

IYRICO



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lyrico

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"This is a difficult time for everyone, Levi. I need you to be nicer to your cousin during this visit. I don't know what got into you the last time." Her eyes in the rearview mirror revealed the same expression of disappointment he'd seen before. Pain filtered through as well, quenching the heat of his irritation with the subject.

He looked out the window at the passing orchard and mumbled, "I wouldn't steal from Grandma Mola."

They had accused him of taking a necklace - one made from a drachma coin and passed down through generations - from her dressing table. He had always suspected Nessa. Too bad no one else did. The culprit had left behind a clue to frame him for the crime - his sketchbook on the floor, behind the bedroom door, as if he would be so careless. The adults in the house required no further evidence.

"You're eleven, now. You know better than to take what isn't yours, especially with all that's happening. Please don't make this any more difficult than it needs to be."

They'd been to Cliff House two years before, when he was nine and his cousin, Nessa, was eight. Neither of them had any siblings. He would've liked to get along with her, maybe have someone (aside from his schoolmates) to play with once in a while, but she was a conniving beast, always in search of attention. She wasn't worth the trouble.

As if sensing his master's discontent, the old coonhound curled up on the seat next to him, looked up and whined. He dropped his head on the boy's lap.

As they travelled down the road, ill-tended stone bridges forgotten by county inspectors replaced safer, more modern models with rails. Wilds crowded close to the edge of the road, as if reaching out, to drop the first leaves of autumn to pavement left wet from the rain earlier that morning. The roads narrowed the closer they got to Cliff House, merging to one lane as they passed the neighboring vineyard. Anyone else would've enjoyed the scenery. It only reminded him how much he hated the destination.

They arrived just before noon, with the sun riding high in the sky above the thick tangle of vegetation, above the slumping stone walls of the cottage and the sagging roof. With the clouds of earlier having moved on, nothing impeded the growing warmth of the day.

Hound barreled over Levi to hop down to the yard for a stretch on the pavement and a wander over to the grass. He lifted his leg to the crumbling well while Levi and his mother unloaded their suitcases from the trunk of the sedan.

Dean, Levi's uncle, came outside to help. He was a lanky man, slightly older and taller than his sister and weary. He always had a disheveled look about him, but the impending death of his mother had him dragging even more than usual. His button-down shirt was rumpled like he'd slept in it, and his eyes behind his glasses were red with tears. He took the handle of the rolling suitcase and set it down on the cracked driveway to hug her.

"How is she?"

"The doctor said she might have the day."

Levi stood off to the side, awkwardly. He didn't know how to handle such situations. He'd experienced loss, in a way, as a kind of hole in his life because his father had never been around. But death - that was a whole new animal, and to be so near to a person in the act of dying. Mortality was a terrifying thing.

He looked to the front of Cliff House to find his cousin glaring at him from the open front door. Nessa looked like a ghost, pale hair and skin, pale dress, doll-like in many ways, save her disdain for him. She would make everything harder if she could find a way.

"We have lunch waiting." Dean ushered them inside, lingering with the door open to let Hound in.

They left fresh air behind for the dank interior of Cliff House. Even if not for his cousin, he would've detested being there. It was an old, strange place with interior walls made of the same stone as the exterior. It smelled of decaying plants and earthen surfaces that could never really be dusted or cleaned.

The story was that his great grandfather built the house with his own two hands after finding that precarious patch of land atop a cliff. If a person judged it by the swampy smell alone, they would never guess that ocean waves crashed against rocks at the bottom of the cliff out back.

Dean accompanied them to their respective rooms so they could drop off their suitcases. Levi's room was a glorified closet on the northern side of the house. It had one window, which faced a bit of yard leading into a patch of thorn bushes growing among the trees.

Deadly, red berries grew there, mingled with the green leaves like poison Christmas. Nessa had tried to get him to eat some once. Lucky for him, he had already known not to trust her.

He wedged his suitcase between the small chest of drawers and the wall with the window. He would unpack later. First, they had to spend quality time with their hosts.

Levi liked his uncle well enough. Dean was obsessed with history, so he always had some new old story he'd dug up in the library or heard from one of his history buff friends. In a past life, he'd even taught a history class. He abandoned the teaching profession entirely after a series of problems left him with too much stress to continue.

Levi had overheard his mother discussing Dean's various issues with their sister, Aunt Marion. He overheard lots of things adults said. He discovered early on that if he remained quiet, they almost forgot he was in the room and when that happened, the internal censor that usually kept grownups from speaking frankly about the darkest aspects of one another's dealings would fall away. His silence was his pass into the secret world of adults.

Levi stood alone in the hallway outside his room to wait for his mother to come out of the room next to his. Down the hall, Grandma Mola's door stood open. Hushed voices spoke inside. Levi listened to them discussing death in medical terms. A strange voice, no doubt belonging to a doctor, offered instructions on who to call when it was all over. Afterward, Dean showed the almost elderly man in a business jacket and blue jeans to the front door. They shook hands and the doctor departed, leaving Dean looking even more withered than before.

Levi didn't understand the surrender. Doctors should be heroes. While the patient still breathed, didn't they have some kind of hope? He looked at the open door to his grandmother's room.

She mumbled, he thought, a half-singing through the labored breathing. He didn't want to see her, but they'd make him go in. And what if the death rubbed off, somehow?

He caught a word in her frail voice, practically whispered, "lyrico."

She went on to other words in a dreamy voice, more sad than panicked about the encroaching darkness. He tried to make the words out as they tumbled from her lips.

Gibberish, he decided. It meant nothing - that strange word, despite the fact that it remained in his mind. A part of a lucid dream had touched him; that was all. His mother had talked in her sleep before. He heard her when she left her bedroom door open at night.

"What are you doing?" Nessa's voice said in his ear.

He jumped, startled.

She laughed and passed by him, "Chicken boy."

They had a lunch of cold cuts and cheeses on hamburger buns with potato chips, and fizzy lemonade on ice. The kitchen was as old-fashioned as ever. A rough wooden table with benches for seats still sat across from the large hearth that Dean used to cook some of their meals. Modern appliances shared the far wall with ancient looking cabinetry.

His uncle had opened the shutters on the front window. The rippled glass pane transformed the light, which had been so warm outside, to a stark unnatural presence in the dark kitchen that highlighted the ugliness in everything it touched: the scars on wooden surfaces, the sadness on Levi's mother's face and on Dean's face.

