

THE DARK TOME
SEASON 1, EPISODE 1

Featuring "THE DEVIL ON THE STAIRCASE"
By JOE HILL

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Draft 6
9-12-2016

MUSIC - Theme of THE DARK TOME, eerie, sense of mystery,
wonder

Cassie speaks directly to listener, pleading us to understand

CASSIE

(NARRATING) You know that phrase,
'books are a gateway to the
imagination'? Well, imagine it was
true. Literally true. Yeah I know,
it's the oldest cliché out there.
You forget that when you were
young, books were like that. No
matter where you were, no matter
what was going on in the real
world, when you opened a book, read
those words... you could go to
other worlds..

And if you've forgotten that, if
you think imagination is a toy to
be locked in a box when the grownup
world comes crashing in with
student loans, 30-year mortgages
and retirement accounts, then you
must never have heard the legend of
The Dark Tome. I mean, I never had
either, not until that May, when I
was spending my suspension reading
to Mr. Gussy in the stale air of
Thompson's Memorial Hospital.

THEME OUT - crossfades to...

1

INT. NURSING HOME - DAY

1

FX - Medical equipment

CASSIE

(READING) It was Wilson; but he
spoke no longer in a whisper; and I
could have fancied that I myself
was speaking while he said -- "You
have conquered, and I yield. Yet
henceforward art thou also dead --
dead to the world and its hopes. In
me didst thou exist -- and, in my
death, see by this image, which is
thine own, how utterly thou hast
murdered thyself.

FX - Cassie closes book.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
Mr. Gussy? (BEAT) Mr. Gussy?

GUSSY
(WAKING) Wha! What is that crap?
Get it out of here.

CASSIE
Mr. Gussy, sorry, it was, uh -

GUSSY
Poe. Goddamn Edgar. Allen. Poe.
Come on Cassie, you know I hate
that guy, long winded and overrated
if you ask me. Couldn't you find
the book I told you about?

CASSIE
You told me to fetch you a---

GUSSY
I told you to bring me the Dark
Tome, Not that crap. Give me that
book.

CASSIE
Okay...

Fx - CASSIE HANDS A BOOK TO GUSSY. GUSSY STARTS RIPPING OUT
PAGES

CASSIE (CONT'D)
Mr. Gussy! What are you doing?

GUSSY
"What say of conscience grim
indeed." I told you, the book I
wanted, it would've had gold
letters, the spine as smooth and
white as my pale Anglo ass. It
would look alive.

CASSIE
I didn't see any book like that.

GUSSY
Gah! What am I paying you for?

CASSIE
You're not. I volunteered...

GUSSY
Penance 'cause you ripped the hair
out of that stupid girl.
(MORE)

GUSSY (CONT'D)

Don't worry, she deserved it. Have you seen the nurse? Good God, they are trying to starve me in here. Nurse? NURSE!

CASSIE

You have that clicker, right there...

GUSSY

Next you'll tell me I need to get an "App" to get decent service around here. What did I pay into my pension for, if not to get a little help when I was on my deathbed?

CASSIE

You had a surgery, Mr. Gussy. You'll be out of here in a week.

GUSSY

Not if they kill me first with this horrible food. NURSE!

CASSIE

I've got to go, Mr. Gussy.

GUSSY

Where to? You got a date?

CASSIE

No.

GUSSY

It's gotta be something good, you think I'm gonna cover for you again, after what you pulled last time?

CASSIE

What do you mean, if that nurse says I left early, Mrs. Pearson will flay me a --

GUSSY

(LAUGHS) I'm just messing with you. Go on, get outta here. I got your back.

FX - Steps trot in.

NURSE

Is everything okay?

GUSSY

It is not. You trying to kill me here?

NURSE

Excuse me?

GUSSY

This grape juice. You try drinking it lately? It's despicable.

NURSE

We'd still be giving you milk if you hadn't snuck coffee brandy into the last carton.

GUSSY

Need something to take the edge off, don't I? You won't even give me the good stuff.

Cassie is now perfect school-girl.

CASSIE

Bye, Mr. Gussy.

NURSE

Leaving so soon, Cassie?

CASSIE

I'm sorry. Got homework to do.

NURSE

Oh?

GUSSY

I told her she read me plenty for the day. She told me one of my favorite stories, "William Wilson."

NURSE

Of course. See you tomorrow, dear.

CASSIE

Bye!

FX - GUSSY FADES AS CASSIE TROTS AWAY

GUSSY

You ever sit in one of these cots? The blankets, I swear, you make 'em out of sandpaper.

(MORE)

GUSSY (CONT'D)

And I should know, I worked in the
Number Ten Mill for thirty years,
used sandpaper in the work shop for
a good ten of 'em.

2

INT. MR. GUSSY'S BOOKSHOP - DAY

2

CASSIE

(narrating)

But of course I didn't have any
homework to do - I'd been kicked
out of school for two weeks
already. But I didn't go home,
either. I couldn't. She'd be with
him, drinking, and... Things got
bad when they got drinking.

