" the whole galaxy might know by now.

When humans first spread across the galaxy, long after the vampires had left them behind on Earth, some planets that should've supported life simply rejected it. The colonies would go silent, no communications, not even a distress beacon. It took weeks or even months for the humans to traverse the black oceans back then. Rescue missions would either find nothing or become nothing. They called it *Morbid Silence Syndrome*. Now these planets stood as silent testaments to human superstition. It had always been useful to Victoria's kind, that human needed to reject puzzle pieces that didn't fit into their preconceived universe.

The rusty procession left village and its sea of graves, ascending through low hills to a large cave where more young humans waited. Boys guarded the entrance while girls coddled infants around a fire under a natural chimney in the ceiling. Decaying furniture and odd bits of art and toys furnished the place.

Victoria's appearance, a stranger in a land of no strangers, turned the clan into a mob of chattering monkeys. They bound her unhealed wounds and tried to keep her warm, not knowing that what would really warm her ran through their veins. The smell of all the humans gathered so close when she was so hungry, it made Victoria's fangs pulse; Victoria had to will them back into silence.

As she lay cocooned in blankets with the little girl stroking her hair, the leader with the ancient eyes parted the crowd. He carried a small, plastic model of a shuttle, a make that hadn't seen service in centuries. With solemn reverence he held the shuttle high and declared, "Go up."

The others chanted softly, "*Go up... go up... go up...*"

Trapped here with that ghoul feeding on them, generation after generation, the survivors sometimes dwindling to a handful of children, their lexicon had dwindled to that of children. Still, they knew that Victoria had come from above and she suspected they knew that her sarcophagus was call for help. Rescue had become their religion and Victoria was their savior.

She could save them, alright, save them from the jaws of the ghoul only to feed them to her brethren on Space Station Midnight. But this strange, little band of humans saved her. Victoria owed them. She couldn't just turn them into slaves and food; it would be, at the very least, rude.

But if Victoria didn't figure out an exit soon, their fate might not be her choice. With each stroke of my hair, another waft of sweet, young blood swept over Victoria's face. That gray monster inside her was starting to seep out. Under the blankets, her nails darkened. Her lips parted, inhaling the scent while her head rose toward the girl's throat. Victoria tried to will herself back but her monster pressed her forward toward that delicate throat.

Victoria gathered a swell of self control and shoved the little girl away.

The chanting stopped. Confusion swept through the young humans like a cold wind but was quickly washed away by a wave of anger. After sending the toy shuttle away, the leader stood over Victoria and demanded, "Push bad why?"

How the hell was Victoria supposed to answer that question? She just stared at him, speechless, until a sudden ruckus at the mouth of the cave spared her from answering. The clan grabbed their weapons and headed out, even the little ones, leaving just a couple of smaller children to watch the infants and to watch the stranger. From the gathering chaos at the mouth of the cave came one word, "Mine!" The ghoul had come for Victoria.

Victoria propped herself up on her elbows and peered into the mist. The ghoul had overtaken the nuke cart. The ill shaped figure swung wildly at the humans. Bodies spun through the air like branches.

"Give me second chance!" cried the creature.

Victoria knew she had to help them. She had to help herself.

As Victoria tried to stand, the little ones danced around her calling, "Stay! Stay!"

Barely on her feet, Victoria almost fell over backwards. It was obvious that she was too weak to fight this ghoul like this. She had to do something she had not done since she was human; she had to take a weapon in her hands. With a broken knife blade melted into a plastic pole, she hobbled out of the cave leaving the little ones behind in worried mumbles.

Outside, the clan surged around the ghoul like a roiling sea. Seeing her shoe still imbedded in its chest, Victoria chuckled. She imagined its twin still lodged in Luke's femur somewhere far away.

The leader stepped out of the rolling waves. His star of nails descended like a bolt of lightning, landing hard upon the ghoul's shoulder. With a yelp, the ghoul ripped the star free and

swung the leader around by his own staff. The others ducked as the leader's feet sailed over them.

