

Power in Potentia

An anthology of Gothic-inspired tales

COntents

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The Legend of the Menacing Rampions

Izzy Bannister and Sophie Hammett

It was a dreary night in November. An isolated chateau in the North of France, inhabited an even more isolated girl. Madeline Scott. No one had ever seen her face since she was a baby, and the mystery of her appearance attracted suitors from all around the kingdom to compete for her hand. All that they knew was that her golden, luxurious locks enchanted every man who had the pleasure of stumbling upon her chateau in the middle of the deep, dark forest.

Prince Bartholomew, heir to the throne, strode like a proud lion on the hunt for a bride. He had heard the stories of the beautiful and elegant princess and must claim her as his own. Several of his royal acquaintances, Prince Wilfred, Lord Lancelot, and Duke Montague, had also all embarked on the same quest but Prince Bartholomew was certain he would get there first and claim the prize. Cunningly, he rehearsed how he would woo his lady as he hacked through the menacing rampion flowers in the overgrown thickets of the forest. Suddenly, he heard a gentle sound emerging from the near distance. What a lark! what a plunge! It was his lady. The smoothest sweetest and slightly solemn sound filled his whole body with joy. The louder the angelic song became, the more enchanted the Prince fell. He was so drawn to it that his legs seemed to carry him effortlessly and thoughtlessly towards the magical and mysterious chateau. The proud prince stopped in awe as he discovered the grand castle. It was almost crumbling away and looked as though it hadn't been touched in thousands of years, yet it was somewhat charming and elegant but also intriguing. Prince Bartholomew knew he had reached his destination. He checked carefully his handsome appearance in the reflection of his shiny polished sword and smiled and winked as he confidently knew that all who looked on him loved him.

The proud prince carefully hunted the sound down to a humble window in the tallest turret of the tower. To the prince's dismay, the sweet sounds of the singing suddenly stopped. However just a moment later, his heart skipped a beat as the most luxurious golden locks fell gracefully from the window all the way down to the damp tips of the overgrown grass and menacing rampions. He knew what to do. He wasn't afraid of anything. Without even a word, the prince began to climb the golden locks. As he gripped on to her hair it intertwined with his fingers almost cutting off his blood circulation in his arms and legs. He pushed through despite hearing the whimpering groans of the princess as he tugged at her hair with each attempt to get closer to her. As he grew nearer to the to the previously proud prince returned to the trembling little boy he was as a child; his stomach churned as he gazed on how far he could fall, but he knew his lady's hair would protect and save him from the danger.

Blistered and bruised hands desperately gripped onto the crumbling windowsill with ropes of hair tightly wound around his weak whimpering wrists. The room had been revealed as bare empty with nothing but a cracked mirror and a sickly sweet scent of lilies almost as if it was masking something. The mirror stared still at him and his lady's face remained hidden in the darkness. The pale moon emerged within seconds, from behind the dark dreary clouds and its light shone into the mirror and reflected bright white light into the room. Disgust filled his heart. Piercing blood red eyes met his own with an unforgiving glare. A desperate shriek

leaped from his lungs without his consent. The now monstrous and deceitful Madeleine smirked, revealing pearly white jaws. These teeth resembled more of a shark than a princess. They were dripping in a horrific cocktail of blood and saliva and were as sharp as the prince's sword. Frustrated and terrified he was reminded that he had a sword; could that save him? In panic he reached for his sword but after the slightest movement he felt the cold metal on his neck. The beastly princess's smirk had not left her deformed countenance and she let out a childlike giggle as her golden locks held the prince's sword up to his neck. The sword sliced through his trachea like a blunt knife through soft butter. His fresh blood splattered onto Madeleine's furry face and she licked it off with her rough sand paper tongue. Delicious. Thud thud thud. The head bounced like a football on the delicate chateau walls as it tumbled to the floor, miles below. Like a watermelon it splattered onto the ground leaving a bloody mess, painting the rampant flowers an almost beautiful shade of crimson that the princess had come to love.

Another guest has arrived to the party. My hair gracefully welcomed the prince into my chamber and I sat him down at the head of the grand dining table to join Prince Wilfred and Duke Montague. My collection is nearly complete. I place napkins on each guest to collect the dripping blood that was falling down from the wounded stubs on their necks. I only welcome guests without heads as they shrieked at my complexion so the wretched and useless men don't deserve to see me. As I gaze into my cracked mirror at my cracked reflection I see my cracked childhood. My dear mother had begged and pleaded to my father to keep me but that cruel and entitled monster possessed hatred for me since the first time he saw my face. I have been locked in this tower since I was five years of age and misery made me a fiend.