The smile Nessa wore took on shadows, removing the doll mask and revealing the monster in her. She had a scheme in mind for later; he could tell. He would make a point to avoid her, perhaps stretch the task of unpacking his suitcase into an hours-long affair.

"You kids have to stay inside." Dean changed the subject from talk of death. "Animal control is rounding up a pack of stray dogs from the property today. The mongrels made off with the neighbor's dog yesterday. Levi, you'll want to keep Hound indoors as much as possible."

With those words, the house became more of a prison. The land outside Cliff House always had its dangers. The forest plants like the berries, the well out front, the cliff out back, and the occasional sinkholes were always concerns. He could escape outside, though, from his cousin as long as he kept a watchful eye. He walked with caution and not too close to the rocky edge of the world. Now, he had no escape, save his room.

He went directly back there as soon as lunch was done and shut the door. It had no lock, unfortunately, but he was thankful for the physical barrier, just the same. He shut out Nessa and the sounds of dying down the hall. The room became his island of solitude, just him and faithful Hound along with the ever-present sound of waves crashing against the rocks below.

Holing up this way, only coming out for bathroom visits, worked well for most of the day, until he heard the front door open.

He poked his head into the hallway. Nessa stood at the front door, calling outside.

"Kitty, here, kitty, come back in. Please, baby." She begged as she knelt and snapped her fingers.

Hound whined from his napping spot on the braided rug, a warning to his master.

Don't trust the girl.

Nessa stepped outside, still beckoning. She didn't have a cat when they last came to Cliff House, but he supposed she could have gotten one.

No. Better to shut the door and forget about her. He did just that, backing away as though he expected a monster to burst through.

She continued to call for the cat. He lost her voice as she moved away from the open front door.

Levi went to his window to see if he could watch her. If she ran into some kind of trouble, he could go get the adults. She didn't cross his narrow view of the yard in the minutes ticking by like days.

Would she put herself in danger to get him into trouble? He turned the idea over and over in his head. How far would she go?

He removed the library book he brought with him from his suitcase to read but stayed at the window. More minutes passed with only the sound of ocean waves. Words in the text failed to hold his interest. He tossed the book onto the bed, paced to the closed door and back.

"She isn't my problem," He told Hound.

More minutes ticked by in tense quiet. What if stray dogs mauled her? He pondered how a tragedy like that would affect his mother and Dean. They didn't need any more grief, not with their mother dying. He decided to tell on Nessa.

He abandoned his solitude for the hall, stopping next to Grandma Mola's now closed door. Voices spoke on the other side, his mother's words broken by tears and Dean chiming in. This was important talk. Interrupting them for the childish act of ratting out Nessa would mean greater consequences for him than her.

Levi growled under his breath. He had two choices. He could go back to his room and wait out the suspense or he could fall for what was likely a trick to lure him where he wasn't supposed to go.

Nessa had left the front door open. The adults would want him to shut it, especially with stray dogs nearby. They wouldn't want the dogs to smell cold cuts and wander in.

"lyrico, lyrico, lyrico." Grandma's Mola's words rose above the others, sounding a warning no one understood but her. Her frustration dissolved into mournful explanations in some other language.

The language of the dying. Levi thought.

He kept his eyes riveted to the sunlit foyer and listened for Nessa calling to the cat as he crept closer. He tried to detect her voice over the ocean waves beating against the shore. The air became heavy, bearing down on him like in a dream. It would resist any attempt he made to run.

His mind conjured images of hulking beasts, of dogs pushing in through the open front door. Jaws snapping, mouths watering at the idea of ripping into his flesh, they filled the hallway of his imagination, scrambling on the wooden floor.

Levi hesitated next to a window. The yard remained still beneath the weight of the air. He made fists to stop the tremble in his hands.

"Stop being stupid."

He ran forward and slammed the door. Stunned by his own action, he stared at it. The house was secure again. He assured himself they couldn't come through.

You shut her out. The idea nagged. He could always tell them he had only just noticed the door open. He didn't know she'd gone out there.

Levi leaned against the door to catch his breath.

"Nessa, are you in the house?" He asked aloud and received no reply.

With the door closed, the smell of decaying vegetation returned. It coiled around him, the fragrance of dead things in their earthy tomb. He ventured down the hall to the kitchen.

"Nessa?"

He didn't see her. There were other sections of the house interior, a utility room with a washer and dryer, a pantry, a storage room holding all sorts of junk Grandma Mola had deemed important. He had been back there only once with her. Thinking he might want a toy to play with, she had asked him to retrieve a spinning top made of dented tin from a shelf buried in the corner. Boxes were stacked everywhere with random items scattered among and on top of them. She had dirty dolls and clocks, fabric scraps and ceramic figurines of fancy ladies in fancy hats, power tools. He'd scraped his elbow on a rusted animal trap, and after all that squeezing by and rummaging, the top didn't even work. It was junk like all the rest.

lyrico. Grandma Mola's mind was as cluttered as the room, he supposed.

"Nessa." He whispered.

Nothing moved. No one replied. He felt the house waiting for him to make a next move, watching for him to slip up.

At the back of the house, he left the storm door closed as he surveyed the yard leading down to the edge of the cliff. No one ever went into the back yard. They had no picnics near the ocean. The danger there was worse than anywhere else, especially for a kid when the wind was high. A lone seagull glided from the trees down toward the rocks below. Nessa was not there.

"I'm going back to my room now. Your trick didn't work." He said more to the yard than her.

Back in the front hall, on the way back to solitude, he made the mistake of glancing toward the well. What he saw there chilled the blood in his veins.

A big, brown dog nosed the carcass of a small animal, rolling as he pushed. Irritated skin poked through bare spots in his fur where bugs had bitten him raw, and his head twitched as he nipped bits of flesh from his meal. A second dog entered the scene from behind the well, and they bickered over the meat.

"Kitty, kitty." Nessa spoke, but he didn't see her. "There you are."

Where had it come from? The sound was muffled by a wall between them. He went from window to window, trying to determine if she really was outside.

The dogs tussled, growls escalating to shrieks. If Nessa wandered anywhere nearby, they would rip her to pieces. The first dog broke from the fray to snatch up the animal carcass and bounded off, into the wilds with the second mongrel at his heels.

