

Wolf and Hound

Nigel Bennett and P. N. Elrod

Sabra stood on the cliff overlooking the sea, scenting the rising wind for magic. She braced against cold updrafts buffeting her small body, her long hair torn free, whipping about like Medusa's snakes. She braced and let it come until she could determine if it was the simple spice of some minor weather-wizard or the dank reek of deeper sorcery.

As the church bells below tolled midnight the air abruptly went still, waiting. In the fields behind her she heard the dolourous bleating of sheep. In the town below a dog frantically barked warning. Then the storm itself burst upon sea and land. She could see the very color of its force on the wind, angry red streaks shot through with a violet so deep as to be black.

Spreading her arms wide, she sang into the night, her clear voice going out to the rocks below, then dancing across the wild gray waters of a harbour to a mist-hidden horizon. The returning echo against her soul confirmed her suspicion. The quickening wash of the gale had real spellwork behind it: old, dark, and dangerously powerful.

Blood magic it was.

Blood magic... and death.

Out there beyond the breakwater... a drifting schooner. *That* was the source. Did it carry plague such as she'd seen ravaging all the world in those short centuries past? If so, then there was little she could do to stop it. A rare stab of true horror pierced her, but only for an instant. Great would be that calamity, but it was part of the natural cycle of the earth. This was decidedly un-natural. Which brought it within her sphere of influence.

By miracle or curse, the ship found its way into the harbour, going aground, causing much activity among the locals who ran to its aid. She wondered if any of them marked the black shape of the huge wolf that leaped to shore from the deck. It charged straight for a sea cliff and the darkness of the churchyard above. The beast did not pause, but continued past the church, heading for the shelter of a broken abbey, heading directly toward Sabra.

The wolf found its way up the last steep rise, gaining level footing not five paces away.

Much larger than any she'd seen before, it was big as a calf, a match for any of the hounds of Annwyn. Raw hate gleamed from red eyes. Swinging its heavy head in her direction, long teeth bared in a growl, it advanced on her. She did not move, except to hold out her hand in a placating gesture. She spoke Words of Calming in the Old Tongue. The creature snapped in reaction, ears flat, hackles up as though she'd clubbed it instead. Beneath the thick fur, muscles bunched, and it leaped at her, its reeking jaws closing upon her throat, ripping flesh like paper. She fell backwards under the weight of its body and kept falling. Both of them launched spinning from the cliff, dropping into empty, roaring space...

Sabra awoke fully from the dream.

She lay inert, eyes shut, only mildly aware of the ornate bed in which she'd slept the day through, and tried to hold fast to the last shreds of the vision, seeking more details. Clearest of all was that picture of herself standing on the cliff overlooking Whitby Harbour. Sweet Cerridwen, but she'd not passed through Whitby in decades, why now?

Used to all sorts of nightmarish dreams, her gift of Sight was usually more forthcoming with meanings to explain the mesh of images, but not this time. Whether the wolf was a literal or symbolic danger she could not tell. Whatever was astir knew how to cloak itself, which meant a formidable magical skill. She could not ignore such a strong, if murky, portent and made the necessary arrangements for the long rail

journey home.

Taking advantage of certain modes of this century's fashion, Sabra covered her pale skin in long gloves and a heavy cloak, and draped a dense black veil over a wide-brimmed bonnet. Warm for August, but it protected her from the burning sun and offered welcome isolation. She appeared to be a recently bereaved widow in deep mourning. None would question why she took no meals in the train's dining car. Those feedings she sought elsewhere from willing and forgetful companions. No more dreams of blood magic disturbed her day-sleeps, which was frustrating. She wanted more information.

It took days of travel to reach England from St. Petersburg where she'd been keeping an eye on Victoria's granddaughter, Alexandria. By then the storm Sabra had envisaged had come and gone, the mystery of it cold, though gossip was still rife. The macabre tale of a dead captain sailing his deserted ship into harbour confirmed to her that she'd done the right thing leaving the Russian court to investigate this. Whatever had been aboard boded ill for the realm she'd pledged to guard.

She spent a week in Whitby, sensing nothing useful, learning little of import except that the wolf had also been real enough, though all thought it to be only a large dog. According to a newspaper report, it had fled the ship following the same path she'd seen in her dream, vanishing into the night, perhaps to prowl the moors, alone and afraid.

