

LUCY STRANGE

Our
Castle
by the
Sea

Chicken House

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On the very first day of the war, Mags came home with a split lip. Her eye socket was swollen too and promised to ripen into a large, plum-colored bruise. Her knuckles were red and grazed.

“What happened, Mags?” I gasped. “Was it one of the girls at school?” But my sister ignored me, storming down the footpath and into the cottage through the kitchen door.

Mags is a fiery sort of person. Living with her is a bit

like living with a half-tamed tornado, but for all her fierce temper she had never been in a proper fight before. Mutti made her sit down at the kitchen table. She gently bathed my sister's eye, lip, and knuckles with warm water and witch hazel.

I hovered just inside the door, watching.

"Tell me who did this, please, Magda," my mother said quietly.

"It doesn't really matter who did it," Mags muttered. "It could have been any of them. They were all saying the same thing."

"What were they saying?"

But Mags just drew in a long, shaky breath and would say nothing.

I could see Mutti's eyes were brimming with tears. She blinked them back, wiped her hands on her apron, and then got on with preparing dinner. She pushed her hair from her face with her forearm and quickly chopped an onion. I wondered if she really needed to chop an onion for dinner or if she just wanted to have something to blame her tears on.

Pa took Mags outside into the darkening garden, and I followed a little way behind. I picked up the watering can and made myself look busy tending to the vegetables.

Mags and Pa stood near the fence at the bottom of the garden, talking quietly—or rather, Pa was talking quietly

and Mags was just staring at the ground with her arms folded across her chest. She kicked at the grass with the toe of one shoe. After a while I heard her say, “You didn’t hear them, Pa. You didn’t hear what they said about Mutti.”

There’s something you should know about my family and, specifically, about Mutti. You might already be wondering why we call her Mutti and not Mum or Mother. Mutti was born in Germany and grew up there. German is her first language, and she taught it to us too. *Mutter* is German for mother. The fact that our Mutti had been born in Germany was never important to us—it was normal after all, as normal to us as living in a lighthouse—but now that the war had started, other people seemed to think it was very important indeed.

Mutti called us all in to dinner, and we sat around the kitchen table in silence. Mags touched the corner of her lip and inspected her finger to see if it was still bleeding. It wasn’t like a normal dinnertime. There was something else at the table with us—something tense and waiting, like a gun that had been cocked but not yet fired—the fizzing gunpowder trail of the conversation Pa and Mags had started but not finished.

My sister had a library book in her lap—*Essential Motorboat Maintenance*—but her eyes didn’t seem to be focusing on the pages as she turned them over.

Pa moved his chair closer to Mags and leaned towards

her a little. She pretended to be very interested in a diagram of a propeller. Mutti and I pretended to be very interested in our dinner. Mags frowned down at her book, refusing to look at Pa.

“You’re too old for playground scraps, Magda,” he said. “You’re nearly sixteen now.” Then he sighed, and when he spoke again his voice was softer. “Try to let it go, Mags,” he said. “Next time they start saying things like that, just try to let it go.”

Mags said nothing.

“You have *a choice*,” he went on. “You don’t have to react.”

“You’re right, Pa,” Mags said at last, closing her book and turning to look him dead in the eye. “I have a choice.”

And the conversation was over.

After dinner, Mags shut herself in our bedroom. She wanted to be by herself, so I took my sketchbook up to the lantern room. *Perhaps I’ll draw the sunset*, I thought. There were some wonderfully dramatic clouds that evening—dark and jagged against the red sky.

You can see the Daughters of Stone from the top of our lighthouse. In fact, it feels as if you can see the whole world from up here. On a clear day you can see right across the yawning sea to the outline of the French coast.

The harbor is down there to the right, and our village, Stonegate, is tucked away just behind it, in the lee of the cliffs. When the tide is out, you can just see Dragon Bay—that long, thin, sandy beach below the chalky south cliff that runs most of the way from here to Dover. If you turn and look the other way, the English farmland stretches out in an enormous patchwork of green and gold—hundreds of oddly shaped fields all stitched together with hedgerows and dark woodland. Little groups of houses cluster around church spires, clinging to the roads that thread between the fields.

Because there are windows all the way around the lantern room, you can keep turning and turning, and soon the sea and fields, sea and fields, sea and fields become a blue-green blur, and you have to sit down.

If you go through the door and out onto the walkway, and if you are brave enough to look down, you will see the standing stones beneath you. The wind out there is nearly always fierce and blustering, even in the summer. The four stones wrap around the seaward side of the lighthouse like part of an enormous clock face, half-buried in the green turf of the clifftop. I think the stones are the main reason that our lighthouse has always been known as the Castle. From a distance, the Daughters of Stone seem to be buttresses or guard towers, or even stony sentinels, facing out towards the sea and the storms, watching for enemies.

I had always liked the fact that there were four standing stones, just like the four of us—Mutti and Pa, Mags and me. The symmetry pleased me—each of us had our own stone. The smallest one was mine—farthest to the left, pointed at the top like a diamond. When we were little, Mags and I would pretend the stones were mountains to climb, or islands in a sea churning with predators—and we would use ropes and rocks and bits of wood to get from one stone to the next without getting our legs bitten off. I remember Mags brandishing a toy sword, using it to slash at the slimy tentacles that had twisted around me and were dragging me down into the inky, blood-black depths of the ocean . . . Pa told us to be careful. He said the stones were *megaliths*, they were thousands of years old and if we wanted them to last another thousand years, we probably shouldn't be scrabbling about all over them.

Pa said people who were experts on megaliths had all sorts of theories about the stones—ideas to do with druids and rituals and the summer solstice. They believed the stones must have come from another part of England altogether, or maybe even France; they aren't local rock, as our cliffs are chalky and these stones glitter with granite.

I've dozed in the long grass between the stones on many a summer's afternoon. I've lain there for hours, listening to the lullaby of the sea and watching the slowly dimming sky.

Mags doesn't believe me, but I've heard them singing—on those still, dark dawns, when the sun struggles to rise through the fret or the fog. It's a strange, distant ghost song, high and resonant, like four different tuning forks buzzing their soft notes from deep within the rock. It feels as if they are singing only to me.

Sometimes I speak to the stones—a sort of whispered, pagan prayer. I remember doing that on the evening of Magda's fight. As I drew their four, rain-rounded shapes and the dark daggers of cloud that hung above them, I asked the stones to protect my Mutti and my Pa, and my stupid, surly sister. I have always believed that the Daughters somehow guarded our Castle, and in a way I think they do, but I know now that it is much more complicated than that. This sort of old magic is not loyal to anyone or anything. It has its own laws. It is as cold and unknowable as an ancient god.