

To Kill the Undead

by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Almost the first thing which Lythande had learned to do when first she came into any village was to look about for a wineshop or an inn. Because although one of the laws by which such an Adept lived was that she might never be seen to eat or drink by any man, yet for the price of a bowl of soup or a cup of wine, she could sit and listen as long as she liked to the gossip of the village and find out whether anyone in the area was in need of the services of a mercenary magician - and put her in the way of earning her bread.

On this particular evening she had walked along time and was very weary, so she did not immediately make her- self known, but sat for some time listening to the quiet rumor of voices about her.

At first, she was so tired that the voices rose and fell over her head almost without making an impression.

Then she heard one voice saying aloud, "But what is this creature? It prowls by night, and tears out the throats of its victims; yet with the light it vanishes away, and lies in hiding all the day? Is that any natural beast, or some evil thing out of legend?"

"A wolf?" suggested another voice.

"Not by any means," replied the first voice. "A wolf is not unlike a big dog; and every wolf I have known is gentler and more timid than any dog. I have reared many wolves taken from the wild as pups; and never did I know any wild wolf but hunted in a pack. This killer hunts alone."

"Wolves are like other beasts," the first argued, "and no beast so tame but it can turn rogue. It might well be such a wolf turned rogue - but I say this is no natural beast."

"A werewolf, maybe?" sneered the first.

"As likely a werewolf as anything else," said the first gloomily. "But then perhaps it is only a matter of finding what shape it wears by day - and hunting it down in that shape."

At this point, Lythande straightened up. Her long aristocratic-looking feet were stretched out to the fire. She slowly lowered them to the stone floor and said, in that carefully neutral voice, "I know something of werewolves. How do you know this thing which preys upon your people is a werewolf?"

"What else could it be?" demanded the first speaker truculently. "To hunt by night and tear out the throat of its victims?"

"I can think of many things," Lythande answered carefully. "For all you say, it could still be some form of wild animal; a wolverine, perhaps; or an escaped lion from a menagerie. A captive tiger, or some other predator escaped its owner. Or, if you are speaking of supernatural creatures, why a werewolf, rather than a vampire or night-ghast or some similar creature?"

"Why not indeed?" demanded the first speaker.

"Tell me," Lythande asked, "does it hunt by night? Is there any way to see something it has attacked?"

A sturdy farmer spoke up, "In my barn, magician, is a sheep it has killed. You are welcome to see it - any of you."

Lythande slid her battered sandals on her feet, and several of the others rose and followed the farmer into a nearby barn. There, by the light of a lantern hanging from a rafter, lay a dead sheep, lacerated and much torn. Lythande knelt down by the dead animal. From the tingling of the blue star on her forehead she could tell she was in the presence of some powerful magic.

"It might well be victim of a werewolf or vampire at that. So what then can we do about it?"

"Can you kill this thing? This - vampire or whatever?"

"No," said Lythande. "By definition, a vampire is already dead. There is no way to kill the dead. I can do many things but to kill the dead is not among them."

That silenced them all for a moment.

Then the innkeeper said tentatively, "Then can you - do away with this thing, dead or alive? If it is - for in- stance - a werewolf?"

"Be the Gods willing, I can," Lythande said.

The innkeeper said, "I know something of magicians, I dare say you will charge this village a pretty price for getting rid of this thing."

"Alas," Lythande said, "even a magician must somehow get a living. Is the presence of this thing not losing you much in the way of profit that you can gain if I rid you of it?"

"That's true," said one of the farmers.

"We can't even sell the dead sheep at market - an' if this thing gets much worse, we'll all lose all our sheep an' go broke. I'd say hire the magician now to get rid of this thing - an' pay him a decent wage before we all of us loses our living."

"That's true," said another farmer. "I suggest every farmer in this village gives half a silver piece. That way no one of us has to pay the whole thing."

Lythande looked around the room. Even at a quarter silver apiece she would make a good fee, for there were thirty men or so in the room. She checked both the scabbards hanging at her belt; the right-hand sword of steel, for footpad or villain, the left-hand sword for ghost or supernatural monster or any creature from the realms of magic.