Or so people assumed.

Shape-shifters were not unknown to her. Most were harmless, but this one was different, else its magic wouldn't have drawn her attention so strongly.

She sought and found information about the ship's cargo and its final destination, tracking it to Purfleet. Taking to the rails again, she followed the same route to King's Cross station, and ultimately to the badly aging mansion attached to old Carfax Abbey.

The place was deserted save for a number of boxes in the ruined chapel which proved to be filled with earth.

So... that was it. One of the European Breed come to settle in England. She had no objection to them, so long as they conducted themselves with wisdom and discretion. Thus far she was unimpressed. This one—if she drew the correct conclusion from the captain's log printed in the papers—had killed the entire crew of the ship on which he'd sailed. Why had he not simply cast his influence upon them to make them forget his presence? All those of undead blood had that talent, but this had been vicious and barbaric beyond reason.

Then there was the matter of the magic.

Whoever this newcomer might be, he commanded powers beyond those of his peers. The Europeans had sufficient supernatural strengths within their inherent natures, but to combine those with black sorcery made for a frightening potential. Before she could return to Russia, Sabra would have to determine their extent—and his intentions.

Still in the convenient isolation of widow's weeds, Sabra took rooms at a nearby hotel. In the days to come she maintained a loose vigil on Carfax, primarily after dark, as she judged it to be the most likely time for him to return, but that proved a disappointment. The only activity she marked was noting one night that nearly half the boxes were gone, the signs left in the thick dust indicating the invasion of a carting firm going about its prosaic business.

Then there was the occasional excitement when one of the lunatics from the sanitarium next door escaped. He always came to Carfax, crying pitifully to gain entry to be with his "Master."

The poor brute was touched by the moon all right, his disturbed mind reacting badly to the European's strong psychic trace. She visited the fellow once in the late hours, speaking through his barred window in hope of learning something useful. Alas, his madness was something even her powers of

influence could not pierce. All she got was his insistence that "the Master was here," to which she assigned its broader meaning. If the European were on the immediate grounds, she'd have sensed him.

Growing impatient with the wait—for August had long vanished and September was nearly gone—Sabra tried a scrying ceremony one night while the moon was still at full. The results, as she stared hard into the mirrored surface of a black bowl filled with water, were mixed. She saw the delicate shadow of a young woman, but nothing of her face or location. The shadow became less and less substantial, then vanished altogether.

Not good, Sabra thought grimly, then added a handful of earth taken from one of the boxes to the bowl. She stirred it clockwise and waited for the water to grow still again.

This time she saw *his* shadow. It stretched long and solid in the moonlight, reaching far over city and field. The shadow was not black, but blood red. No surprise there. She sought to raise her view, to see the man himself, but he kept drawing away from her. His shadow suddenly changed shape, first into that of a wolf, then a bat, and finally dissolving into countless fly-specks that swirled away to vanish in the wind. She did not think he was aware of her; this was only part of his normal protective magic.

And probably strongest at night, she wryly concluded upon waking from her trance.

The next time she made an attempt was at the brightest hour of noon, closing her shutters and pulling the draperies close.

The visions were clear now, but dark: deaths and burials, images accompanied by vivid emotions. She was at last able to see the young woman. Dead now. There had been much unhappiness and suffering for her. Though she'd been hedged round with protections, they were not sufficient to keep *him* from sating his appetite for her. Poor lost child. She'd have had little idea what was happening to her, nor would she have known how to defend against it. There was much to be said for keeping alive old superstitions and wives' tales. The great dawning of science had helped many with its light, but there were yet things walking abroad who took advantage of the shifting shadows in the chasms between science and faith.

Dire change had already wrested the girl from her final sleep, too late to restore the balance there. However, Sabra had gotten a distinct clue to follow, a very clear vision of a churchyard with a marble mausoleum, and the impression that it was fairly close.

At dusk she set out searching for a specific building to match the one she carried in memory. London had hundreds of churches, but she had a scent to follow the right one. Death and sorrow leave their own unique spoor.