This was Levi's chance. He promised himself he would be quick. He just needed to know for sure so he could return to the solitude of his room with a clear conscience. He burst through the door.

"Nessa!" Near the well where the dogs had just been, he swung in a circle, dizzy with the rush of heat from the sun and his pulse in his throat. "Nessa, dogs!" were the only words he could manage. The day was too bright for his eyes to adjust so quickly. He blinked at the shadows at the front of the house, trying to force his vision into focus.

A growl emanated from the woods, a rustle of branches, and then he was running.

The door slammed in his face, throwing him onto the rocky soil. He sat, numbed by the denial of safety.

The dogs fought again, moving through branches in a chase just inside the trees. Leaves seemed to whisper, *run!* The danger brought him to his feet.

With a murderous smile, Nessa waved to him from a window, and then she receded into the cavernous house.

The doorknob refused him, and he threw his body into the door, beat on the wood with both fists and shouted as loud as his voice would allow, "Help! Mom! I'm locked out!"

The sounds of canine struggle in the woods ceased.

He stopped shouting and faced the yard. Wild dogs stalked him from the leaves, possibly more than the two who had been so brazen as to enter the yard. Eyes peered out at him, evaluating; he felt them just as he felt his heart racing in his chest. If he ran, they would certainly chase, and the only direction that would carry him farther away was around the house, to the cliff, where the wind posed an equal threat.

Other than the cloud of flies over the wildflowers at the base of the well, the yard remained still. The sun had begun to set into the woods, giving the sky a radiant rosy glow over the trees. And the leaves rustled again. Movement, more deliberate than a chase, more calculated. He tried to track their locations by the disturbance of the tangle of green.

Levi was cornered. Did he dare put his back to them to beat on the door again? Did he risk being swarmed at the back by a pack of wild dogs and dragged into the woods? He had no

choice. He went at the door with the full force of his urgency. Through tears, he screamed for his mother until his voice broke, pounded until he thought he would break every bone in his hands. He felt a change in the scene behind him.

He turned to see a snout had emerged from the trees. A red dog with a bull nose sniffed the ground, his eyes on Levi. His left ear was gnarled against his head. Another dog, a slightly smaller version of the first minus the gnarled ear, came next. He assessed the situation by sniffing the air instead of the ground. They were cautious but wouldn't be for long.

Levi flattened his back against the door only to have it swing open. He landed at his mother's feet with her looking angrily down at him.

"Levi Francis Philips, what in the world are you doing?"

Breath wouldn't come at first. He simply gawked up at her and his uncle as they stood over him.

"The dogs." He finally said. "They're out there." He pointed to the empty yard.

"We told you to stay inside for a reason. Go to your room this instant and stay there until dinner," She ordered.

Legs shaking, he rose to his feet. He thought about telling her how Nessa had lured him out, but decided against it. They likely wouldn't believe him anyway, just like they didn't believe him the last time she got him into trouble. Also, he didn't mind being sent to his room. He would've stayed there in the first place if he had known this would be the outcome.

Back in his island of solitude, his heart rate returned to normal. He sat on the floor, petting Hound and reading his book for a while. Then, when the white animal control van arrived, he watched a man and a woman round up the dogs they could find. They were out of the view of his window for most of this process, but they flushed one dog out of the trees just across from him. It bolted toward the open ground between the tree line and the cliff and a blonde lady with a wire loop on a stick chased after it.

Be careful of the wind. Levi thought.

She returned, triumphant with the fearsome beast snapping at her from the end of her stick. A nasty thing with no love for humans, its struggle tested the limits of the woman's strength as it jumped and twisted in the air in an effort to escape its date with euthanasia.

Levi lost interest then and lay on his bed with his fingers laced behind his head while he stared at the ceiling. Nessa had tried to kill him again. He'd make every effort to avoid her from that point forward, no matter what she did. He vowed to himself that he wouldn't even speak to her.

At dark, there was a knock on his door. He expected his mother was retrieving him for dinner, but instead, she led him to Grandma Mola's door. In the hallway, before they entered, she cradled his face in her hands and tilted his face up toward hers.

"She requested to see you. She hasn't got long. Just listen to what she has to say, and tell her you love her. I know you weren't very close, but this is important to her. You're her only

grandson." She kissed him on the forehead and urged him into the death room, then closed the door behind him.

Levi was alone with Grandma Mola in candlelight and the smell of melting wax and urine. She was propped up by a pile of pillows, smiling at him in a strangely wistful way. Medical equipment was gathered in the corner, no longer connected to her because she'd given up the fight. Skin hung off her bones, no fat underneath. Her remaining hair stuck out in all directions. She seemed alert but in the grip of some strange energy.

"Closer, dear. I can't quite make you out all of the way over there." She nodded toward the chair next to her.

He sat without saying anything. What is there to say to a person when they're about to die? He was supposed to tell her that he loved her. He couldn't very well lead in with that. It would seem insincere, and in a way, it was. How much did he really love her? He barely knew her, after all.

"I wanted to tell you, before I leave this shriveled, old body behind, that I wish we could have been closer. Your mother moved you so far..." She lost her train of thought and stared into space before returning her gaze to him, "You're a good, sweet boy, a better soul than most of the others in our family."

"Thank you."

"The lyrico will come for you."

Levi felt the color drain from his face, "What does that word mean?"

"I knew you would believe me." Her trembling hand reached for him. "That's why I need to talk to you before I go. The lyrico is our family curse, a demon." She paused to let this information have its full effect.

"Demon?" His mind reeled. This had to be the product of her state of mind, right? She was hallucinating.

"When your great, great grandfather claimed this land for our family, other people who had settled nearby warned him about the harmful spirit imprisoned in the cliff, but he was a brave man and wouldn't let some silly superstition stop him from providing a homestead for his wife and two sons."

A strong ocean wind hit the the rear side of the house with the sound of a far-off scream. A draft coursed along the floor at Levi's feet.

Grandma Mola went on, "The older son fell ill during the first winter. No one knew what was wrong, and he became sicker until death was but a breath away." She held up a finger for him to give her a moment, then rested back against the pillows. This talk was exhausting the last of her energy.

He didn't want to be in the room with her when she died. He glanced toward the door, silently beseeching his mother to come in and rescue him from the sights and smells and the weak sound of a voice she barely had the strength to use.