Seeing Victoria, the ghoul flung the leader aside and plowed through the cringing mob like a truck. Victoria raised her pike over her head but nearly fell over backwards, again. Shaking it off, she brought the weapon down hard. The ghoul caught it in its fat fist and yanked Victoria off her feet and across battlefield. She landed in a shattered pile.

The ghoul charged again. Victoria struggled to her knees and took up her pike. The ghoul blasted through a line of humans and lunged at Victoria. Victoria aimed her pike and shoved it deep in that bloated belly. The ghoul screamed.

The creature pulled back, yanking Victoria into the mud, face down. Unable to extract the knife, the ghoul snapped off the protruding plastic pole. The human tide swept in, eager to fight. Pikes and hammers fell in torrents upon its gray hide. The ghoul roared and swept its arms through them like a cyclone. Bodies spun through the air.

As the humans retreated with their wounded, the monster turned back to Victoria. There was no way that Victoria was going to let another anything feed on her. She found her broken plastic shaft and struggled back to her knees. Once there, she found she had no strength left to lift her weapon. She had no strength to move at all.

As the ghoul's black claws and black teeth descended upon her, Victoria knew what she had to do. She had to let it out; she had to release her monster. It was her only chance but what would happen afterwards? Would the humans gather and kill her? Would she kill them? Either way, Victoria knew the ghoul would be dead.

The ghoul clamped its hands around Victoria's shoulder and drew her in. Victoria gathered what scraps of strength she could find and pushed back. But she merely slowed the ghoul's advancing maw. She could see the sallow in the ghoul's eyes; she could taste the rot on its breath. Her strength was fading fast. The time was now. Victoria had to let her monster free.

Suddenly, the ghoul arched back, squealing. It flailed its arms, blindly groping over its shoulders as it howled. Turning around, it revealed a long, plastic pipe protruding from a fan blade buried in its back. At the end of the pipe, with her little feet flying high, was the blue-eyed girl. Victoria smiled.

The ghoul shook her free but she didn't stay down. The wild girl scrambled to Victoria's side and hissed. The ghoul came roaring. The girl got on all fours, screeching like a deranged cat, her teeth dripping with anger. The ghoul lunged. The girl took the broken pike from the mud and drove it into the gap held open by the knife.

Black, rancid blood poured over the ghoul's round belly, dripping to the ground in clumps. Too wounded to fight any longer, the ghoul limped off. As it vanished in the thick mist, the wild, little girl returned to Victoria and hugged her. Victoria hugged her back, wishing she had had the honor of raising this one herself. Such prowess in battle when yet so small, it was a rare and beautiful thing. If only Victoria could take this one back to Midnight, bring her to age... make her an heir and an ally. But some rules even Victoria couldn't break... yet.

As they held each other in the mud, the leader shook off the little ones trying to coax him back to the cave and limped over to Victoria and her wild, little girl. His left arm hung limp, the shoulder out of its socket. With his eyes locked on Victoria, the leader got down on his knees and smashed his shoulder against a rock, popping it back into place. As he sat back on his heels, waiting for the pain to ebb, he glared into Victoria's eyes. It was clear that he knew something or at least suspected. Maybe he figured out what the ghoul was talking about, 'second chance'. Maybe he figured out what Victoria was. Victoria didn't know.

If they all set upon her at once, Victoria wouldn't be able to fight them off, not in her present condition and form. Her monster, on the other hand, could destroy them all, an unfortunate thing... very unfortunate. But after that, what? Would her monster think to stay with her sarcophagus or at least take it with? Of course not. When the others found the sarcophagus alone, would they know Victoria was somewhere wandering the planet, starving to death? Victoria wasn't sure.

The leader pulled himself to his feet while Victoria held her wild girl tight. The other humans gathered around him, not sure what their leader was about to do. One of them handed him his nails. A soft rain fell, chilling the air. Victoria braced herself for whatever happened next and hoped the little girl would find a way to survive.

