

Lucy Strange Our Castle by the Sea



Chicken
House

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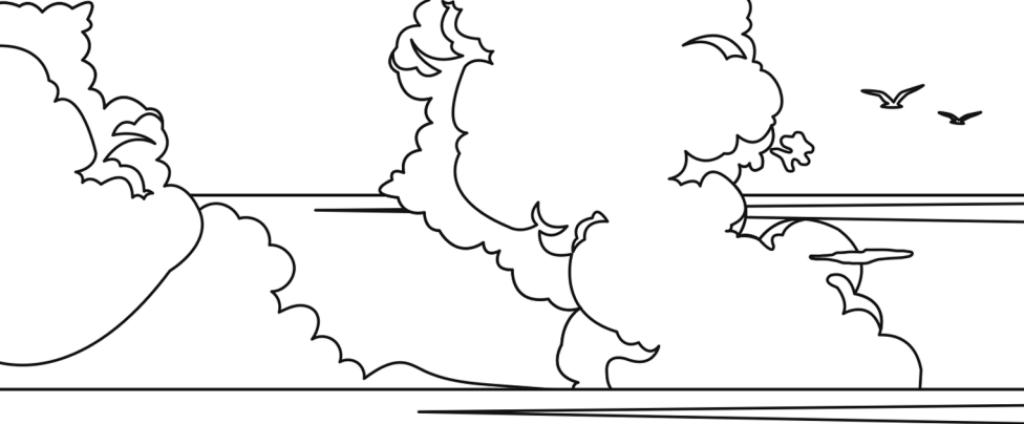
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For our path in life . . . is stony and rugged now, and it rests with us to smooth it. We must fight our way onward. We must be brave.

Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

For James
and for Freddie – our little miracle



PROLOGUE

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I was very small indeed when Pa first told us the legend of the Wyrm and the Stones. It was Hallowe'en and he took us out to the standing stones on the clifftop to play snapdragon and tell ghost stories. This was my big sister Magda's idea, and we were almost out of our minds with excitement when Pa agreed. I carried the bowl of brandy-soaked raisins very carefully from the cottage, while Pa lit the way ahead with a lantern. Mags galloped giddily behind, drunk on the night air and fizzing with delight at being allowed out after dark. It was probably not long past supper time, but I felt that it must be midnight at least – *the witching hour*. The darkness danced with spectres.

We wrapped ourselves up in blankets and huddled together on the clifftop, the four standing stones looming around us. Pa lit the brandy in the snapdragon bowl and the flames flickered dangerously, casting shadows on our faces. I had never played the game before. My father and sister started swaying backwards and forwards, grinning and chanting together: 'Snip! Snap! Dragon!' They pinched the burning raisins from the flames. I did not recognize these strange, chanting, nightmarish creatures. I was half-afraid of them. I caught the rhythm of their words and joined in the game, pinching at the weird blue flames and gobbling up the burning-hot raisins.

With his blue and lapping tongue

Many of you will be stung!

Snip! Snap! Dragon!

*

After the game, when the flames had dwindled and our faces were lit only by the lantern, Pa told us the story of the standing stones.

‘Long, long ago,’ he said, his face suddenly serious and skull-like in the lamplight, ‘a thick fog settled on this coast. It was very bad for the fishermen and their families, as they could not fish while the fog lingered, but it was even worse for the families of those aboard the *Aurora*. The *Aurora* had set out on the morning before the fog came, and she had still not returned.

‘There were four men aboard the *Aurora* and each of these men had a daughter. Each evening the girls climbed the path from the harbour hand in hand, making their way up to this very clifftop to light the signal fire, and they kept the fire burning all through the long, cold nights. They hoped that, if the *Aurora* was still afloat, if she was lost somewhere in the fog, the bright flames would help to lead the little boat home. By the fourth evening, everyone else in the village had given up. They said the *Aurora* must have been swallowed by the Wyrm – the treacherous sandbank that lurked in the shadow of the towering cliffs. The Wyrm had wrecked many hundreds of ships over the centuries, and it was hungry for another sacrifice.

‘But the girls had one last hope. That night, as usual, they wound their way up the cliff path hand in hand. As usual, they lit the fire, and tended it, and they sat and

watched and waited for their fathers to return, but on this night they did not make their way home again.

‘Here in the dark, on this very spot where we are sitting now, the girls sang a special song to the sea. They sang the sweetest, saddest song that has ever been heard. It was a song of love and loyalty and sacrifice, promising the greatest of gifts if only the *Aurora* were returned safely to the harbour. They sat and sang, and as they sang, they saw the fog begin to disperse. They kept singing and singing.

‘Soon it was dawn and the girls stood up together, holding hands as the darkness dissolved and the new sun started to rise over the sea. Their white dresses billowed like sails in the first breeze that had blessed the shores in four long days and nights. A ghostly little boat seemed to bob up from the grey waves, and the girls knew it was the *Aurora*. They kept singing – but singing with joy now as they watched the fishing boat sail towards the harbour below.

‘The Wyrm squirmed beneath the surface of the water. It had returned the *Aurora*, but now it felt angry and cheated and hungry. So it took the great sacrifice the girls had promised: it took their souls. Tentacles of mist reached up from the sea, creeping over the edge of the cliff and into their hearts. As the sun rose over the glittering water, the four daughters turned to stone.’

I shivered horribly. I felt all icy and strange. I looked

at Mags and she was frozen, her mouth hanging open. For a moment, I thought perhaps she had been turned to stone too, but then she blinked and swallowed. Pa was still talking, though his voice was very, very soft now – just a whisper.

‘People say that the Daughters of Stone stand here on our clifftop as a warning to those who sail these dangerous waters. If you close your eyes and listen very carefully, you might just be able to hear their sad, sweet, ghostly song . . .’

A sea mist must have risen as Pa was telling the story; tendrils of it seemed to be creeping across the cliff. I was aware of the four stones surrounding us, watching us. I could almost hear them breathing. My heart was thudding in my throat now. I heard a whispered song, as soft as the hiss of sea foam over pebbles, the swish of a sea breeze through a long white dress.

For my father and sister, the legend of the Wurm and the Stones was just that – a legend, distant through the mists of centuries. But for me it was different. From the moment I first heard the story, I knew it was much, much more. I knew it in the chill of my bone marrow and the crawling of my skin. I knew that the ancient magic of our cliffs was real and that I was destined – somehow – to become part of the legend too.