

Love to Death

Eve's heart leapt into her throat at the sound of three sharp knocks coming from her front door. The wet glass plate she had been moving towards the drying rack slipped from her fingers, bounced off the counter, and smashed on the floor. Light from the ceiling reflected off of the largest purple shards, but the rest of the plate had scattered as tiny amethyst pieces across the kitchen floor.

She wasn't expecting them so early. While she took several deep breaths in an attempt to thaw herself out of the freezing panic that had taken hold, three more knocks came. She couldn't decide if the knocking sounded more impatient or concerned. Her nerves almost overpowered her, and she briefly considered pretending she wasn't home. That wouldn't work though, not with the Elders.

Knowing she couldn't wait any longer, Eve carefully stepped around the pieces of purple glass, then walked through the kitchen archway towards the front door. She sneaked in a few more deep breaths before she reached the foyer. The air was too humid; her throat felt thick and clogged with each breath. Her eyes lingered on the stained, brown and black doormat with the word "Welcome" embroidered in swirly font. Hushed whispers could be heard through the thin wooden paneling. The faint conversation abruptly ceased when those on the other side of the door heard the creak in the floorboards when Eve stepped onto the doormat to reach and turn the handle. Her racing heart caused her to open the front door too fast, and she heard a *thunk* and then an, "ouch!"

"Oh no, I'm so sorry!" Eve said with remorse, pulling the door back and then much more slowly opening it again.

The seven Elders stood gathered together on her porch, although the Crown, Seraphina, was rubbing her head with a morose expression. “It’s alright,” Seraphina reassured Eve unconvincingly; the Crown’s voice was too sour.

Eve smiled awkwardly. “Please come in my sisters,” she said as she stood to the side and held the door open for them.

Each wore beautifully embroidered cloaks with colors signifying their rank: the Crown’s was a pure white with accentuating designs of double crowns sewn in with a vibrant violet thread, the Third Eye’s was an interwoven mix of indigo and plum purple with an eerily realistic eye sewn on the hood of her cloak, the Throat’s hood was sky blue while the rest of her cloak was a solid royal blue, the Heart’s cloak had white fading outwards into pink surrounding the chest and rib cage while the rest was a shimmering emerald green, the Solar Plexus’ was a fiery gold meant to imitate the sun’s rays, the Sacral’s cloak was a mesmerizing sunset orange that began as yellow-orange from the top of her hood that spread down and gradually transformed into a deep red at her ankles, and the Root’s was such an intense red between that of rubies and blood that Eve found it hard to look away from. She felt plain and much less impressive in her leaf-green, long-sleeved wool shirt and dark blue jeans.

An herbal mixture of agrimony and bayberry hit Eve’s nose as the Elders walked past her and spread out inside the foyer. After closing the door, she held her hands behind her back to hide her white knuckles and her nails digging deeply into her palms. Both herbs had different purposes, but this was not an ordinary house visit to bless the home and imbue Eve with the gifts of restful sleep and good luck. *No*, she thought, *they’re going to use the bayberry to try to persuade a confession out of me*. But she felt much more uneasy about the presence of agrimony. Alice, her closest friend who had been recently ranked as the Heart within the Elders, had

warned her that there was a chance it would be used when they came to investigate Eve's house to reverse any cloaking or invisibility spells. She gave the doormat another fleeting glance, though she played it off as a self-conscious look towards her bare feet.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" Eve asked, trying to keep her voice light and easy. She looked towards Piper, the Throat, a witch in her forties with a motherly air about her. She was the first to pull back her hood and the only one, besides Alice, to smile at Eve.

"First, thank you for allowing us into your home so willingly, Eve. We were intending to give you a longer time to grieve alone and allow you to return to the loving arms of the coven in your own time," Piper's voice was tinged with regret, "but to be frank with you, troubling events and signs have brought us here. Three weeks ago, one of our few grimoires on necromancy was stolen from the Labyrinth Library. Beyond the Elders, there are a handful of witches within our coven that have the skill to completely remove the protective spells and hexes placed on such texts. Seeing as you are one of these witches, one that we feel very blessed to have as a member of our Circle of Balance, we are obligated to conduct a search through your house."

"It does not help your case that a month ago your fiancé died in that car crash," Sybil said pointedly and without remorse. She was the Root, and her energy was always intense, be it through affection, rage, or suspicion.

