

1030

The vampire squatted in front of him. Her smile grew bestial as she bared her fangs, and her eyes shimmered into pools of blood. "You will enjoy this, mon cherie. I will make you come!"

She attacked, burying her fangs in his jugular, and began to suck. Van Helsing moaned, but it was a throaty moan of sheer pleasure. The sensation of her fangs in his neck, his blood gushing down her throat as she sucked, was the most intense source of pleasure he had ever known. It would be so easy just to give in.....

And then, before she even realized what was happening, Van Helsing finally grabbed the sharpened stake and savagely drove it to the hilt into her chest in an explosion of blood. Giselle shrieked and convulsed; her wings receded, and he pressed his advantage, falling on top of her and driving the wood deeper into her. Then he grabbed a rock and hammered the stake in all the way.

Then Giselle du Meliere, the vampire, reverted back into Giselle du Meliere, the innocent young girl.

Her beautiful face was wreathed in a radiant smile as blood trickled from the corners of her mouth. "M-Mama... I have b-been released..." she gurgled. She turned to Van Helsing. "Th... thank y-you..."

Her head lolled to one side and she died.

Again.

The fog lifted almost immediately. The stuttering of machine guns began anew, and the tide shifted back in favor of Van Helsing's soldiers. The death cries of werewolves rang out through the trees.

Suddenly the forest lit up as bright as day as spotlights flooded the area. Two helicopter gunships, RAH-66 Comanches on stealth approach, opened fire with 20 mm cannons and specially-designed Hellfire missiles and assorted rockets. The choppers had been called in as reinforcements when the red mist had filled the forest. The werewolves were mowed down like tenpins now; the ground troops cheered and pressed their own attack with renewed vigor. The lycans were bracketed from above and below.

It was over within moments. The last werewolf lay kicking on the ground, quickly reverting to her human form as she died.**wWw.nOvLwO-rm.cd(m)**

Van Helsing sat wearily against the tree as his troops mopped up. Vic Childress trudged slowly up the hillside.

"All the bodies need to be cremated," Van Helsing said without looking up. "The werewolves, our troops, all of them. You need to cut off the vampire bitch's head and fill her mouth with garlic, and burn it away from her body. We need to do the same... with Tessa. Use thermipalm to cremate them; that's hot enough that there should be nothing identifiable left behind from any of the bodies. I want a gunship to hover and scatter the ashes when the fire's out."

Childress nodded. As he turned to leave, Van Helsing added, "And I need a torch from the bonfire."

A young soldier ran and brought one back, and before their horrified eyes, Gabriel Van Helsing pressed the flaming brand against his wounded neck, screaming as the gagging stench of charred flesh wafted through the air. He nearly passed out; then as smoke curled up from the horrible, blackened burn, his trembling fingers grabbed a bottle of holy water from a pouch on his utility belt, and he liberally splashed the liquid on the wound.

Within moments, the flesh had totally healed. Not even Giselle's fang marks remained.

Van Helsing was to his feet by Childress and the soldier who had brought the torch. They half-dragged and half-carried him over to the clearing where Tessa's naked body lay, pale as snow now. He sagged to his knees and sat on his heels next to her, and his shoulders shook with silent sobs. He slowly raised his head.**or©W.(n)dV6LwO-rm.©orm**

"Get me a stake and a hammer," he ordered.

"Gabe," Childress began softly, "I can do this..."

"Just get me the fucking hammer!" Van Helsing cried, distraught.

Vic Childress nodded. He walked off, and returned moments later with the implements Van Helsing needed. The vampire slayer's lips moved in silent prayer. Then he rammed the stake to the hilt into Tessa's chest with one mighty blow, just to the left of center, as blood arced into the air.

The "dead" woman sat up, screaming, clutching at Van Helsing's arm. She stared at him in horrified disbelief, as if she had just awakened from a nightmare.

"G.... Gabe? What..... happened.... "

Then she slumped back on the ground, fangs gleaming in her open mouth.

Tears streaming down his face, Van Helsing slid a long bayonet from its sheath and decapitated Tessa. He drew on thick gloves and stuffed her mouth full of garlic from a pouch on his weapons belt. Vic Childress took the severed, dripping head from Van Helsing, while two of his men picked up Tessa's headless corpse and lugged it away.

Something glinted in the midst of the gore where Van Helsing had beheaded her. He bent down, heedless of the blood. His fingers closed over a charm. Tessa's body had rolled atop the 14-K cross charm she wore on a fine gold chain around her neck.

Her good luck charm.

Van Helsing threw back his head and loosed a scream of raw anguish.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO..... .." "

Gabriel Van Helsing awoke with a gasp. He had fallen asleep at the computer terminal again. He rubbed his eyes.

They had gone into the compound in Kentucky with 257 troops and had come out with 84. It had been a bloodbath. He had lost many friends, and..... Tessa. They never had discovered who was behind the unholy convocation of werewolves and vampires, although he had heard rumors that the CEO of a mining company who was an aficionado of the occult had wanted to terrorize the residents of counties bordering the National Forest and drive them away from their property. The residential areas sat on some rich coal veins. His company could buy the property for a song and strip mine it once it was abandoned. There wasn't much incentive to stay when werewolves were running amok in your neighborhood, killing and eating people.

He shook his head. Such an elaborate scheme, just to satisfy simple greed. Satan could take many forms.....