Not far from Hampstead Heath, she found the church and its attendant cemetery. There she got confirmation that the gods favored her presence, for she arrived in time to witness a most peculiar event. Four men, one old, the rest young, were hoisting themselves over the churchyard wall. With no small exertion they eventually succeeded, albeit in a most undignified manner. They should have scouted the area first and made use of a convenient overhanging tree but a few yards along the wall. Sabra had the advantage of them with her excellent night vision. Despite her skirts, she nimbly climbed the friendly branches to drop silently on the other side.

Though stealthy as they threaded through the tombstones to the mausoleum, they did not have the look of grave robbers, being too well dressed. Medical men seeking a corpse suitable for dissection? No, for one of them produced a key to the structure. Mourners? They were in for a wretched surprise. She hid behind a shadow-steeped cypress, close enough to observe.

The older fellow, who had a Dutch accent, seemed to be in charge, unlocking the mausoleum that they might enter, then shutting them all inside. She stole forward, listening through the door cracks as they labourously opened one of the coffins within... only to find it empty. That did not sit well with the other men, who all seemed connected to the young woman who should have lain there. They demanded an

explanation, and the old man, whom they addressed as "Professor," provided one. He was quite detailed.

Ah. So that was it. Hunters. He was trying to train his acolytes in the mysteries of destroying Nosferatu. With indifferent success, it seemed, though he managed to convince his unhappy students that something odd was afoot and that they should hold watch.

They soon quit the tomb, Sabra withdrew to the cypress, and all save the professor settled in to wait. He busied himself by working some sort of putty around the door, explaining that the crumbled-up Host he'd mixed into the stuff would prevent the Un-Dead from entering through the cracks. This positively scandalized Sabra. There were other, more respectful methods of sealing a place. Holy Water or a blessing would have done just as well. Perhaps he was trying to make a dramatic point with his students.

Sabra settled in, senses alert. She'd have had to wait anyway; this added company was merely an unexpected complication. It would be most interesting to question the professor, but later, when she could hypnotically control him.

If he survived the night. Even a young Nosferatu was a deadly opponent to ordinary mortals. Sabra hoped the men had armed themselves. And with the right weapons.

A distant clock struck the quarter-hours. Slowly, most slowly. She found no fault with the other guardians in their determination; it was a weary vigil and in such a place as to excite the morbid side of one's imagination. Cemeteries held no fear for her, but she did not approve of them, disliking the idea of all those bodies lying corrupt in the good earth.

The ancient Britons had sensibly exposed their dead, letting the elements and animals have their way with the flesh until naught remained but clean bones, which were then tidily interred.

For a time they'd adapted the northern custom of burning the corpse, setting off a spectacular blaze none of the gods could miss, releasing the spirit to soar free from its clay prison.

Either way, there would be no doubt to anyone that the deceased, and any illness he or she carried, was indeed dead and would remain firmly, safely, and harmlessly on its *own* side of the veil. This relatively new custom of burying bodies in the ground or leaving them boxed up in mausoleums was indecent, not to mention unhealthy. Far better to let the natural corruption of the flesh take place in the cleansing wash of open sky or by purifying fire than to hide it away to fester and rot in the airless dark.

Well, if one must have such dreary spots, best that they be on holy ground, which was good for certain numinous matters. But there were some types of magic that ran beyond the bounds of the ordinary rituals of faith...

The clock struck two, and moments later she heard the old man's hiss of warning. The group's whole attention riveted upon *something* coming up the yew-tree avenue. Sabra ventured out a bit for a glimpse.

A young woman clad in filmy grave garments, the same one from the scrying-vision. She walked slowly, ghost-like, not yet aware of the men. There was no mistaking what she'd become, but that dark bundle she held close to her lithe body... a *child*? Sabra was aghast at this cruel turn of appetite, and set herself to leap forward and to intervene, devil take the consequences.

But matters moved too swiftly; the instant of intervention passed when the men startled the girl, who cast the child away. She should have fled, but instead turned the full power of her charm upon one of them, apparently her husband. It was as though none of the others existed for her. She'd have ensnared him on the spot, but the professor stepped between, using a crucifix to thwart her. Only then did the girl seem to realize her danger and darted for the tomb—to be repulsed by the Host. The change should *not* have left her vulnerable to such holy objects; it was the corruption of the European's dark magics that had done that to her.

Sabra's heart sank. This was bad. Very bad.

The professor removed a portion of the putty so the girl could slip inside the tomb, which she did, her ability to do so adding to their consternation. He replaced it, then announced that they would return on the morrow. They quickly left, taking the child.