Bump. I hear a noise. A familiar sound followed, another foolish man exclaiming his love for me outside my window, it must be Lord Lancelot. As if by routine, I brush my mane, let it tumble out the window and lick my lips impatiently.

The Taste of Tilney of Time Gone By

Julia Comar and Rose Stott

Lilies are white and stain you, but Flora would not remember the day a single white lily caused her fall from innocence.

It was an early morning of May. Muted throngs of sunlight washed over her waves of red hair, and there she was: clutching her mother's hand for support as her tiny feet made tiny steps across that fateful bridge. The moment quickly subsided, as all fleeting moments do, and no longer was she clutching her mother's pale hand, but a single white lily was forced in its stead. She looked down at her palms and caught herself red-handed in the white lead that dripped from its petals. It looked more like a dismembered limb than a flower, and all of a sudden, she could not walk, but nor could she stand still. Stumbling, vulnerable, and full of shame, she fell, as if swept by a gust of wind. As if she were nothing more than the tear falling from her cheek.

She hardly had time to scream; her head was swept beneath that current as quickly as a predator caught its prey. The comforting presence of the sun drowned alongside her and she found herself in numbing darkness.

But now, as a seventeen-year-old girl, Flora remembers none of this. How she found herself living in this subaqueous drainage pipe, she has never dared to question.

The only life she knows is her eel, Tilney, and the circuit of prisoners awaiting decapitation in the underground cells of the Tower of London, like a merry-go-round of impending death. As for the old hag, Miss Havisham, who lives in solitude beneath Waterloo station, she hardly knows whether she can be classified as living. Something as haggard and cadaverous as that half-being in a white dress seems to her even more dead than her piscine friend who she weekly galvanises to life, extracting electricity from the running trains above.

As she does every day, she awakes not from sunlight streaming through a window, but from Tilney's languid body pulsating like a faulty alarm clock. She picks herself up, removes a piece of algae from her darkening hair and crawls her way to the end of her drainage pipe, lit only by the blue light of Tilney's mouth that she holds before her. Here she comes to observe the prisoners from her peep hole, however, the ones that were there yesterday are long gone. Where there had been an old, drunk man only the day before, now lies a youth with such a regal jaw protruding from his dungeon, that he cannot be anything other than the worthiest prince in all of the seven seas.

Flora finds herself immediately overwhelmed by an ardent thirst to be in his presence and within his loving, royal arms. A small crack in the barrier offers hope of their union and Flora does everything in her power to fit through this fissure, but fails miserably.

Finding herself with little other choice, she decides to visit Miss Havisham, the old hag who lives beneath Waterloo station, to discuss techniques for reaching her one true love. The journey is long and arduous, albeit slightly improved by the benevolent company of young

Tilney of yesteryear. His luminous pulsating body lights the way like a disco ball in a night club and she finds herself grooving along to the beat of his electrifying choreography. All of a sudden, the levitating rhythm brought her to mid air and she found herself floating through Miss Havisham's cave entrance, knocking against her crooked nose and snapping it in half with a loud pop.

"Good afternoon, Fleur. Thank you for giving me a nose job; I was in dire need. Now I am able to take your womb for reproduction and the growth of my own food, as per my new dietary requirements."

Tilney nods with an electric shiver.

Flora does not correct Miss Havisham when she gets her name wrong, because she is a passive damsel in distress who could never acquire such agency as to challenge her superiors.

"Havvy, I am too fat to fit through the barrier and I need to reach my Prince. Please help me. I will do anything."

Miss Havisham appraises bone-thin Flora, looking her malnourished body up and down.

"Yes, I suppose you have the body shape of a whale," she replies dismissively. "It is all that river scum that you have been devouring. I shall remove your ribs as well as your womb and allow you to fit in the corsets of society."

Flora falls down to her knees and thanks Miss Havisham profusely, tears streaming down her cheek with exultation. Miss Havisham shudders, recalling a distant incident of the same nature.

"I thank my stars, I am happy. I will do anything thou will have me," she cries, clasping her hands together and wiping her tears with Tilney's tail. However, seeing as electricity and water do not mix, Tilney gets a bit of a shock: pun intended.