Then she bent to the floor and again slipped bespattered shoes on her feet, tying them securely round her ankles. If she survived this battle, she thought, she must find out if there was a sandal-maker or shoe-cobbler in this village, and spend a piece or two of her silver to have new shoes made or the old ones botched together. These were as filled with holes as if they had been left out in the winter rains. For the moment, she murmured a spell which would give the road-worn bits of leather some semblance of wholeness; she did not wish the locals to see how battered they weren't this spell could last only a certain length of time.

There was no sense in delaying. Lythande went out into the star-sprinkled night and took up her station in the corral where the town's animals were kept. She had hoped to spend most of this evening with feet to the fire, but the chance of earning such a fee should not be put off. Wrapping herself in the warm folds of her mage robe, Lythande took up a station by the fence and settled down to wait and watch.

The night dragged; it was damp and cold and Lythande wished she had had leisure to have a cup of hot soup unobserved. As always, she had in the pockets of her mage-robe some pieces of dried fruit and she chewed glumly on a handful of raisins without enthusiasm as she waited. The moon had set when she heard a soft padding sound and saw in the darkness two green and luminescent points of light at the very edge of the sheepfold. Lythande swallowed a raisin and in the darkness made certain her swords were loose in their sheaths.

And then she remembered. Months ago, in being pursued by the Walker Behind, she had struck with her magical dagger - and it had been destroyed - melted away, disappeared. In effect, then, she was unarmed against this thing if it were any form of magical creature. Her regular steel dagger was unharmed, not that a regular dagger of ordinary steel would be that much good against a werewolf or vampire. In the faint greenish light of ambient magic, Lythande examined what was left of the blade of the magical spelled one.

Not much: beyond the hilt only some three inches of twisted, melted metal remained. It shone faintly in the dimness with its own eerie light. Would it then be any defense against the uncanny green eyes still visible at the edge of the field?

Lythande could only try. The strength of the enchanted blade was not in its metal - of that there might be little left - but then, it might well have been drained of its magic too, in her confrontation with the Walker Behind.

Lythande had no idea whether the faint tingle she now felt in the Blue Star was from the broken magical dagger, from the magical beast she could faintly see and sense approaching, from her own ambient magical senses and the Blue Star itself, or from something else unseen in the darkness.

It was near her now. She whispered a spell which would temporarily void the air of all magic near her, even including her own. This way she would be able to diagnose whether the thing approaching her were any natural creature or a thing of magic. The fact that for a few seconds of the spell she would also be at the mercy of the thing, whatever it might be, was not important; she had to know.

Sure enough, the green eyes vanished; but Lythande knew perfectly well that the terrible creature had not gone away, it was only that without magic she could no longer perceive it.

The chance that it was not magical had always been very small, but she had to examine it. She pulled the broken magical dagger from its sheath. Broken or no, it was all she had to face the creature. With the broken remnant she struck out at the gleaming green eyes, and at the same time she murmured the strongest banishing-spell in her repertoire.

She did not think it was strong enough, not for this creature, but it was all she had.

The green sparks of the eyes went out. Hardly believing in her good fortune, Lythande sheathed the broken dagger. Well, she thought, while I am having my sandals cobbled, I must also find some weapons-maker who can attempt to replace the magical dagger.

And while she was at it she must somehow find herself a spell-candler who could fashion some stronger spells.

There was an old adage - and Lythande had never yet known it to be wrong, but there was a first time for everything - that for every magical danger there was somewhere a spell to conquer it. But, thought Lythande pessimistically, it did not follow that she could find that spell.

She took a careful backward look.

No, there was nothing - as yet - following her.

But then - would she know? A short time later she entered the common room of the inn, and when she was greeted with many questions, told them briefly that the beast was gone, "so far as I know; bearing in mind that I am neither a God, nor yet infallible."

They would have loaded her with their best, and Lythande was tempted.