What a terrible little drama, Sabra thought, and alas for the grieving husband. He was the most shattered, but then who would not be? To have a loved one die, then return from the grave so hideously changed as to turn that love into loathing would break the strongest heart and will. She trusted that his friends would see him through the worst of it; there was nothing she could do for him but seek the source of his loss: the European.

She left the cypress and tried the door of the tomb. Locked, and Sabra was not in the habit of carrying skeleton keys. On the other side she sensed the girl's roiling feelings: rage, frustration, confusion, pain, and terror, the mindless terror of an animal.

With as much reverence as she could summon, Sabra peeled away some of the putty, then pressed her hands flat against the cold stone of the tomb.

Come forth! she commanded.

Strong as she must be in her new state, the girl had no defense against such a Summoning. Within seconds she'd seeped through the thin opening and stood trembling on the grass. She'd been pretty in life; in the death-that-was-not-death she was radiant.

And from the look in her wide eyes, she was also quite mad.

Once a helpless innocent, now returned to prey upon the most helpless innocents of all. She had no restraints and no reason left in her addled brain. Little wonder she'd reacted so foolishly to the hunters, seeking sanctuary in a place no longer safe. She was like a child pulling a blanket overhead to keep out the monsters.

Sabra tried to fasten her attention with hypnosis, hoping to draw her from the darkness, but to no avail. What remained of the girl's mind was quicksilver elusive; she voiced only vague ramblings about being lonely and hungry. Her eyes focused once—on Sabra's throat—and she started eagerly forward, but Sabra put a stop to *that* with a rebuffing word and gesture, freezing her in place. The girl subsided, moaning miserably.

Most of the converted made the transition with little or no shock to the mind. Of course, it helped when their lovers took the trouble to acquaint them with what to expect. Sabra asked the girl for the European's name, but she didn't even know that much. Less than the poor lunatic from the asylum.

With no small disgust—for the European, not his pathetic victim—Sabra released the girl to return to her hiding place. She was malleable to some forms of suggestion, so Sabra took care to instruct her to sleep deeply for the next few days and nights. It would ease her sufferings. By then the old professor and his friends would have had time to return and deal with the wretch. She was entirely lost to insanity and the European's magic; death would at least free her spirit. A tragedy, but there was no other help for it.

As for the heartless bastard who had *done* this to her...

Sabra returned to her hotel, sleeping lightly until midmorning, when she donned her widow's weeds, paid the accounting, and set forth for Carfax, carrying a carpetbag of such items as she might need for an outdoor adventure. It would be only a slight rough-out for her; she'd camped in worse places in her varied travels. But, oh, the abbey was so filthy, the dust a foot deep in some places. Why were some men such pigs? She'd known wonderful exceptions over the centuries, but this European was not in their number.

She gathered wood, twigs, and vines and made a broom, the first to cross the threshold in several decades. She swept out an inner room of the house, banished its resident nest of rats, and blessed it to make it a place of power. Then she sat cross-legged in the middle of the circle she'd chalked on the floor.

Before her was the scrying bowl, its water muddied by earth taken from the boxes. There she focused the whole of her concentration, trying to contact him through that link. The possibility existed he would go to ground, but from his vile treatment of the girl and the murder of the ship's crew, Sabra judged he would be more curious than cautious. If he was that arrogant he might think himself immune to harm—a weakness she could exploit.

Sabra lost track of time. She surfaced once, days later, drawn out one night by a strange commotion in the attached abbey. The hunters were there, apparently having followed the same trail of boxes as she, and busily opening them and blessing their contents. A convocation of rats turned up, one of the European's devisings meant to discourage burglars, but the men countered with some fierce terriers to chase them off, and continued with their work, placing pieces of the Host in each box. She smiled approval for their cleverness. It would not please their quarry.

Armed with this new advantage, Sabra later returned to her room with a fresh handful of reconsecrated soil and added it to the scrying water. When she sent her thoughts forth—*now and finally*!—she encountered *his* solid presence, and the jolt she sent him struck like an electrical shock. The returning echo carried his reaction: reflexive rage... and vast puzzlement.

Good. It was about time he noticed her.