With an eldritch grin, Miss Havisham gathers all her necessary equipment to perform the surgery. This includes filing both her teeth and her nails to sharpen them into spikes, and smashing a mirror (one she stole from the tube) on her filthy ground and collecting the longest, sharpest shard.

"Now, youthful wench, you must lay down on this sweet bed of flowers and prepare yourself for body mutilation," commands Havvy, putting on a Dracula accent and swinging on her cosplay cape. She had recently acquired it from Transylvania, on her honeymoon to which the groom never showed up.

As expected, Flora complies without hesitation or resistance, and lies down on this supposed 'sweet bed of flowers' that is in fact a wet concrete slab covered in dismembered, rotting limbs. They squelch as she bounces on their spongy, foamy flesh like a bouncy castle.

Tilney of yesteryear grimaces and shakes his tail in distaste, but the mistress of all this disintegration notices nothing.

Clutching the shard with both her gnarled hands, Miss Havisham hammers the end through Flora's lily skin, scattering grains of flesh that fall like blossom beside her. Like a bride on her wedding night, she is impaled a dozen times: her image scattered carelessly across the shattered reflections of the bloodied shards. Goblets of blood cover her skin with a ruby red glaze, which Miss Havisham scoops up and licks like frosting. The old hag's crooked smile is projected up at her through a honeycomb of looking glass fragments. It's everywhere she looks.

"The last blood I tasted was far too bitter," laments Miss Havisham, blood spluttering as she speaks. "But you dear wench - your blood is of a divine perfection. It is just right."

Shuddering with shock, Flora can hardly mutter a word. Her mouth is wide open, but any sound is buried six feet under her clamped tongue.

With a booming cackle, Miss Havisham thrusts open her her mouth and lowers herself down to Flora's rib. Her fangs penetrate her flesh, biting their way through the crackling nerve endings while she saws through bone and cartilage with the crunch of her slicing fingernails. She extracts Flora's rib and holds it within her jaws like a dog playing fetch before spitting it violently onto her trophy cabinet of human debris. Tilney hovers his way over to the wound and electrifyingly sterilises it.

Both Miss Havisham's dirt-encrusted hands dive into the bottom of Flora's stomach, which gives way as easily as a knife plunges in hot butter. She hauls out her womb by the Fallopian tubes before swinging them around her neck like a ruby red choker, forming a cape of dripping blood behind her.

Retrieving two eggs, Miss Havisham pierces them into her ear lobes with a satisfied smirk stretched across her thin lips.

"You have been an excellent wench. I am now fertile and able to engage in subsistence farming with the growth of my own food: children."

Once again, all screams fail Flora as she finds her words gagging at the bottom of her throat.

After round two of sterilisation from young Tilney of yesteryear, Flora is able to crawl her way back to the prisoner in the Tower of London, where she is finally able to slip through the crack in the barrier to save him. She picks the lock to his cell with a spare piece of bone sticking out from her wounds.

Flora tries to speak again when the two of them are finally united, but is still unable.

"Do not worry, Madam; I prefer my women silent," drawls the prince, clamping her throat with the grip of his huge hands. "You shall be a buxom mute wife to me and we shall prosper."

The prince prepares for flight by grabbing Flora by the hair and dragging her through the subterranean drainage pipe passageway. Tilney trails along feebly - his electricity slowly dissipating into the surroundings. Rather forcefully, the prince prepares the both of them to swim up to the surface, when all of a sudden they are interrupted by a familiar voice.

“Wench!” thunders Miss Havisham, swinging her Fallopian tubes from side to side as she charges towards Flora. “I forgot one condition of our agreement.”

Flora stares at Miss Havisham in disbelief, but is unable to vocalise her feeling of betrayal.

“I must have this male species of yours for I am in need of sperm to fertilise my new eggs,” she declares, holding up an ovary as a microphone. “Male, you have an infertile wife. Come with me and you shall prosper further.”

The prince - who actually turns out to be a grotty, lice-infested chimney sweep - drops Flora in an instant, leaving her to fall flat against the floor of crawling rats and vermin.

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Flora wiggles her way back to her drainage pipe home and weeps and wails for hours on end (albeit silently as she has now permanently lost her voice). Poor Flora, she went under life-threatening body mutilation for nothing.

