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THREE AND A HALF MONTHS EARLIER SOMEWHERE IN THE DANIEL BOONE NATIONAL FOREST EASTERN KENTUCKY

'Something's wrong,' Gabriel Van Helsing thought. 'They should be in position by now!'*W(w)W.nOvEL(w)OrM.cO@*

They had to lie low. The forests of Eastern Kentucky were very dense, but they had not yet completely leafed out in early May. He peered down at the clearing through his night vision goggles and winced.

The huge bonfires painted the clearing with the flickering, garish light of Hades. An ancient, rotting wooden coffin, apparently full of soil and dust, was propped up on a bier. A beautiful young auburn-haired woman, naked except for a long black cloak and a leather belt, stood next to the casket. She raised a serrated dagger in her right hand. Its silver blade gleamed crimson in the firelight.

Two terrified young girls dressed in white blouses and plaid skirts struggled in the clutches of a pair of enormous werewolves.

Schoolgirls -- probably from some nearby Catholic high school, judging by their uniforms.

On the open ground in front of the makeshift stage, hundreds of werewolves milled about, snarling and growling impatiently. A hulking beast of a man in a blood-colored robe climbed the steps to the platform, his shaved head shining in the night.

"Attend your mistress, Lady Deidra!" he bellowed, motioning to the cloaked woman wielding the knife.

The werewolves only grumbled more loudly. Deidra surreptitiously touched her belt buckle, and the creatures calmed down somewhat.

Van Helsing studied the wide leather belt around the Deidra's slender waist. There were small blinking lights and touchsensors in the buckle. Microchips? Was that how she was controlling the werewolves?

The fresh-faced young woman lying prone on the cool ground next to him was getting antsy. Like him, she was dressed in a camouflage uniform and helmet, and outfitted with all manner of lethal weapons and high tech equipment. Tessa McCallum turned toward him.

"Gabe, we've got to do something now!" she hissed sotto voce. "They're going to kill those two little girls!"

"We've got to wait, Tessa," he countered. The anguish in his voice was palpable. "We move too soon, four months of work goes down the drain. If this wolfpack is turned loose, hundreds may die -- or be turned to werewolves themselves. So if I have to sacrifice two innocent lives to stop that, then that's what I'll have to do -- whether I like it or not! We start blasting away and those weres will scatter to the four winds, and it could take us years to hunt them all down. I haven't gotten the signal from Taggart yet, and I can't raise him."

The woman on the platform nodded. The red-robed hulk roughly stripped the screaming girls naked. The blonde girl was slender and beautiful, with firm, pert breasts. The redhead was pretty, too, although still a little plump with baby fat.

"What are they doing?" Tessa asked in a strangled voice.

"Resurrecting a vampire."

"What?" She was aghast; her eyebrows climbed toward her hairline.

"The werewolves are probably being controlled by microchip implants and a transmitter in the woman's belt buckle -- not the most reliable method. A vampire, however, can control hordes of werewolves and other dark creatures with ease."*WwW.nOvELwOrM.co@*

"But who would want to control a pack of.. of werewolves? And.... why?"

Van Helsing shook his head.

"As to why... who knows? Extreme evil needs no reason. And as to who...."

He hesitated.

"Maybe Satan himself." He clicked on the mouthpiece of his helmet. "Christ! Come on, Taggart -- where in hell are you?"

The young blonde girl was strung up by her ankles head down over the open coffin from the limb of a tree that hung over the platform. Her piercing shrieks of terror split the night as she swung back and forth, and the werewolf pack began to howl in agitation.

"These virgins, both of whom have reached their eighteenth season, will be sacrificed to revive and nourish our mistress, Giselle du Meliere, the Queen of the Vampires!" the cloaked woman intoned.

Van Helsing stiffened. He paled, and his eyes widened in horror.

"Gods, no!"

"What?" Tessa's face was etched in concern.