He delayed answering. In all likelihood he'd never encountered one such as herself. Another few days passed before prudence surrendered to curiosity, and she sensed his approach to Carfax not at night, but at noon. Perhaps he thought that like his own, her un-natural powers would be at their lowest ebb in the sun, and preferred to keep things on a physical level where he would have the advantage.

She went down to the abbey to greet him, perching primly on one of the boxes, not so much to make a point, but because it wasn't layered with dust like the rest of the stinking sty.

The great door opened, and he paused on the threshold, allowing his eyes to adjust to the dimness within. It left him beautifully silhouetted. If Sabra had a crossbow in hand and been so minded, he'd have much regretted the error.

Tall and thin, with a cruel sensual face, and a fierce intellect alight in tiger green eyes... yes, that poor girl had stood no chance against him at all. Few would. There was a poisonous aura around him that boded ill to any who brushed against it, like a carrier of plague.

He came in slowly, his harsh, red-flecked gaze fixing on her like a fiery arrow. He took in the boxes, certainly aware that they'd all been interfered with, made useless to him.

"Did you do this, woman?" he demanded, his voice rumbling so deep with suppressed fury that it stirred a breeze around him. The place was in need of such; the air was unbreatheably thick with grave-stench.

"I'm not responsible," she replied, holding to an even tone. "But we must speak—"

"Who are you, woman?"

Well, she did *not* care for that contemptuous address. As though being a woman was a weakness. And she would never give him her true name. Names held power; he had quite enough already. "You may call me Miss Smith. And you?"

His red lips twitched. Amusement or scorn? Probably both. "I am the Count de Ville. I own this place. Why are you here?"

He had a sense of humor to go with his arrogance. With but a small shifting of accent one could pronounce it as "Devil."

"Very well, Count de Ville. In the name of Queen Victoria I command and require that you give an explanation for your activities since you've come to this land."

His stare was priceless. "What?"

I've never been very good at presenting credentials, she thought. "I shall be brief, but you must listen and think most carefully. The evidence is that you committed murder on the high seas, the ship on which it occurred is still at Whitby Harbour, along with its logs. The evidence is that you did seduce and willfully murder a young woman, but not before transforming her against her will to become one of your own breed, the motive as yet unknown. These are most serious crimes, Count de Ville, and they must be answered for."

Another long stare, then a roaring bark of laughter that filled the room. "You do not know with whom you are dealing."

Hm. Romanian accent. Probably one of those minor princes so used to having his own way that he'd forgotten how things were done in the outside world.

"I may also make the same observation," she responded. "I remind you that you are not in your homeland, but mine, and are answerable to her laws."

"English law?" He spat.

Older than that. Much older.

De Ville looked carefully around, scenting the heavy air.

"There are no others here, sir," she said. "You will find this to be a most singular court."

"You have me on trial?" He seemed ready to laugh again.

"Indeed, yes. Use your common sense and respect what it tells you about me."

He glared. She felt an icy hand caress her protective wards. His gaze turned inward as he concentrated, eyes rolling up in his head, palms out as he delved past surface appearance. "You have Knowledge. But it is not such as to help you here."

"Count de Ville, you are a man of great intelligence, yet you are ignoring some very important danger signs. I strongly suggest you heed them. Would I be here alone with you if I could not take care of myself? Would I have even been able to call you here if I did not have considerable skills at my disposal?"

He was silent, thinking. Past time for it, too.

"Now, sir, let's us get to the business at hand. Explain yourself."

"I will not."

There were ways around that. She fixed him with her own gaze, tearing past the protective hedges now that he was close enough. What she found was revolting.

He was old, but not ancient, and another name was in his mind... Vlad, Son of Dracul, yes, that was it. She'd heard of him, quite the vicious devil against the Turks in his day—and his own people. He was decidedly savage to any who challenged his authority. She swiftly closed off a random vision of a forest of writhing bodies impaled on stakes and moved on to his present-day concerns. He had plans to establish himself in England. The British Empire, right or wrong, was the seat of real political influence for the world. He'd once been in the center of such a maelstrom in his distant land between the forests. He wanted to resume that sort of absolute control again, but on a much larger field. He had some very specific plans on how to do it, too. Sweet Goddess, if he ever got to the Queen or the Prince of Wales...