As the hours go by, she loses her life and consciousness at an ever-increasing pace. Not even Tilney can save her as he has not been topped up recently and after seventeen hours of torturous pain and trauma induced hallucinations, she dies from crippling wound infections that turn into river foam and float their way up to the surface of the Thames. The wind brushes against them in a way that Flora never got to experience.

Ever since that day, the old hag in a white dress visits that one drainage pipe, leaving a single white lily in remembrance that stains her watery grave.

The Hunchback of The Tower Of London

Flora Gilchrist and Ruby Thorne

The class of 13D arrived at Surbiton train station on the night of the full moon, as a treat for finally finishing their A Levels. It was nearly midnight and they were waiting for the 11:32 train to London Bridge station. Already, there was a lingering sense of uncertainty, head girl Sophie Hammett had mysteriously lost her shoe, the whole class were wearing rags and the sound of werewolves rang through Surbiton High Street.

Once on the train, a strange orange gloom ominously oozed from out of the seats and Sophie noticed the sides of the train metamorphosing around her.

“What’s happening to the windows?” screamed Sophie, as she was smacked in the face by a massive gust of wind.

The windows shattered and suddenly they were replaced by a hard orange shell.

“Why does it smell like pumpkin pie?” Questioned Susie.

And, at that instant the class noticed that they were trapped inside a giant pumpkin which was nonetheless heading straight for the Tower of London.

Walking under the tower’s decrepit, menacing portcullis which slammed shut behind them, they were greeted by a respectable imperialist gentleman. Upon closer inspection, Rose noticed that his suit was littered with cobwebs and there was mould poking out between the cracks in his skin.

He introduced himself as Victor Frankenstein who, with a sinister grin, offered to be their tour guide for the night at the Tower of London.

The class apathetically followed Victor through the pointed arched hallways, under the vaulted ceilings and up the winding staircase to the throne room.

When they walked in the room, there was a table laid out with audio guides and headphones so they could learn more about the history of the tower. One by one the students took the guides and put on the headphones.

Victor told the group that the museum café and gift shop would be open at the end of their tour,

Julia randomly exclaimed, “Oh I wonder if they have a mango and passionfruit cheesecake.”

“Hahaha” Victor cackled “if you last that long that is” as he silently floated out of the room.

13D were a little baffled but sometimes you tend to get strange tour guides in these kinds of places.

“Welcome to the Tower of London’s audio and visual immersive experience” said the virtual tour guide through the audio clip.

“Built in 1070 by William the Conqueror, this tower was used especially by the Tudors to imprison and ...”

Suddenly, the tape was interrupted by an unbearable crackling sound. At once, all the doors slammed shut and the lights cut out.

Distant screams echoed through the subterranean passages, horror overcame all the students and the teachers panicked in disbelief.

“Get out your phone torches everyone.” said Ms Rusholme, hyperventilating, “Mrs Leigh is going to do a head count, everyone keep calm and take deep breaths”.

Mrs Leigh flashed the torch from student to student, ticking them off the register as she saw their faces. One face was distorted, another had turned to stone and Rose’s body stood headless, blood dripping from her neck, her spine protruding from her soulless body.

A beastly monstrous voice usurped the kind lady on the audio guide. “The panic room has begun...”

“I have already kidnapped the first victim, your most prized student Sophie Hammett. She’s locked away somewhere in the deepest depths of the tower. You have until dawn to rescue her unscathed, or each one of you will be killed off one by one by me. I am the ruler of this establishment! Do not challenge my authority and I have closed the café until further notice.”

Mrs Leigh said trembling, with sweat dripping down her forehead, “Girls, I think it would be best if we split off into smaller groups to help find Sophie”. As Rose has just died, we can make an easy split into three groups of three. One group take the top floor, one check the ground floor and you three can do this hallway”. As she finished her sentence, a gap in the ceiling spilled out a dozen skeletons, dripping with honey. Everyone screamed in shock and horror and ran to their respective hallways.

Flora, Ruby and Alex clambered up the winding wooden staircase to attic. The door slammed shut behind them and they were overcome by a whirring sense of vertigo. “The room is spinning!” shouted Alex as Flora fell to the ground throwing up pumpkin pie. A strange rustling sound came from behind and, as if in slow motion, Ruby turned to come face to face with a massive blood-thirsty spider. Its obese, gaping mouth was dribbling with an aqueous solution and its fangs glistened in the moonlight. It cast a web, lassoing Ruby into its grasp as he ate her whole in one enormous gulp. The spider burped out her bones and then, in an effort to re-establish his manners, he pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed his mouth dry.