As Victoria and the leader locked eyes across the silent tension, a soft ping pierced the air. Everyone turned. The light on Victoria's sarcophagus now blinked fast. The others were coming for her. She had to get these humans away from here. She had to get her sarcophagus away from here.

Victoria pushed the wild girl away and struggled to her feet, hoarsely yelling, "Go up bad! Run! Go! Away! Go! Go!"

Victoria swung her arms, urging them back to the cave but they just stared at her, confused. The little girl backed into the fog, angry tears cutting muddy streaks down her cheeks as she vanished into the grey. The leader tightened his fists around his pike. His militia readied their weapons. They closed around Victoria.

Victoria no longer had a choice. She closed her eyes and let go, knowing that she would have no control over what came next. As screams punctured the air, Victoria's nails grew into claws, black and jagged. Her skin thickened into armor, rough and gray. And her teeth swelled into fangs, filling her mouth with daggers. When Victoria opened her eyes again, she saw the world as if through a mask... and the mask was running the show.

In a tempest of weapons and screams, the crowd descended upon the monster. Their leader stood at the heart of the maelstrom, his nails repeatedly bouncing off the monster's hide. As Victoria watched from within, black claws grabbed his weapon and yank him forward. He slammed his fist across the monster's jaw but only broke his own knuckles.

In another place, with other humans, this would've made Victoria laugh in amusement. But here, she battled the monster, trying to get it turn away, to leave these humans behind. Victoria's monster paid her will no mind. It was hungry. It was going to feed.

While the others pummeled Victoria's monster like so many gnats, the beast ignored them and sank its teeth into the leader's throat. Blood filled Victoria's grateful mouth.

As Victoria and her monster drank joyfully together, a high-pitched scream pierced the fog. Victoria's monster jerked back from its meal and stared into a pair of horrified, blue eyes. The crowd grabbed their drained leader and fell back, all but the wild, little girl.

Victoria's monster dropped to all fours, preparing to lunge upon another meal. Victoria had to stop it. But her will was worthless. All she could do was watch helplessly as the beast seized the wild girl about her waist. Its jaw opened wide but the little girl was not afraid. She stared into that chasm of death with earnest contempt.

As Victoria struggled to stop it, she knew her people would be disgusted with her, trying to save the life of a wild human. Still, Victoria fought her monster, holding its jaws back by force of will, at least for a moment.

A moment was all that the wild girl needed. As the dripping teeth descended upon her, the tiny human held up a fat rock and smashed the monster dead in the teeth. The monster dropped her, howling and holding its face. Somewhere behind the mask, Victoria smiled.

The others gathered with their useless toys but the monster had already had enough. Its teeth throbbing, it ran off into the fog leaving the lost humans to their Morbid Silence.

Gradually, the leader's blood soaked into Victoria's body, giving her enough strength to regain control but not to return to her preferred form. She found herself in the middle of nothing, just muddy, rocky ground and silver, soupy sky. There was nothing to give her bearings, not until a red streak crossed the sky.

Victoria licked her lips clean, removing any evidence, and followed the streak until it landed not far from the cave of lost humans. Upon seeing her rescuers, Victoria finally collapsed in exhaustion. Four of her brethren gathered around.

"Oh my Lady!" gasped Ahka of House Bhutu as she stood over Victoria's wounded monster. "What happened to you?"

"What happened to you *this time*," added William, a member of Victoria's House, Ahnaux. As Victoria's personal bodyguard, he had already seen her in this state and worse.

"Bring her slaves," Ahka called back to the ship. "She needs blood, quickly!"

Through a voice of gravel, Victoria mumbled, "Go up fast."

"Don't worry, Princess," assured William as he gathered her up. "We will get you out of here."

William carried her onto the shuttle and laid her on a reclining seat. While she waited for the feeding slaves to be brought up from the pen, Victoria gazed out the window. Out in the thick mist, a small figure stood watching their shuttle go up.

Victoria had managed to keep the wild humans secret and she intended to continue keeping them secret, at least for now. Perhaps one day she would return for what she had left behind. But if that day ever came, it would cause quite a ruckus at home, quite a ruckus indeed.