She closed her eyes but continued, "You see, the demon was imprisoned in the cliff by the Dutch immigrants who had settled the land before. They trapped him in an idol and set it in the ground. A priest and the local blacksmith crafted a medallion to plug the hole. A good prison for a spirit, wouldn't you agree?"

He nodded.

"It confined the lycrigo to the cliff, but when George built this house, he did so within its reach." She collapsed into a fit of coughing that left spots of blood on her hand.

Levi's mother burst through the door, "That's good, Levi. That's enough." She urged him away from the bed.

"But what happened to George's son? She didn't get to finish."

Grandma Mola had lost consciousness. Levi's mother removed the extra pillows and brushed the old woman's hair back to kiss her forehead.

"Dinner is ready. Go join your uncle and your cousin at the table. I'll be there in a minute."

Hound waited for him in the hallway and together, they went to dinner. The dog ate from a bowl on the floor, while Levi sat on the bench across from Dean.

Dinner consisted of beef stew scooped from the pot hanging over the fire. The night was too warm for both stew and fire, but he ate it anyway, concentrating on his meal to avoid conversation with his relatives.

"You all right, bud?" Dean asked after several minutes of silence.

"I'm fine."

"I know it's sad, but all living things die eventually."

"I know."

He felt Nessa looking at him. Determined not to give her the satisfaction of a glance in her direction. He kept all attention on the soup on his bowl.

"Marion won't get here in time. Mom is almost gone." Levi's mother walked into the room and sat at the table with her arms crossed.

"She's intentionally making herself late." Dean muttered, "Selfish as always."

"The trip is so far for her, nearly across the country, and you know she has trouble getting away from work."

"Her mother's last moments alive are more important." He stated this calmly, too emotionally drained to make a real argument.

"Are you planning to stay here when she's gone? I was thinking you could move closer to us."

Levi almost choked on a bite of bread. All he needed was the nightmare doll close by. He wouldn't live to see adulthood if she had her way.

"Cliff House is an important part of our history. If we leave, it has no one. It needs a caretaker."

"You know as well as I do that living here isn't safe for Nessa. You saw what happened with Levi and the dogs today."

"That was an isolated incident."

"How would you feel if something happened to her because of your stubbornness?"

Dean looked at Nessa as if seeing the danger to her for the first time. She grinned innocently and hugged his arm. Levi gritted his teeth.

His mother added, "You could stay with us until you get settled."

Levi panicked. Desperate to change the subject before an agreement was reached, he blurted out the first words that popped into his head.

"What's an Iyrico?"

His mother petted his hair, "Grandma Mola is just dreaming, baby. It's not real."

Dean said, "She thinks it made her sick because she didn't pray enough. The legend has been around for centuries. It's a scary story to tell the kids at Halloween, like Sleepy Hollow. You've heard of Sleepy Hollow, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you think there's a headless guy riding around on a horse, flinging jack-o-lanterns at people?"

"No."

"There you go, then."

Levi knew better than to argue grownup logic. Once they had an idea cemented in their heads, there was no use trying to talk them out of it. However, that fact wouldn't stop him from asking questions.

"What is the legend? Can I hear it?"

The table went quiet while Dean engaged in silent consultation with Levi's mother. She nodded her approval for him to go ahead.

"The Iyrico supposedly began with a curse, brought from the old country by a woman called Esma. Legend says the family she lived with, her parents and her siblings, were lazy, horrible people who lived off family money. She, on the other hand, was hardworking. One night, she grew tired of keeping the house clean."

"Like Cinderella, Daddy?" Nessa interjected with a bat of her eyelashes.

Levi glared at her and shook his head in disgust. She stuck her tongue out at him.

"Yes, Pumpkin. A blizzard had them all in the house for days. They kept her running just as long. She lost her temper at dinner, tossing dishes at them and food, and telling them exactly what they were. The father grabbed her by the collar and tossed her out into the driving snow with nothing but the clothes she wore.

When she rapped on the window, they shut the curtains. They had no nearby neighbors. Esma had no way to make a fire. She huddled in a corner of the porch and slowly froze to death, but as she did, she devoted all of her thought and will to revenge."

"They left her to die? How cruel." Nessa feigned sympathy.

"Don't get any ideas." Levi couldn't stop himself from snapping.

"Levi!" His mother was both shocked and appalled.

Dean continued, too engrossed in the tale to notice, "She remembered a book she'd found in a trunk when they moved. It contained ancient poems and riddles and the like and one in particular had grabbed her attention."

"About the Lyrico."

He nodded, "A poem about disease and famine brought by a malicious spirit. She had always thought her piggish family could use some misfortune. They'd had it too easy. She recited the poem over and over as the snow blew around her and the others extinguished the lights. Her hatred gave the Lyrico the life it needed to terrorize not only her family but an entire village a mile away. The spirit traveled from house to house, killing a man here and a woman there. Then, it made the mistake of entering the church."

"You're scaring the kids." Levi's mother protested as she set down her fork.

"Nonsense. Am I scaring you?" Dean asked Levi.

Levi shook his head no. Nessa concurred, and the story went on.

"The priest, being close to God, saw what the thing truly was, and he came up with the plan to trap it."

"Grandma Mola said they put it in the ground." Levi said.

"Yes, they did. They lured it up to this very cliff and the priest prayed it into the ground and sealed the hole with a blessed medallion."

"Have you seen it?" Nessa asked. "The hole in the ground?"

"It isn't real." He stuffed the last piece of bread in his mouth and headed for the living room. "If you will excuse me, I'm going to watch television for awhile."

Nessa followed Dean to the living room located just around the corner. Levi's mother returned to Grandma Mola's room. Levi had no desire to be with any of them. He returned to his room to read.

Back in the quiet, he relaxed. While he closed the blinds, Hound took up his usual post on the braided rug. Levi spotted an object in the shadow of the bed. He dropped to the floor to retrieve it.

The top his grandmother had made him dig out of her collection room had withered to an even greater state of decay than when last he saw it. The chipping paint was almost completely gone, the metal beneath dented and pitted and scratched in places, as if someone had beaten it against the stone repeatedly in a fit of rage. He inspected it, listening to the ocean rush against the cliff and Hound begin to snore. A sensation of being watched swept over him, much like he'd felt with the dogs stalking him from the woods.