On the ground floor Maddy, Julia and Susie found themselves trapped in an octagonal room of mirrors. Julia felt a strong force pull her towards a mirror as if the devil had grasped hold of her heart and was forcefully dragging her, chest-first, into a vortex. Whilst Maddy and Susie lost footing and ended up face to face with themselves, the three of them froze in horror as they witnessed the mirror images of themselves slowly transform into hideous beasts. Their faces had twisted and deformed, and it struck them that these creatures were potentially a portrayal of their true inner darkness. Disgusted, Julia glanced down in horror at the pads of her hairy

hands, they had doubled in size and grown warts. She had just got her nails done for prom and now look at them! They had extended into long yellowing claws. They tried to leave the room but despite their newfound beastly strength, the door wouldn't budge.

Jess, Maddie and Izzy ran into a ground floor chamber after being chased by whirring ghosts. They slammed the door behind them in fear. "Maybe Sophie is in that cupboard over there?" said Izzy. "Oh but it's all the way on the other side of the room!" Maddie replied. The three of them nervously tiptoed across the parquet flooring, admiring the beautiful architecture above them. To their surprise, black tar began to bubble from the depths of the floorboards filling the room rapidly. The girls had nowhere to turn because their knees were almost submerged under the sticky black tar. Totally unable to break free and gasping for air, the girls had they accepted their melancholy fate. The tar would engulf them and fill their lungs and organs becoming the catalyst for their inevitable death.

"You only have half an hour left; I suggest you take a trip to the basement if you want your precious head-girl Sophie to survive." growled the voice on the audio guide.

It was up to Alex, Flora, Ms Rusholme and Mrs Leigh to save Sophie now. Huddled terrified in the basement, the four of them looked around desperately for Sophie, knowing that they would come face to face with the hideous beast at any point. Mrs Leigh made eyes at the beast, shouting at him "come out you hideous fiend, how dare you kill of half of our innocent class? They didn't even get to take their A Levels!"

Crawling fully, out of a near-by hovel with Sophie wrapped in his grasp, the creature who almost resembled a lion growled menacingly "I was benevolent and good, misery made me a fiend. All I wanted was a companion to stay here with me in this lonely tower, so I had no choice but to take her. "I am willing to make a deal, if one of you hands yourselves over, I would be willing to..."

THUD, SQUELCH, a huge helmet had fallen from the sky, squishing the rest of 13D's English class to death. It wasn't quite a perfect Cinderella evening.

Hunger

Alex Hughes and Madeline Taylor

Hey, come join me. Let's have a tea party, here among the gravestones. Come on, you must be hungry. Everyone's hungry nowadays. Look, I'm sorry the bread is stale, it's getting harder

and harder to find anything at all. It's fine. You eat. And hey, maybe once you've eaten we can go into the woods and set some traps for squirrels like we used to, remember? Mama and Papa always said it was up to you to catch them, but you felt too sorry for them to be any good at it, so I slit their throats for you and licked the blood off of papa's knife. I haven't seen a squirrel for a while. I wonder where they've all gone off to, maybe we'll have to go further into the woods. Remember how hungry we were... You remember... that time? I don't want to feel that ever again. No, I won't let hunger consume me again. I am fearless now. I am powerful. You can't be hungry! I won't let you starve, come on already, eat something.

Do you smell blood? Maybe I'm imagining it. I can't stop thinking about it.

I haven't had meat in so long... I don't want it. I'm giving it to you. Do you want me to cook it? I don't want to — I- I hate that smell. I can eat it as it is so why can't you? Just pretend it's some sweets. Remember when we found some sweets in the forest and you were so happy you followed them to that house and I didn't want to go in but you insisted that we go in and you were so, so happy. I'll never forget that look on your face, I wish I could make it come back.

You never smile anymore.

She stole your smiles from you. That woman — that witch. The sweets she gave you made you smile but where did she get them from? You trusted her but I knew she was only trying to fatten you up so she could eat you. I saw the way she looked at you, like a wolf eyes a squirrel, salivating at the thought of its warm blood... I'm the only one who cares about you. I'm the only one can look after you. She was going to hurt you- she was going to eat you!