Frozen with surprise, he gave a start and tried to throw her from his mind. She withdrew at her own speed, leaving him panting from the effort of trying to hurry her.

"What *are* you?" he asked, when he'd recovered.

"You already have the answer, but *my* apprenticeship was very much elsewhere than in the hell-depths of the Scholomance."

"What know you of that?" His shock was such that he'd lapsed into Romanian. Still in tune with his mind, she was able to translate.

"I know much. I know that you are gifted with the Talent, but you do not see beyond the gratification of your own needs. You do not see forward to the consequences of your actions on yourself or others or the general balance of all things. That is blind and blatant irresponsibility. You've grown careless and foolish or you are simply mad. And your ambitions are such that I cannot allow you to continue unchecked."

"You have not the strength to stop me."

Damn. He possessed more arrogance than wisdom. She'd hoped to be spared the ordeal of her dream. "Sir, let it suffice to say that I am used to dealing with real monarchs, not some incognito lordling with delusions of his own importance. You are an invader here, I see that now, and, by the authority of the queen I serve, I command and require that you immediately leave and return to your homeland."

She did not remotely imagine he would go quietly. From her touch on his mind she understood there was only one way to deal with him, only one thing he would respect. And she also understood the play of her initial dream, why it had ended in that manner.

He reared to his full height, like a cobra preparing to strike. "Ah, but I see it now. Talent and power you do indeed possess, but as for delusions of importance... you are nothing more than an escapee from that ridiculous madhouse across the way. Unfortunate for you, young woman. But you are comely, and for that I shall make it pleasant."

The first wave of it stole suddenly over her like a heady perfume. Sweet, but that was meant to mask the underlying bitterness. It was most potent, though, and deeply compelling. Sabra felt her body willingly respond to his seduction, though her emotions recoiled. She could physically fight it, but it would do her no good, for he was bigger and stronger. She could magically fight it, and win, but he would have to die. She had no objection to killing, having done her share in the past, but her Sight told her his was a different destiny, entwined with that of the hunters. She knew better than to fight Fate.

He drew close, looming over her, eyes flaming with hunger, desire, and triumph. She smiled dreamily, as that poor girl must have smiled, and waited as though enspelled for him to take her.

He did indeed make it pleasant, murmuring softly in his own tongue, tilting her head to one side with the light touch of a fingertip. His breath was warm on her bare throat, his kiss gentle. Under other circumstances she might have welcomed him as a lover, but they were too far apart in spirit for that.

Then he held her close and tight, and bit into her flesh. Though he did not rend it like the wolf in her dream, the effect was the same. She gasped from the sudden pain, felt her blood being strongly drawn away, as though he were taking life from her soul, not her body. Perhaps he fed on souls, enjoyed corrupting innocence. That would explain his lengthy torture of the girl.

Nothing like that for me, Sabra thought. He intended to drain her dry. He pressed hard upon her, drinking deep.

She allowed it, waiting.

He was not the only one adept at blood magic.

But... hers was far older.

All that was of the divine—no matter the faith—was his bane. He'd chosen his dark path and thus made it so. And if the Host repelled him then so would...

His strangled scream, when it came, made it all worth it.

He reeled away from her, hands clawing at his mouth and throat. Staggering, he crashed against one of the boxes and fell. She watched his sufferings, showing no expression, but with a great lifting in her heart. Sometimes justice could be most satisfying.

Vlad, son of Dracul, writhed in the dust, choking and groaning his agony. She'd seen such symptoms before, but then the effect had been from strychnine, the convulsions so strong that the victim broke his own bones from his thrashings.

"In my veins runs the chill doom of Annwyn's hounds," she explained, rubbing her throat as the flesh knitted up. "They will harry you forever, you bastard son of the Scholomance."

He shrieked, twisting.

"You feel also the holy fire of Cerridwen."

Another shriek, his back arching, then he abruptly collapsed and went still.

Sabra stood over him, taking in the ravages her blood had executed on what remained of his soul. He yet lived, but the fight had gone out of him. When he finally opened his eyes to her, they were suffused with terror.

"Return to your own land, dragon's son," she whispered. "This place is not for you."

Telegram from Mina Harker to Van Helsing:

"Look out for D. He has just now, 12.45, come from Carfax hurriedly and hastened towards the south. He seems to be going the round and may want to see you: Mina."