"Giselle du Meliere lived in 15th Century France," he said, "She was an innocent eighteen-year-old girl, the daughter of a French nobleman. She was studying in Romania, and was the first victim to be 'turned' by Count Dracula , when he began his reign of terror. As a vampire, she is evil incarnate - as dangerous and cunning as Dracula himself. If she is revived....."

"My God!"

"I must stop her -- again," Van Helsing said. "It was I who..... staked her and put her in that coffin in 1882."

Tessa shivered. She had to remind herself that Gabriel Van Helsing was an immortal. He was so handsome and virile. He appeared to be in his mid thirties, and yet he was hundreds of years old. Sometimes it creeped her out.

Deidra's lips moved in a silent chant. Then she shouted, "Dark Lord -- guide my hand!"

Suddenly she buried the huge dagger between the blonde girl's spread legs with a meaty 'chunk.' The girl's piercing screams shattered the stillness of the forest as Deidra savagely sliced downward, gutting her victim from groin to collarbone. Blood and viscera rained down, flooding the interior of the coffin.

The butchered girl's companion shrieked and passed out from sheer fright, and the werewolves, maddened by the smell of blood and raw meat, set up a hair-raising cacophony of howling. Deidra tapped a series of several buttons on her belt buckle this time, and the beasts finally quieted down.

Van Helsing closed his eyes. Beside him, Tessa McCallum wretched quietly.

The contents of the coffin began to boil and smoke. The girl's entrails dissolved and her blood was greedily absorbed by the bubbling soil. Something began to coalesce and take shape in the midst of the roiling mess. As the scarlet mist cleared, they could see what it was.

A skeleton!

As they watched in horror, blood vessels, nerves and muscle began to grow over the bones. Within seconds, pink skin began to form. Long, flowing raven hair grew down to the shoulders of the now fully formed body.*(w)@w.W.nOvEL(w)OrM.c(O)!!!*

A beautiful young girl lay in the coffin now, where only moldering soil had been. She was as naked as the day she had been born.... over 600 years earlier.

A last few droplets of blood from the dangling corpse dripped onto her too-red lips. A pink tongue flicked out and licked them away.

Suddenly, bright green eyes snapped open wide. The girl in the coffin sat up abruptly with a scream of terror.

"Why have you awakened me?" she demanded, her voice thick with anguish. "I was at peace!"

The werewolves on the stage and in the clearing suddenly grew silent. As one, they prostrated themselves before the newly awakened Giselle du Meliere. She climbed out of the coffin and stood on the platform, looking for all the world like a sweet-faced young girl, a terrified, innocent eighteen year old.

Van Helsing grabbed his compound crossbow and reached for a sharpened wooden stake.

"Wh-what time is this?" Giselle asked.

"It is May 2nd, 2007, Mistress -- the night of the full moon."

Giselle closed her eyes, and a single tear tracked down her smooth cheek. "I have been at peace for almost 130 years, and you have disturbed my rest."

Suddenly she cried out and went to her knees in pain, clutching her stomach. "S-so hungry!" she sobbed.

A werewolf stood up and pulled the unconscious redheaded girl to her feet, rousing her. A sudden, terrifying change transformed Giselle's guileless features. Her lips drew back over her teeth in a feral snarl, revealing long, vicious fangs. Her skin turned the color of putty, and her eyes became as deep red as a pool of blood, and glowed like twin coals.

The redheaded girl revived just in time for the attack.

She shrieked as the vampire sank razor-sharp fangs into her soft, tender throat. Giselle tore out the jugular and drank greedily. She drained every drop of blood from her victim within minutes, and the redheaded girl's bladder emptied helplessly as she died.

As her corpse began to sag toward the platform, Giselle grabbed it by the neck. She effortlessly tossed the girl's body out into the crowd of werewolves with one arm, and the beasts were noisily tearing apart their treat before it hit the ground*Www.nOvEL(w)Or@.com*