I'm glad she's gone. I'll always keep you safe.

I've always loved the taste of blood— yes, yes, I know you can't stand the sight of it. Ever since that time in the Forest, when we were very small, so small you probably don't even remember. Yes, since then, I've loved the taste. Eat up! We can't have you starving. No, no, no we can't! I have nothing without you, just the clothes on my back. We've always been so close, you and I, even though all they tried to drive us apart with all their favouritism. You always gave me some of your food when all they gave me was stale bread crusts— I'm sorry it's just stale bread, I couldn't find anything else. They gave you all the best pieces of meat whilst I got all the stale bread crusts and eventually only crumbs whilst you happily munched away on gingerbread and sweets and meat and

Silly me, I mustn't talk too loudly. We don't want anyone to come and take our food.

Look at all these gravestones, look how many. So many new. You can tell, the stone is shiny, not like those ones over there. They've probably been here for hundreds of years. Maybe thousands... no, not thousands. But a long time. See that one over there? Jane— something. I can't make out the second name, only Jane. Faint as a ghost. Sometimes I imagine her sitting there on that gravestone, laughing at us and -

“Who are you talking to?”

Who's that? No-one ever comes here.

"I'm Julia, I'm here to visit my mother."

Those are pretty flowers she's holding. I wish somebody would bring me flowers, since I'm all alone here too. Except for you, of course.

"I'm Gretel, and this is my brother. Hansel."

Her face looks strange, confused; have I made her unhappy too?

"Come, eat with us. Sit. Sit. You must be hungry."

"No, not really. The crops have been doing well this year, didn't you hear? And it's been a long time since anyone went hungry round here. Not since my grandparents were small. You know, you and your brother's names sound familiar... I can't quite place it."

"We've never met, I would remember."

"Oh, I remember now. Did your parents really name you after *them*? That's a bit morbid."

Name us after who? "What do you mean?"

At first her face was slightly amused, if a little bewildered, but now it was beginning to pale, her grip on the flowers becoming tighter and tighter.

"Everyone knows the story of Hansel and Gretel. They wandered into the Forest, during the Great Famine... They say she..."

"What?"

"Well, they're just stories, but some... some say she ate him, and left a trail of his blood through the Forest for their parents to find. Ever since then animals have been going missing, a couple of children, and that same trail of blood... but don't worry about that. It must just be a coincidence. And your brother's buried here right? You're visiting him, just like I'm visiting my mother."

"Don't be silly. I'd never let my brother die, we're having a tea party— look, he's right here. As if I'd eat him. Hey, where are you going? You dropped your flowers."

Oh well, I didn't want her here anyway. It's always just been the two of us. It's better that way, isn't it?

The Fragmented Mirrors

Jess Graas, Susie Marr, Maddie Scott

Alex leaped drastically across the open caskets in the graveyard on a cold October night. A silver glimmer of light from the full moon illuminated the beast that was chasing Alex, the brooding, bellowing beast. She was panting desperately, gasping for air while in the midst of trying to avoid being sucked into the open graveyard full of skeletons and blood and gore. The tall trees lashed in the wind as lightning struck, Alex was haunted by the moss-ridden decayed graves and as she looked back she saw, once again, the wretched, tyrannical beast thrusting himself towards her.

For a moment, there was calm and serenity as Alex caught her breath, walking slowly through the winding withering path of the unforgiving graveyard. Suddenly, Alex slipped on the polar icy roots of the weeping willow, plunging her into a scene of darkness. Tumbling down, she found herself in the deepest darkest caves, lit only by the luminescent fragmented mirrors that hung by a single delicate string on the concrete walls. Startled, she flung herself round desperate for a route of escape, but after a few panicked minutes, she realised the beast was gone. However, there was a new enemy... the shattered mirrors that did not seem to reflect herself.

Yet again, she gasped for air, her lungs filling with the damp, rotting, moulding air travelling through her body. As she peered closer, she was horrified to see spirits and ghosts circling, suffocating her. These spirits spoke to Alex; they shrieked and screamed sounds of pain and suffering of those who, were buried here. She was on a journey to discover the lives of those who lived in fear and torture. She learnt of terrible stories from young innocent children burned at the stake to old crippling men being hunted by wolves. Ancient ancestors with whom she saw liminal to herself - the similarity of some was uncanny. She trembled with fear and started to lose her stability...