Sybil's words cut into the memories Eve had been repressing for weeks. Her hands covered in James' blood, glass sticking out of his throat, the warmth of his hands turning cold and stiff as she clung to them for what seemed like forever and no time at all. The overwhelming flashes clawed at the mangled pieces of her heart and she was bleeding out all over again. Before she could even try to hold her reaction back, a wet sob erupted out of her. Her hands moved to cover her face—she hated crying in front of others—then they stopped at the top of her chest

when she realized that letting the Elders see her this way would gain her more empathy and hopefully lower their suspicions.

Alice rushed to her side and embraced her. Cries racked Eve's body; she let out a wail full of agony before finally letting herself hide her blotchy-red face in the crook of Alice's shoulder. The pain of her loss was real to be sure, and the genuine-ness of her body's sounds caused the remaining six Elders to converge on her in a large group hug. All the while, the shadow within her grinning with victory made her feel uneasy, and a little unreal.



Eve waded out of the chilly riverbed with a satchel filled with seven slimy, moss-topped rocks. This was the first afternoon in late winter where the water had warmed enough for her to safely collect what she needed. The bottom of the leather bag was dripping onto the grassy edge of the river, but she didn't care. Her ruined bag was an easy price to pay. She knelt near the river's edge and set aside her soaked satchel. Holding her hands close to the ground to where the tips of the grass tickled her palms, she closed her eyes and whispered a warming sun spell to the earth. Her numb toes were begging for such a spell, but she ignored them, focusing her energy into the five feet of soil surrounding her. The hard ground softened beneath her knees and she smiled, her opening eyes glimmered with satisfaction. Eve's long, thin fingers sunk into the damp ground below her, and then she pulled by the fistful. Opening her palms, she searched the soil for worms. She felt two trying to wiggle their way through the gaps between her left hand's fingers, and she gently plucked them from the dirt with the other. She frowned at them before tucking them into a small jar she had in her pocket.

The reanimation ritual called for exactly eight worms. Eve was surprised that such powerful magic didn't require, well, something more substantial than worms. Before she'd taken

the necromantic grimoire, she'd been worried that she might have to sacrifice another person in order to bring James back. But no, these little lives were to play a part in giving back life to a dead body. *His body*, she corrected herself. After rereading the pages many times over the last few months, Eve could see that the original caster and creator of this ritual valued life greatly, but they had also warned that Death was a monster better left asleep.

She grit her teeth and reached back into the earth. If you loved someone deeply enough, that had to be considered an exception to Death's wrath. *The reanimation ritual will work*, she told herself. *It has to.*

As she dug for more worms, her thoughts drifted to the search the Elders had conducted a few months ago. She'd felt the pull of the bayberry's influence that they burned while the Third Eye, Fiona, interrogated her. Eve had successfully resisted, although she hadn't been able to stop herself from admitting she had considered finding a way to bring James back. But no one could blame her for at least thinking about it after such a loss. The Elders had searched what they had thought was the whole house. Though they had searched Eve's basement, they were unaware that she had a separate small room underneath her doormat. None of them, not even Fiona, had the ability to sense or see into areas blocked by a ten-foot wall of earth. Piper apologized several times when it had become clear that there was no evidence to be found.

On Eve's way home, her heart was pounding with excitement. Everything was almost ready. The worms and the river stones had been the last necessities she'd had to collect. In the months following the search on her home, she traveled to distant apothecaries to find the rest of the ingredients the ritual called for. She didn't trust the locals not to snitch on her. The only thing left to do was to wait for Spring's first full moon.



“I offer Death the sacrificial life of worms,” Eve shouted into the void of night as she tossed the eight worms into the cauldron filled with molten fire. She’d memorized the incantation for the ritual every day since she got her hands on the grimoire, but as she spoke it aloud for the first time, her voice took on an other-worldly quality of both a masculine and feminine voice overlapping and speaking together through her. Her whole body thrummed with power, and if she hadn’t been so focused on the task at hand, she would’ve seen the blue veins beneath her skin turning black as ink, like dark spiderwebs running across the top of her hands and up into her arms.

“I offer Death obsidian and the life cycle of a butterfly, for rebirth.” She flung three sharp and smooth pieces of volcanic glass in, then a caterpillar, a chrysalis, and a butterfly. Flames burst forth and leapt towards the sky, their color changing from orange to blue.