It was only later that he learned Giselle du Meliere's coffin had been spirited away in the melee before the funeral pyre was lit. If there was any of Giselle's essence remaining in the casket - and he'd be willing to bet there was - she could be resurrected yet again with another sacrifice of virgin's blood.

He feared they hadn't heard the last of Giselle du Meliere.

Van Helsing gazed moodily out the window at the shimmering late August heat of the Kansas plains. He had been assigned to this satrap of Eglon Special Forces for rest and rehabilitation. Eglon was a quasi-military clandestine ops organization that specialized in..... unusual cases. Very few people, even inside the organization, knew that the real power behind Eglon was a secret society called the Knights of the Holy Order, who had been fighting the forces of supernatural evil for centuries. Van Helsing answered to no one at Eglon. As the Chief of Operations, he got his orders directly from the Vatican.

A light flashed on his monitor screen, and a beep sounded, informing him that Eglon's computer network had picked up an alert. Van Helsing sat forward, suddenly wide awake.

"Something come in?"

He craned his neck as Miranda Tyler, his new assistant, walked into his quarters. She was girl-next-door pretty, a slender brunette with brown eyes and a nice smile. He nodded.

"I haven't opened it yet," he said. "It's on F. I. Network, a forensic net. Coming in from a place called Winslow Junction, Washington."**wWw.NoO+Lw©OM.©©©**

He clicked on it and opened the file. Miranda gasped in horror when the image of the Winslow Junction werewolf came up on the screen. Van Helsing swallowed hard. "My.... God! What a nasty-looking bugger! He's maximally transmogrified." He scrolled down the screen. "The video is from a dash cam unit on a Park Ranger's cruiser. She was a young woman; the werewolf violated and slaughtered her. The video shows it.... all."

Miranda stiffened.

"You don't have to watch," he said softly.

"Yes, I do," she said. "Don't forget, I was in Kentucky, too. I saw the carnage first hand, and I'm still with Eglon. If I'm going to be your assistant, I'm to be spared nothing."

He nodded and pushed 'play' with his mouse.

When it was over, Miranda was numb with horror. Van Helsing was as pale as she had ever seen him. There was an almost imperceptible tremor in his hand.

"You were worried about me," she said softly. "Are you okay?"

He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. "It brings back memories -- all of them bad," he said. "I keep going back over it all in my mind, asking myself if I could have done anything differently, and I keep telling myself 'no.' That mist Giselle generated -- only a vampire as powerful as Dracula himself could have done that. We weren't expecting that. I should have been prepared. All those people died. Tessa..."

His voice caught, and unshed tears glimmered in his eyes. "I promised her father, as he lay on his deathbed, that I would do my best to protect her. My best wasn't very good, was it?"

She kissed him on the cheek. "You did do your best. Don't beat yourself up; I hate to see you torture yourself. I.... care about you."

He affectionately squeezed her hand. "Miranda -- please. Don't go there. You know what I am, but you don't know what that costs me - to sit and watch people I care about grow old, wither and die - assuming they live long enough to die of old age - while I stay forever frozen in my thirties. You don't want to get involved with me. It's dangerous. People I get close to end up dead. Anna Valerious.... Tessa. Don't join the list."

"I knew the risks when I signed up for this duty," she returned. "Please don't shut me out."

He sighed. "I won't. I'll do my best to protect you, but... no guarantees." Van Helsing pointed at the screen. "This may be our 'random werewolf.' The modus operandi fits. Little backwater towns, different one each month. He hits and runs, in and out. The brutal rape, the sexual mutilation -- eating the breasts and genitals. He's an elusive bastard, though. He's a real psycho -- probably is one in his human form, too. Maybe this time we'll have a chance to get him. Most of the time the law enforcement agencies won't admit that they have a werewolf on their hands, and by the time they do, it's too late - our beast has left town."

He glanced at her and smiled. "Ever been to Washington?"

"No. I hear it's pretty country though."

"It is," he said. "Let's go."

"Whoa, uno momento, cowboy," Miranda said. "You're forgetting the little matter of medical clearance. The staff is still concerned about the spinal trauma and bruising you sustained in your back when you hit that tree in Kentucky. It's almost cleared up, but they're not sure it's 100% cured - at least enough for you to go back into action."

"I'm fine," Van Helsing said defensively.

"Then let's see you stand up," she challenged.

He got up slowly and stiffly. He fought to hide the involuntary wince from Miranda, but she was leaving none of it.

"It's just a little creaky when I first get up," he said. "Once I get moving, it's fine. Maybe a cortisone shot..."

"That's up to the doctor," Miranda said.

"But I'm Chief of Operations!" he protested.

She chuckled. "On Star Trek, there was only one man who could pull rank on Captain Kirk, and that was Dr. McCoy! You, love, are in the same boat." Her eyes twinkled. "You could always do what James Bond did in Die Another Day."

"And that was?"

"He was still pretty banged up, and not really ready to go back on duty," Miranda replied with a grin. "007 persuaded the pretty young doctor to reactivate him by screwing her! You, however, my dear Gabe, need to convince Dr. Collins. He's 82 years old, been married 57 years, and is totally devoted to his wife!"**VWw.rOv(6)l(w)(o)r.m.C:m**

"I'm doomed!" Van Helsing groaned. "Come on, let's see if we can talk him into it."

He left the room. Miranda followed behind him. She glanced once more at the horrifying image of the werewolf.

A shudder coursed down her spine. She slammed the door and hurried after him.