No one had opened the door. He'd seen Nessa follow her father to the living room to watch television.

Levi's room was small, with nowhere to really hide. It had no closet, no other doors. He looked up to the brass air register grate near the ceiling. It was too small for any person to fit in but not too small for a rodent.

The general, primitive disposition of the house allowed the entry of some of the smaller members of the local wildlife to come in. He'd seen Grandma Mola catch errant bats with pots and set them free. She'd talked about having mice and how they chewed through boxes. Anything small enough to fit into the vent probably couldn't hurt him.

He let that idea ease his mind, and he went on about his business, reading, coming out only when his mother told him to shower.

He locked the bathroom door to keep his cousin out, which seemed the best idea, especially when he heard someone rattle the doorknob. He smiled to himself as he rinsed his hair. When he was finished, he dressed himself behind the locked door and headed back for blessed solitude.

Hound stood in the hall, which was strange because Levi had left the dog sleeping on the braided rug. He faced the direction of the front door, growling a low sound deep in his throat. The hall appeared empty, except for moonbeams reaching through the windows.

"What's the matter, boy?" Levi touched the bristling hackles on Hound's back.

The dog almost never got worked up. He rarely barked, never chased squirrels or cats. He didn't care for other dogs. Guests at their front door received little concern from him. Yet there, in the night, with death so close, the old boy was on edge about something.

Grandma Mola's door stood open. Levi didn't want to be any closer to that situation than he had to. He coaxed Hound back into his room. Nessa appeared behind him, from the direction of the bathroom and her room.

"Cousin."

He nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of her voice. He said, "I'm not interested in talking to you."

He stepped inside his room and began to close the door. She stopped it.

"Not even about the lyrico?"

"No." He closed the door the rest of the way and waited there in case she attempted to follow him.

She spoke from the hallway, "It's real, you know. I found the hole. I know where it is."

Liar. He restrained himself from stating the accusation aloud because he didn't want to invite further conversation.

"I'll show you tomorrow."

Her footsteps receded in the direction of Grandma Mola's bedroom. He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

He hung out in his room for the remainder of the evening, and when he was ready to go to sleep, he did one final check of the room - under the bed and the dresser. Again, he evaluated

the darkness in the vent. Unable to escape that nagging feeling that he was being watched, he continued to keep an eye on it as he pulled the covers up tight.

"lyrico, lyrico."

He dreamed of the door, alone in a sea of darkness with his dying grandmother's voice warning him from the shaft of light spilling from the room beyond. If his room was an island, hers was the ocean of death lashing its beaches with waves of eternity. He didn't want to be so close.

"lyrico flies

On wings of hate

Curse thick as shadow,

Pools as blood

The strike is slow,

Progression pained

Suffer the demon

Serve your penance"

Esma recited, no - chanted, this poem on the porch as snowflakes clung to her hair and frost sprouted from her mouth and tears froze to her cheeks. Her skin had gone blue, her eyes faraway, but she still found the words.

"lyrico flies

On wings of hate

Curse thick as shadow,

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Serve your penance"

Levi sat up in bed, gasping for air, broken from the dream that had him spiraling away from everything warm and good. It had dragged him away from the light, into the depths of despair where lost souls roamed. He wiped the sweat from his brow. Again came that disturbing sensation of being watched, only now the invisible eyes had moved closer. His skin prickled with gooseflesh, and he swore he detected an odd smell, a kind of metallic odor, akin to blood but not blood, exactly.

His curtains, which he had earlier closed, were wide open to let in the full light of the moon. Tentatively, he rose from the bed, checking the floor to be sure no rodents scampered there. Hound kept on sleeping. Ocean waves kept rushing. The only disturbance to the quiet was his. He crept silently to the window, grasped the curtains to close them but hesitated.

Shafts of moonlight revealed fragments of the forest interior. It was a magical, silvery blue wonderland in the night with shadows dashing, bobbing when a breeze pushed through and set

the foliage in motion. Fiery eyes popped out of sight, then back in. After all for what is a forest without prowling beasties?

Levi shut out the night once more. He heard a quick scrape across the floor. He froze. It came again and twice more, the rhythm of footsteps but not a footstep sound. Where was it coming from?

Scrape, scrape.

Trembling, he lowered himself to the floor. It sounded like a mouse or some other vermin, he thought. Under the bed, he found the tin top, yet again, even though he was certain he'd left it on the dresser. It rolled back and forth as if having just spun. He brought it out to inspect it and heard the scrape sound once more, twice more, and he could tell it had come from outside his room, in the house.

Go to bed. He told himself. No good could come of this curiosity. However, part of him had to verify it wasn't the lycico, or it would infiltrate his dreams again. He cracked the door.

No one was there. Against his better judgment, he ventured into the darkness, taking one last look at his dog and wishing it had a more protective nature. He kept close to one wall in an effort to make himself appear smaller, not that doing so would have helped. The hallway seemed to elongate, the end pulling away from him.

Scratch, scratch, like claws in his ears, the sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, perhaps his mind. He stopped short of Grandma Mola's room. It was dark but open. Could he pass without looking inside? Whether she was dead or only in the process of dying, he longed to proceed with his own life without gaining that memory. He closed his eyes tight, moved past the room quickly.

Too, he resisted the view out the window, at the yard in which he was trapped earlier that day. It held nothing good. He touched the front door to be sure of its solidity. Nothing big had come through, unless it had the dexterity to turn the deadbolt.

A plate hit the table in the kitchen, not breaking but landing firmly, a place set in anger. Any other time, this sound would have assured him that all was well, but the air had changed. Near the front door, it had shifted into a thicker breed of itself, holding the smell of decaying plant life and stone surfaces that could never really be cleaned. It clung to whatever it touched, including his skin, and his lungs.

He reached the kitchen threshold and moved to the other side of the hallway to peer around the corner. No one was there. A lone white plate lay on the table. The smell of fire remained. A sliver of light angled across the stone from the interior of the open refrigerator.

"Nessa?" He practically hissed, annoyed by whatever prank this was.

There came no reply. He hastened, but carefully, to close the refrigerator, and found himself exposed to the rooms at the back of the house. They became a deep sea of night.

Levi detected movement behind him. He wheeled around to face the empty kitchen.