“I offer Death cordyceps mushrooms and stinging nettle flowers, to build a tower of life to death. I offer Death river rocks, so that the divine river may flow through one door into the next. I offer Death a rainbow moonstone and a plumeria flower, for new beginnings more powerful than the final rest. I offer Death the final gifts: amethysts and ylang-ylang flowers, for unconditional and never ending love, I shower the binding fire with these.” When she tossed them in, the cauldron’s liquid bubbled up and over. It receded only after the top of the surrounding earth had been soaked. The towering flames burned brighter.

“James stepped through the door of death.

To let him go, is to set him free.

On this night, I shall bind him to me.

To never let go until I let go,

and fly free, together,

into the welcoming arms

of Death.”

Eve hesitated. She was supposed to say next, “Should James wake, and wishes not to stay, let Spirit take him back, and let his body be still from this day forth, forevermore. This is the sacred pact I make.” The idea of leaving this out filled her with a deep unease, and her gut was pushing her to say it, yet she still couldn’t bring herself to do so.

“But should I fail,

let the second death be

quick.

Underneath this ancient oak tree

lies his body.

On this full moon Spring night

I shall call him to me.

Let my Voice be heard by Death

to heed and honor my request.”

As the last word left her lips, the fire turned a nasty shade of black-ish green and reached so high into the sky that the branches of the ancient oak tree caught fire. Eve hastily moved backwards and fear began to bloom in her chest. The fire was *doing* what it was supposed to; the tree would burn up down to its roots, and its life energy would be transferred into James’ body. But the fire was supposed to be an almost blinding pure white.

After a couple hours passed following the oak tree burning to ash, Eve's calves had grown numb while she knelt a few feet away from where James was buried. Doubt had crept in the moment she saw the fire’s color and now she felt consumed by it. It wasn’t supposed to take

this long. She beat at the ground with her fists, then started tearing at the grass. Why had she acted so foolishly? There was no way she could repeat the ritual a second time and do the incantation right. After another agonizing hour of waiting, she finally gave up and headed home, crying the whole way back.



Eve's sobs were too loud to hear the faint knocking at her front door. On her knees, her upper body shook like she was trying to heave something out of herself. She was shaking so hard that she could feel splinters in the floor digging through the cotton of her white dress and into her skin.

During a brief pause between her last sob and her next breath, she finally heard it. It was more of a continuous tapping than a knocking. That wasn't the noise that froze her blood. A long and scratchy moan was coming from the other side of the door. A moan that sounded as if it had traveled a great distance, and not just in miles, to get there. A moan steeped in exhaustion and... pain? *No*, Eve thought as she slowly rose to her feet. *Not just "pain." They're in agony.*

Although her own anguish was almost enough to overpower her concern for whoever was waiting for her to answer, she sucked in a few deep breaths before approaching the front door. Each breath felt cold and stung her raw throat on the way down. Her mournful screams had lasted for what felt like hours.

The knocking and the moaning grew more insistent with each of her steps, as if the person had been listening and waiting for any sounds from her side of the door. The tempo became erratically fast and Eve's heart was racing with it as she turned the doorknob. The moaning and the knocking cut off as she pushed open the door. It thumped against the person's head because they were too slow in stepping back.

“Oh! I’m so sorry I —”

James.

But not James.

His body—what was left of it—stood hunched over on her porch, hands on his knees, like he couldn’t stand up straight. The outside lamp shone against his exposed bones and decaying ligaments. Chunks of flesh and muscle were missing all over what Eve could see of his body, as he was still wearing the black suit and red tie she had picked out for him to rise in, though it too was covered in dirt and had pieces hanging off or missing. His once beautiful black hair had turned into a cluster of white wisps scattered around his scalp. There was a sizable hole on his left cheek, rimmed with green and grey rotting flesh, and through it she could see that some of his teeth were missing and his gums were a dark blue. The whites of his eyes were now a brown-ish yellow. Only two out of his ten fingers still had skin and muscle on them. The rest were caked in dirt and had pieces of grass sticking out between the phalanges. But Eve had made sure to bury him only an inch or two underneath the soil for the ritual....