But she had learned it was not well to let commoners, no matter how grateful, diminish her mystery, so she thanked them courteously and went out into the rain, finding a little way down the road a snug barn where she slept warm, dry, and unseen. When she emerged, after breakfasting on an egg she found in a deserted nest and ate raw - no hardship this for she liked it better that way - and taking a cup of milk from a complaisant cow, who reacted better than most to her soothing-spells, she turned her steps toward the village in search of a cobbler for her broken shoes and a spell-wright for the remnants of her magical dagger and the renewal of her arsenal of spells.

This was not an unpleasant task, for it gave her a chance to speak freely with her only true peers, who were other magicians. She slept that night in the home of a local hearth-witch, who thought of it as an honor to entertain an Adept of Lythande's rank, but when, emerging well-pleased, for the bargaining for the mending of her shoes had gone well, and returning to the inn to hear the local gossip, she heard with dismay and consternation that the thing was back, more virulent than ever.

"And it seems to have thrived on your banishing-spells," said the inn-keeper maliciously, "for this time it has not only taken sheep, but two of the shepherd's dogs and the shepherd as well."

After the first shock of dismay, for it was rare indeed that her spells should fail, Lythande managed to collect herself, saying with apparent insouciance that she had promised results and she would therefore certainly deliver them.

And then, as soon as she was unobserved, she sat down to think it over.

This vampire was dead. Well, of course, all vampires were dead by definition, and whatever she had done, she had told them she could not kill the dead - and in truth she had failed to do so. How could she then make good on her promise to rid them of the creature - or whatever it was? She took out her small book of spells and opened it at random. She had often noticed that any particular spell she wanted would not be in the book till she was most in need of it. It did not disappoint her; the first spell on which her eyes fell was one to bring the dead back to life. At first Lythande was dismayed; the last thing she wanted to do was to bring this thing to life again.

Then she stopped to think. She had said she could not kill the dead and thus - by the curious laws of magic - had defined the grounds on which this battle was to be fought. Her attempts to do away with the dead had failed. Was it then required of her that she should bring it to life so she could kill it? There was nothing for it but to try.

The magician went out again into the darkening fields, awaiting the coming of the magical creature. As soon as its wicked green eyes appeared at the edge of the field, only a little fainter than they had been before, Lythande began to repeat the spell which would bring the dead to life.

As soon as she began the eyes were arrested, held motionless in the thick darkness. Like twin green torches they glared at Lythande, and from somewhere - perhaps between the worlds - came the sound of a despairing whine. Then all was silent and in the magical greenish glow Lythande could see the form of a man stretched on the ground, she should have known; if this spell awakens there'd to life, it would of course restore him in the form he had worn in life.

She had her magical dagger - the new one, not the old broken one - in her hand ready. She struck, then - a fraction of a second too late remembered that this was, at the moment, no longer a magical creature.

Swiftly she spoke a spell rendering the air void of all magic. The last thing she wanted was to strike with her dagger of ordinary steel, and find that she was again facing a werewolf or vampire. The creature shimmered. It was already attempting shape-shifting, but Lythande's spell had trapped it in human form.

It gave a despairing - a human cry - as Lythande whipped up the dagger which was effective against mundane menaces. To a creature whose essence had been so long purely of magic, Lythande thought swiftly, how could anything be more humiliating than being killed in ordinary human form?

It lay dead before her, and she spoke - not unwillingly - a spell which would keep it from coming back to life.

Everywhere in the village now, people were coming out of doors, and one of them bent over the pathetic corpse.

"Ah, Haymil," he said. "He was a suicide last year and buried in unhallowed ground."

"And therefore came back to an unnatural life," said Lythande. "And so you see whatever a priest should err so the side of mercy. Had your priest allowed him to rest in sanctified ground, you could have saved many silvers."

They were all eager to buy her a drink, to shake her hand, but as for Lythande she could not too quickly shake the dust of the town off her shoes.

At least, she reflected as the town vanished behind her in the distance, they were newly mended.