Blackness engulfed her as she fell fast to the floor, the sounds of high pitch screeching circling around her head. The last thing Alex saw was one untouched, unbroken mirror. Suddenly, as she fell the mirror shattered to a thousand fragments with the blades of glass flying around the cave.

Alex was still but the mirror slowly started to put itself back together. But it did not look the same.

The Lady and the Sea of Blood

Emma Leigh and Olivia Rusholme

Midwinter – invincible – immaculate. The queen of atrocious loneliness gazes from her frosted window in her derelict bedchamber. She gazes through window of clearest amber and down, down past the craggy edges of the mountain, her gaze penetrating the foggy duvet that covers the boundless ocean; down she stares, into the mirror of darkness that is the ocean's lid. She sees herself in that mirror: her black eyes. Her black soul. She is mad, bad and dangerous to know – a danger, even – to herself.

She gazes down into the sea, but not across it, so she does not see *him*, out at sea, gazing back at her. Yes, gazing back from far out to sea where the blackness dissipates, and the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower and as clear as the purest glass: out to sea; sand, and a sky that melts into the sea; a glittering of seas.

This is where the sea-folk live. He is one of them but not one of them - a strange, thoughtful, quiet child. He is seventeen and knows nothing of the world, but he wants to. He is deeply smitten with a thirst for knowledge. He wants to know everything – not about *his* world but about theirs. Hers. He wants to be part of her world. Nothing makes him happier than to gaze up, up at the human world above; it delights him that up on the earth the flowers have a scent, and that the forests are green and the fish among their branches can sing, and that castles perch at the edge of cliff tops and that queens gaze through windows: uncannily beautiful, luminescent, untouchable.

But sometimes touchable – almost. Sometimes she comes away from the window. Sometimes, she emerges from the castle: standing, walking on strong, pale legs; legs that he wants, and that disgust him. Her beauty is a sort of disorder, he thinks. Sometimes, he sits in the moonlight on the rocks and he watches as she moves like a cat through the night, as she glides across the face of the ocean in her little wooden boat, that the shadow of her darkens the water around him. It excites him and he tries to swim after her but, despite his tail, he is not strong enough. She has almost superhuman strength and stealth, and every time, he loses sight of every trace of her except a silvery umbra – one which may be real, or may be in his imagination.

This happens every third blood moon and then she disappears again – everything but the silhouette of her face, framing luminescent black eyes, gazing down from that frosted window.

What he does not know is that a king once lived there with her - a man huge in ego, huge in wealth but small in stature – but he disappeared many, many moons ago. How, nobody was ever able to discover. All they know about is the rose bush. A rose bush which appeared around the time of his disappearance, fully formed and velvety ruby red. As red as blood. As red as murder.

Its beauty is a symptom of its disorder. Uncanny in its beauty. Uncanny in its uniformity. Too perfect to be real. Too real to be unreal. Like her.

The roses bloom and emit a hypnotic scent. The scent is carried on the summer's inevitable zephyr far and wide. Far enough, even, to assault the senses of the sea-folk. Something about

this scent is alluring. Sensual. Sexual. It, too, seduces him and he yearns to be closer. To her world. To her being.

The scent is strongest around the full moon. Its fecundity is obscene. And hidden in its obscenity is its secret.

Small men and small dogs. They make the most noise, as though making up for their shortcomings. She grew tired of the endless yapping; the demands; the desires. She never yearned for him. He always disgusted her. But her disgust deepened with every month that passed. She bled. And she grew bloodthirsty.

She had to silence him.

And so she did. She drew her father's hunting knife from her suspender belt and with one swift slice, she slit his throat. He bled. Oozed. Unctuous.

Crimson and silky, the blood went everywhere. Who would have thought the old man would have so much blood in him?

She bathed in the sea of his blood; bathed in the power. Basked in the silence.

But what to do with the body?

Typical woman: rather than panic, she paused. Thought.

Without his incessant noise, she could finally think clearly. And she hatched a beautiful, intoxicating plan.

And that's when he first saw her emerge from the castle – saw her legs; saw her silhouette; saw her as a whole being - surreptitious, suspicious. She was a siren crossing the water, spilt, glittering milk of moonlight paving her way, alone except for the bag of cargo she carried with her. The bag of cargo she rowed out to sea; the bag of cargo she sacrificed to the waves, to the fishes, to the esurient belly of the ocean.