His face—her legs screamed at her to run at the sight of it, her stomach and throat were begging her to release the bile churning violently inside her. Yet, her heart was thrashing to be free in a cage made up of her body’s horror. Her heart was screaming with joy now, beating on the bars of its cage as it pleaded with Eve to embrace and kiss him, kiss him for all of the days they had lost, even if his lips were an unnatural grey and an orange fungus was growing on his lower lip. Eve was beyond elated that the ritual had worked after all! But she had preserved him so well with a spell the night he had died. The only signs that he was dead when she buried him for the ritual were the open wounds from the aftermath of the car accident, the first signs of bloating, an ashy complexion, and ice cold skin... she didn’t understand why James looked as if

his body had been decomposing for months. When he opened his mouth to speak, thin lines of green slime stretched between his lips and Eve had to swallow back her disgust.

“Hurts,” he croaked. “End it. End *me*.”

“What?” She asked, hoping she had heard him wrong. Sure, his body hadn’t come back the way she had expected it to, but there had to be a way to fix it. There *had* to be.

“Kill me,” he begged. His voice was a little more clear, but his eyes scrunched up with the pain the effort caused.

“No,” she whispered, taking a step back. “Why would I... how could you think that I even could...” She had him back and there was no way she was going to let him go again. She wasn’t sure she could live through the pain of him dying again, especially not with her heart full of so much hope. “I love you James. I can’t kill you,” she told him firmly. “C’mon inside, we can work this out. I can fix this, I *know* I can.” She held the door open wider for him.

His eyes narrowed into slits. Still hunched over, he walked sluggishly into the house as if he was walking knee-deep through molasses. He leered at her the whole time, and his neck made an unpleasant *chk-chk-chk* sound as he walked by her, still staring.

After closing the door, Eve faced him and said, “I thought the ritual didn’t work, you didn’t rise and I... well I wouldn’t have left you if I knew it had worked. I’m sorry you woke up alone, but it’s so good to see—”

“If you love me...” James cut her off. He had to take a long pause between his words, the pain of speech overwhelming him, “you’ll let me go back. Kill me. Sweetheart... please.”

The endearment made her heart crumble. Tears welled up in her eyes and her face fell into her hands. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be. They were supposed to grow old together. Three years of memories wasn’t nearly enough time with him, and she couldn’t help herself from

wanting—*needing*—more time. She shook her head, refusing. She heard the floorboards creak, but she didn't see him coming.

James lurched forward with much more speed than Eve thought he was capable of in his undead form. He ripped her arms out of the way and wrapped his bony hands around her throat, squeezing so hard that she gagged. His eyes were filled with regret, yet he pushed her until her back slammed against the wall.

She tried pulling and clawing at his hands, his arms, but all that came away was decaying flesh and muscle. She would've screamed, but the pressure on her windpipe was too great. She had no air left. When she started to see stars, a realization came to her; James knew as well as she did that when a witch dies, the magic that binds all of her spells dies with her. Her eyes widened and heart split open with the misery of the truth: James would rather kill her than live for her. Eve gently tapped his arm with the palm of her hand. It was something she used to do when they were physically intimate and James became too rough.

Startled at the gesture, he blinked several times before letting her breathe, but he didn't release her.

"Why?" She asked, her heart now more broken than it had ever been.

His eyes held a sad hope when he looked into hers. "Not just pain. I love you, too," he paused again, the words taking their toll, "We'll be together... this way. No more pain, only love on the... other side of the door.... Do you trust me?" For the first time that night, she saw fear in his eyes.

A few moments passed as she gazed at him. She wasn't sure she could keep going after his second death, but he would be in physical agony if she kept him alive. The pain had already

driven him this far, which hadn't killed his love for her yet, but the last pieces of her heart knew that eventually it would.

She reached forward and caressed his undamaged cheek, feeling ready to be embraced by the welcoming arms of Death with James by her side. "I trust you," Eve said. She closed her eyes.

Author's Note

This is another short story I began writing at URI; although I submitted it near the end of October 2020, the ideas for this story have been brewing (pardon the pun) since I was a teenager. When I first heard Hozier's, "Work Song," I could see flashes of images in my mind's eye that inspired me to write my own story of love and death. The lyrics, "No grave can hold my body down / I'll crawl home to her," tugged at a memory related to another story I first listened to in a classroom when I was ten (along with other short horror stories): "The Monkey's Paw," by W.W. Jacobs. In Jacob's story, the couple never opened the front door for their undead son. I always wondered what might've unfolded had they done so.

I plan to edit and expand this short story over time, and I will replace this draft when there's been enough changes to warrant it. There are more scenes related to the song's lyrics that I want to add. I'd love to turn this short story into a novel someday.

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