Between him and the moonlight on the other side of the window, a dark drop fell from the ceiling, then another. They turned to smoke as they hit the table, a diaphanous rain.

His mind unable to decipher the meaning of the phenomenon, he stood where he was, unable to breathe, unable to call out. The scratching noise resumed. This time, he had no question about the location of its origin. Above his head, on the ceiling, he resisted, but his eyes traveled up the path of the rain against his will.

A mass of darkness, like a body hunched, dug into the ceiling between a pair of thick beams. It was larger than Levi, the size of an adult. Dark rain like beads of sweat dripped from its back. Its head was a mass of what looked like long rat tails with minds of their own, searching blindly for some hapless victim. It ceased in its efforts, turning its head slowly around to expose a face like a mummy, all hollow eyes and mouth agape. Arms followed, jointed sticks with claws built for raking flesh. The thing locked eyes with Levi, stretched toward him, reaching slowly, deliberately. The lyrico need not hurry.

Elsewhere in the house, Nessa screamed.

Levi's paralysis lifted, and he was running. Away from the lyrico, away from the kitchen toward his room and his dog, possibly his mother, just away from the terrifying thing in the kitchen, until the hallway light flicking on blinded him. He tripped over his feet, scraping his knees and then his palms on the stone floor.

His mother stared at him, "What's going on?"

"The kitchen." He managed to spit out the words as he pointed with a hand he could barely control.

Dean pushed past Levi's mother to go inside Grandma Mola's room. More illumination entered the hall.

"Nessa! I told you to stay in your room." He said.

"She's dead!" Nessa wailed. "I just wanted to see her one more time."

What followed this simple statement was a division. It set into motion two series of events that occurred simultaneously but never seemed to cross. Two scenes played alongside one another, in nearly the same space but somehow not affecting one another.

Standing, Levi held his focus on the room from which he'd just come out of fear the thing would follow him into the light. As he backed away, his mind reeled. The lyrico had drawn him out; he was certain. What had it planned to do?

Meanwhile, his mother rushed into Grandma Mola's room. The sounds of crying from all undecorated parties within ensued. Levi could see them out of the corner of his eye, but he couldn't tear himself away from the nightmare. He couldn't risk thinking about anything else.

So the scene inside the room played on without him, and he refused to look at it. Even if the demon wasn't real, his grandmother's dead body was. He couldn't deal with anything more than a nightmare just then.

He chose to flee back to his room and his dog and the blessed quiet. He ran there, shut the door against death in both its forms. Too much. The events were too much for him to handle.

On wings of hate

Curse thick as shadow

"It will come for you." Grandma Mola had warned.

No. The logical explanation was that he was dreaming. His grandmother had planted an idea in his head; that was all. The worry over her impending death had culminated in a kind of waking dream. He laughed to himself, despite the panic sweat on his forehead and the lurch of his stomach. He leaned his back against the wall, then slid down to sit on the floor.

Hound stirred from sleep. Upon seeing his master close by, he wagged his tail and moved to lay with his head on the boy's lap.

"Next time, you're coming with me." Levi said.

An ambulance arrived later. Doors open and closed. He heard static from radios and conversation. On any other day, he would've been fascinated by this peek into the adult world, but this involved the death of a member of his family in a house he had to sleep in, on a night in which he had already experienced too much trauma.

Even though he wasn't normally allowed to do so, he called the dog up to the bed to sleep next to him. He shut out all of the voices. He buried his head beneath the covers so he couldn't see the lights through the curtains. He pushed away the nightmare and somehow, to the sound of ocean waves against the cliff, Levi fell asleep.

"You kids can play outside today." Dean said absentmindedly without looking up from his pancakes. "We have to go into town to make arrangements, but when we get back, you can go out."

Nessa executed the same posture as her father. She didn't reply to the offer.

"Why can't we go to town with you?" Levi asked. The last place he ever wanted to be was Cliff House, especially alone with Nessa.

"Don't do this today, honey." His mother ate her breakfast in a similar manner as the others, occasionally wiping a tear from under her eye. It was a morose scene that made Levi glad he hadn't seen his dead grandmother's body. She added, "The process will go more smoothly if you two stay here."

"Ok." He conceded, mostly out of sympathy for her.

"We should be gone a couple of hours. You're mature enough to handle yourselves."

No problem. He would barricade the door with a chair or the chest of drawers.

Later, through the front window, he watched the car until it disappeared down the driveway and into the trees. The place felt wilder, then, he thought, with Hound as his only companion on the cliff.

He headed back toward his room to carry out his plan of self-isolation. To his dismay, he found Nessa sitting on his bed turning over the battered top in her hands.

"Get out." He told her.

"It's my house. I can do whatever I want."

"I'll call my mom if you don't leave me alone. I don't want to talk to you."

She gave him an awful grin, "You're going to play with me."

"Unlikely."

She hopped down from the bed, placing the top on the bed as she went. She paused next to him, "You won't have a choice."

He shut her out with the door and then with the chest of drawers. Hound whined at the sight of the barrier.

"Sorry, boy. Trust me, it's worth the trouble. We'll both be safer this way."

Ten minutes later, a knock at his door broke the stillness. It was a gentle rapping, almost innocent. Levi knew better.

"Go away."

"Time for a game."

"Time for you to mind your own business." He kept his nose in his book, which he had started for the second reading since leaving home. He should have brought more books, or a longer one. He had underestimated his need for escape.

"Ok, well, I hate to see anyone get in as much trouble as you will."

He rolled his eyes, "I'm not interested."

"You should be. You're going to get blamed for stealing again."

Levi groaned, "I don't care. Get lost."

"Have it your way."

He listened to her walk toward the kitchen. He would've given almost anything to be rid of her. She made him glad he didn't have any siblings. If that was how other kids acted at home, he wanted no part of the nonsense. Hound was far better company. Levi went back to his book.

For a time, all was right with his world. He began to think this plan of his might actually keep him safe long enough for his mother and Dean to return. Who cared what Nessa planned to blame him for? No matter what that trouble happened to be, he was safer on his island of solitude.

Then, just when his stomach began to rumble for lunch, Hound rose from the rug, lumbered over to the door and whined at his master. Levi had barricaded them in as long as his appetite and the dog's patience would allow.

"Guess we can't be chickens forever." He reluctantly put down the book. "We'll still avoid her." He assured the dog as he moved the chest of drawers from the door.