And then the rose bloomed, ruby. And she grew more and more bloodthirsty: a vampiress whose misery made her a monster. And she repeated the pattern, again and again, seducing and then spilling the blood of another yapping little man; reaping the rewards, the riches.

But he did not see her as monstrous, no. He saw her as a queen; as a siren; as a jewel to be treasured – to be desired.

Each time she dragged her victims out to sea, he watched her; and he smelt the sweet savage scent of the rose; and he knew she was real; and when he knew she was real, that's when he knew he needed her. And from blood moon to blood moon, became more and more intoxicated by the bloody smell of the roses blooming and growing; he watched as she fed the waves with victim after victim – all of them dissatisfying to her; he watched her beauty

and the beauty of the rose burgeon. She prospered and as she prospered so did his desire for her. He had to touch her, to have her touch him, to sacrifice himself to her.

The substanceless blue seas enclose. You swim between the waves, and they swallow you up; the waves enclose and enclose on you again like a system of Chinese boxes opening one into another. There's no way to escape the sea. Once you are inside it, you must stay there until it lets you out again for there is nothing and nobody to guide you. Once you belong to the sea, you are a part of its world...

Unless...

He had heard rumours of a sea-witch who had been shunned from the society of mer-folk for her transgressive beliefs and practices. Some whispered that she had something of the occult about her; there were even murmurs between menfolk of a super annuity nipple... Some said that she only went out when the moon was down. When seagrass froze in a cold snap, it was because she had breathed on them. Any small crimes committed in the ocean were her work. Old wives' tales, perhaps; nursery fears, perhaps. But powerful, undoubtedly. Hypnotic. Magnetic. Like the moon's magnetic pull on the tide. Like the moon, she pulled him to her. Poured poison, spirits in his ear; counselled him.

He did as he was told. He had to. He needed the queen – didn't care what he would have to sacrifice for her. He'd give his heart, his soul, his legs, his manhood – anything.

And here we are in the present, watching them; watching as the boy goes to the shore, where he has never ventured before. He drags his heavy tail – heavy as lead – heavy as love – to the rose bush, picks a rose; pricks his finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls.

When he wakes, she is there. Up close, her beauty is blinding. He is blinded by her, her black eyes glisten gold, penetrating. His Magdalena. His dark, dangerous, desired queen. Close enough to touch.

Overcome by happiness, he does not at first feel the pain in his abdomen, in his legs. For yes, reader, he has legs, and a womb. And he is bleeding.

Into womanhood, into exile; the merman (or maid?) senses it but she is glad of it. Glad henceforth to be a woman, with the not-yet familiar weight of womanhood like a bloody bandage of rubies weighing upon her. For she had conspired to seduce the queen so utterly and she could not say for one minute that she felt a single twinge of regret. Pain, yes, but more the pulsing throb of delight at being close to her – of being touched by her.

The mermaid finds that she is trembling. Her breath comes quickly. She cannot meet the eyes of her queen and turns her head away, out of shyness, out of womanly coquetry, perhaps. But something in her charms the queen whose heart had been turned – through avarice, through murder, through the sheer constraints of patriarchy – to ice. She melts into foam, she unpeels, she kneels to caress the mermaid (whose human legs demand that we taint her with a human name... like *Eve*) to kiss her forehead, her eyes, her lips; they entwine, together they grow, a pivot of heels and knees, of thighs and arms. Velveteen tongues touch and tip,

ripping off skin after successive skin, all the skins of the life of the world, until they are naked – literally, figuratively, emotionally – lying in the shade of the rose bush.

As they lie, tangled up in one another beneath the rose bush, the women's menstrual blood yolks and forms a blanket around them, turning the ground beneath them a silken red. But not the red of murder; no, the red of love. A spilled bolt of bridal satin. The blanket warms the queen, and she melts into her Eve, no longer miserable, no longer a monster. No longer other.

And, as for the rose, it does not wither or become baleful. No, it sheds its blood-red petals which float now on the blanket of blood and regrows white. The white of innocence; the white of snow. *Tabula rasa*.

And under the beautiful white rose bush, whose beauty is no longer a symptom of its disorder, we leave our lovers, lying languid, blissful under a blanket of blood.