Nothing stirred in the hallway. Hound went outdoors for his business and returned without incident. The day, while bright and sunny, still possessed the same tense mood it had when the pack of stray dogs circled, but no hostile wildlife emerged from the woods, and Hound returned in a happy gallop.

The kitchen, too, was free of Nessa. Levi made a sandwich. He fed his dog the decidedly less appetizing dogfood, and he opened the window before sitting at the table so he could enjoy some fresh air. He had begun to wonder if Nessa had gone outside when she entered from the rear section of the house. Taking that as his cue to return to his room, he moved to place his dishes in the sink.

"You won't be welcome back when they see what you stole." She sat on the counter and folded her hands in her lap.

"Good. I don't want to come back, anyway. I hate this place."

Nessa leaned forward until her face almost touched his, "But it likes you."

He turned to walk away.

"You can't leave until you find it."

"Find what?" He tossed the inquiry over his shoulder without looking.

"The treasure my dad will have to get back before they'll let you go anywhere."

She wasn't going to leave him alone until he engaged her on some level.

"What?"

"My dad's Saint Christopher medallion."

Levi rolled his eyes and continued into the hallway toward his room, "Why should I care if he loses a necklace?"

"He usually doesn't go anywhere without it. He's real superstitious. But today, the lyrico made him forget, and he left it on his dresser."

He resisted the urge to turn back. He plowed ahead to his bedroom with Hound at his side. He wasn't going to let her coax him into the game. He closed the door and leaned against it. Her voice on the other side startled him.

"Dad will go crazy when he sees it's gone, and he'll blame you because you stole before."

"The lyrico isn't real."

She said in a sing-song, "Yes he is." She hummed as she skipped away from the door, pausing to add, "The medallion is near the demon's door. He dares you to come get it."

The house went quiet too suddenly. She hadn't gone far enough to reach the front door or the kitchen. He got the idea she was standing somewhere in the hallway, waiting for him to emerge, so she could run off laughing. Hound gave an uneasy whine.

Levi cracked the door enough to look out. The hallway was empty. The air there felt hotter than seconds before.

"Nessa?" He hated how weak his voice sounded.

The frame of the house creaked as the wind whipped up from the cliff. He stepped into the hallway.

"lyrico." A voice not unlike that of his recently deceased grandmother moaned from the bedroom in which she died. *"No, please. Release me."* It was her voice but much fainter.

He knew the joke, then. Nessa would lure him to the bedroom, and jump out from the shadows. He shook his head. Too easy.

Bolder, now, he approached the doorway to the death room, stopping at the threshold when the bed came into view.

"I'm gone. Release me." The words, the voice almost wheezy, came from under the bed, still distant, and he wondered how Nessa was making the sound. It was so eerie and real.

Maybe she'd recorded their dying grandmother. Was Nessa capable of such cruelty? All for a prank she planned?

The dogs. He reminded himself. She had tried to get him killed. She was capable of anything.

"I know it's you. Come out. I'm going to tell Uncle Dean."

The wind shifted direction, pelting the house with sand, rattling the gutters. It was stronger than usual, Levi thought, angry.

His heart in his throat, he entered the room.

It moaned. She moaned. Whatever lay beneath the bed let a mournful, otherworldly sound he couldn't definitively identify as male or female. Could Nessa make a sound like that?

"You aren't scaring me." He insisted.

He glanced back to see the faithful hound had refused to follow his master. The dog hung his head shamefully, but the fear in his eyes was unmistakable.

"Don't tell me she's got you fooled." Levi knelt next to the bed to move the bed skirt away.

Too much light. That was his first thought. The room had no windows. No lamps pushed back the shadows. The only illumination came from the hallway behind him. Yet, he could see the patch of floor under the bed as easily as if the daylight had somehow traveled in from the front door, slithered down the hall to coil beneath this piece of furniture, the death bed.

Enveloped in the stark illumination, a long cloud of brown smoke swished back and forth. It swirled to form fleeting shapes, a hollow-eyed face here, a skeletal hand there, and they vanished so quickly Levi could barely make them out before they were gone.

Terror riveted him to the spot. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe. It had him, this mass of disease, and it moaned again. The outline of a hand formed once more, the smoke stopping its ebb and flow motion to build solidity, and the color of it darkened. Smokey tendrils became dense tangles of flesh, fingers spreading. Then came a shoulder, neck, and chin. It grabbed Levi's wrist.

He got hold of himself and kicked away, hitting the closet door behind him. He scrambled for the bedroom door, and he didn't need to look to know it was following.

Hound dodged his clumsy retreat, and they both made for the front door. It swung open easily to fresh air and sunshine, a world where the lycrigo didn't exist. He bolted out into the yard, stumbling onto the grass, blind until his eyes adjusted to the day. He landed on his hands and knees.

Between him and the driveway, a line of menacing dogs sat. They growled a chorus of malice, drooled at the prospect of tearing into Levi's flesh. The largest of them, a black mutt with a white stomach and a war-wounded face readied himself for a pounce.

Here, faced with his own kind, Hound found his courage. He put himself between Levi and the dogs. He crouched and growled louder than the rest. This was him giving his master a chance to escape.

Levi turned and struggled to his feet as he ran, around the side of the house where the shrill cries of dogs in battle collided with the roar of the ocean far below. His shoes slid in the soft mix of dirt and sand. He rounded the corner, and the endlessness of the ocean stole his breath. White-blue sky stretched before him, the void more terrible than ever. Death awaited there on the jagged rocks and the depths beyond.

Levi had nowhere to go. The demon inside. The dogs and the ocean outside. He wheeled in a circle, considering the woods to the side of the house. Maybe he could climb a tree.

A thump, a pulse trembled the ground, shook Levi down to his marrow. He froze, trying to figure out the direction from which it had come. It thumped again, a thing so deep, it moved the soil. Cracks formed from the base of the house, dark lines reaching for Levi's feet. He backed away, closer to the edge of the cliff.

A larger version of the same swirling cloud he had seen under the bed pushed against the windows. It stretched from one end of the house to the other, forming faces, then letting them go.

Pebbles crumbled from the wall. They tumbled down the stone, around the door straining against its latch. Pressure was building inside.

An explosion of darkness threw Levi to the ground. He landed hard on his back, near the edge of the cliff, in the dirt. Debris rained. He curled into a ball until the shower waned.

Feeling the expanse of ocean, the wide open space about to swallow him, he scooted away, through shards of glass all around, far too much glass to have come from the house. He hastily brushed it from his hair and the folds of his shirt as if it might bite him. He got to his feet.

The dark cloud had escaped the confines of Cliff House. It smothered all detail from the land and eddied around him, alive and coiling, twisting into shapes, then losing them just as easily. It smelled of sulfur, he thought, of campfire and rich, wet dirt.

Hound howled somewhere in the distance. It struck Levi, not as a sound of distress, but one of searching. The dog was lost in the fog on the other side of the house.

Aside from the howl and the crunch of his shoes on shards of glass, Levi could hear nothing else. The ocean had fallen silent, and no breeze whispered in the trees. The rest of the world had gone to sunnier places.

Cliff House always had an abandoned look to it, the way it slumped against the cliff and sagged in the middle. But with the windows gone, it had taken on a new level of dillapidation. The back door hung off to the side by its bottom hinge. Intense darkness lurked inside, like an inky curtain draped over all indications of human presence.

He stepped onto the back stairs. Inches away, he still could see nothing of the kitchen. He reached for the blackness. His hand passed through the veil of night with no resistance. He stepped inside.

The temperature dove to a dead cold. Once he crossed the threshold, he could make out a black and gray version of the interior of the house. The furniture, stripped of color, seemed false, like a mirage of itself.

The walls creaked. The floor hummed, a vibration coming from the junk room. He followed it to the source.

Grandma Mola had buried the demon's prison in mounds of junk. It was the same room from which she'd pulled the top she gave him. Had she known the lyrico was there all along?

Everything rattled and clanked and shook in the vibration. He moved closer, sticking to the path, stepping over whatever had fallen in his way.

Then he saw her.

Nessa in her dress, her eyes rolled back into her head, her mouth hanging agape, levitated inches above the floor. She was a ghost in the night, as pale as any corpse could strive to be. And though she remained perfectly still, she made a noise that was a mix of crying and shivering. Inky smoke coiled around her wrists.

"Nessa?" He asked, "Can you hear me?"

On the floor in front of her, he found the wooden planks broken away. A hole gaped. He looked inside.

A round, metal plate lay askew - the door to the demon's prison. The monster had opened the portal, but it didn't yet have the strength to step out completely. This manifestation of its spirit was a part of the whole. The rest, the full horror, waited to break free. He felt the lyrico staring up from the void.

A voice, a wheezing sound from a throat choked with rocks, told him, "Choose."

Memories flooded his mind, a slightly younger version of his cousin getting him in trouble, the current version of her snipping, snapping, tattling, and locking him out for the stray dogs. She taunted him. These visions were intended to rile Levi. The demon forced an image of Nessa's face contorted in anger. She screamed at him, told him how much she wanted him to die.

The haze constricted around them. His thin view of the house vanished.

"Choose." It spoke again.

The lyrico was a monster conceived in a moment of hatred. It sought the same emotion from Levi. It needed hate to escape its curse.

Levi threw his arm around his cousin's waist and twisted away. She was lighter than he expected, and she broke free easily, and then he was running through the house, dragging her by her arms while she leaned on his back for support.

Cliff House shuddered down to its frame as if an earthquake had taken hold. He pushed through, kept his feet moving against the buckling floor. An avalanche of dishes slid from the cabinets to break on the counter and the floor. Levi dodged the table. He cleared a chair with the demon on his heels. Its exhalation, the rage pouring from its mouth, infected the air. It screamed in the voices of many, and the house went black.

Levi lost his bearings, so he stopped running. He turned in a circle, looking for some sign he was still part of the living world and still in Cliff House.

"Levi?" Nessa awoke. She stood on her own, "What is this place? Where are we?"

Hound barked in the front yard. Levi grabbed her hand. They followed the sound for a distance that seemed too long. Without seeing his surroundings, he began to doubt they were heading the right direction. He stopped. Hound continued to bark, but now the sound seemed to come from all around.

The floor shook harder, too violently for them to continue to run. Nessa clung to him.

"Why is this happening?" She asked.

A glimmer of light shone in the direction from which they'd just come. It twinkled like a star, its rays stretching toward them. Illumination spread along the floor to reveal a clawed monster in silhouette, dragging itself toward them. Nessa screamed.

He turned to try and run again but the pitch of the floor sent him sprawling. It slanted, back toward the approaching demon.

As the light beyond swallowed the darkness, it took on the white-blue of the sky. It consumed the floor, now crumbling away from them, into the ocean far below. The walls of Cliff House reverberated with a sound like the roar of a train growing closer, and the light grew brighter. The lyrico shrieked.

Again, Levi made for the front door, the direction he hoped was right. He hauled Nessa along with him, tripped, and ran again, until he struck a hard surface. He felt for the knob and found it. The door opened. Hands gripped his arms and the front of Nessa's dress, and hauled them the rest of the way through.

Levi's mother and Nessa's father scooped them up and ran with Hound alongside them. The ground dissolved, taking the house with it and the grass and the well. They passed the car for the driveway where leaves rained from shaking trees.

And then, all of a sudden, the world went still. The five of them fell into a heap, everyone holding each other as they waited to see if the disaster had passed. In the silence that reigned, the only movement was the last of the leaves fluttering to the pavement.

Levi stood. He started toward the new edge of the world.

"No. It's too dangerous." His mother held his hand.

"I have to see."

She let him go.

The collapse had stopped several feet out from the car. He looked over the side.

A pile of rubble lay at the bottom of the cliff. He made out shingles from the roof and wooden beams. The house had become part of the Iyrico's prison. Afterward, he would wonder if Cliff House had developed some sentient desire to hold the demon, or if the earth sought to keep it from claiming any more victims. It was an unnatural thing. Mankind had no need of more evil.

"What if it gets free?" Nessa appeared next to him.

Levi shook his head, "It's too weak. It needed hate to build strength."

"It was the Iyrico, wasn't it? I saw it in my dream."

"Yeah."

His mother and his Uncle Dean joined them, as did Hound, who sat at Levi's side.

Dean said, "I don't suppose that offer for us to stay with you is still on the table."

Levi was okay with the idea. He didn't mind his cousin so much anymore.

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