So that left me with Mr. Gussy's
Book shop. The spare key was
tucked away in the brass bell
outside, next to the Plexiglass
poster of Stephen King's "Misery."
It was that poster, and the strange
mummified hand -- Mr. Gussy said it
was a monkey's - next to it, that
kept most of the local kids out of
the place. They made up stories,
dared each other to go in, swipe a
book. Some said there was a time,
maybe thirty years ago, when a kid
went in and never came out again. I
never believe stories like that.

FX - JANGLE, DOOR SWING OPEN, STEPS, BOOKCASE OPENING, ETC.
FOLLOW ACTION

CASSIE (CONT'D)

(NARRATING) The place was filled
with paperback novels, stacks of
them, with bone-like creases on
their spines, names like Koontz,
Matheson, Bradbury. You'd walk
past those, worried section Z for
zombies would fall on your head, to
get to the antique wooden desk in
back. Pull back the creaky leather
chair, roll up the thrift shop rug,
and lift the trapdoor. Go down to
the basement, where the walls
got... wobbly.

3

INT. BACK OF GUSSY'S BOOKSHOP - DAY

3

FX - LOW HUM, SUPERNATURAL ENERGY

CASSIE

Down here, no one ever bothered me. I could have my blanket and curl up with a book and be taken away. There were plenty to choose from.... hardcovers, some with a film of dust you could write your name in, ran near to the ceiling. But there was only one book that really mattered. The Dark Tome.

FX - CASSIE SCUFFLES PAST SOME BOOKS, SETTLES ON ONE

CASSIE (CONT'D)

Of course I already knew about the book. He had told me where to find it, with impeccable instructions. I had already picked it up, felt the spine that rumor said was stitched from the skins of murdered babies. I had opened it long enough to read a few words, and feel how as the words parted my lips, the book's lettering faintly glowed, and the must of the basement faded away for the smell the salt of distant seas. Mom and school and Mr. Gussy and that gossipy bitch Cathy Skillings faded into nothingness. Last time I'd opened it, I'd shut it immediately. But now I was ready. I opened the Dark Tome.

(READING) The Devil on the Staircase, by Joe Hill.

MUSIC - OMINOUS, LURES US INTO THE STORY

CASSIE (CONT'D)

(IN SCENE) It goes - I was born in Sulle Scale, the child of a common bricklayer.

CROSSFADE CASSIE AND NARRATOR.

NARRATOR

The village of my birth nested in the highest sharpest ridges, high above Positano, and in the cold spring the clouds crawled along the streets like a procession of ghosts. It was eight hundred and twenty steps from from Sulle Scale to the world below. I know. I walked them again and again with my father, following his tread, from our home in the sky, and then back again. After his death I walked them often enough alone.

4

EXT. ITALIAN CLIFFSIDE - NIGHT

4

FX - SOUND DESIGN - LIGHT - IMMERSSED THROUGHOUT, THE RELENTLESS WHIP OF THE WIND, OCCASIONALLY GOATS BEING ESCORTED PAST, BLEATING.

CASSIE

It - it worked! Holy crap it worked! There it is - the little village.. um... What did they call it? Posi- Posi, ehhhh---

NARRATOR

Positano.

CASSIE

(SHRIEKS)

NARRATOR

(CHUCKLES) No need to be frightened, little girl.

CASSIE

Who are you?

NARRATOR

A boy who used to live in this village. Ah, well I suppose I'm not a boy anymore. Look at it... The olive orchard, the ocean. The stairs. I knew each step of those stairs very well.

CASSIE

What happens now?

NARRATOR

Well, you continue reading, or...
 (BEAT) I don't know. It is up to
 you, I have all the time in the
 world.

CASSIE

Ah... Okay... Well, the next bit,
 it goes, "Up and down I walked
 those stairs, carrying freight -"

NARRATOR

Yes! Up and down I walked those
 stairs, carrying freight until with
 each step it seemed as if the bones
 in my knees were being ground up
 into sharp white splinters. (ASIDE)
 Are you coming with me?

CASSIE

What?

NARRATOR

Follow me now, girl. Yes, here we
 go. I have a story to tell you.

FX - Start climbing down stairs.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

The cliffs were mazed with crooked
 staircases, made from brick in some
 places, granite in others. Marble
 here, limestone there, clay tiles,
 or beams of lumber. When there
 were stairs to build, my father
 built them. When the steps were
 washed out by spring rains it fell
 to him to repair them. For years
 he had a donkey to carry his stone.
 After it fell dead, he had me.

CUTAWAY:

YOUNG MAN and FATHER have a heated exchange in Italian.
 Something like, "Father I am tired," "You will work or you
 will die!" And then:

FX - SLACK, SLACK OF BRICKS BEING LAID.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I hated him, of course, he had his cats and he sang to them and poured them saucers of milk and told them foolish stories and stroked them in his lap and when one time I kicked one - I do not remember why - he kicked me to the floor and said not to touch his babies. So I carried his rocks when I should have been carrying schoolbooks, but I cannot pretend I hated him for that. I had no use for school, hated to study, hated to read, felt acutely the stifling heat of the single room schoolhouse, the only good thing in it my cousin, Lithodora, who read to the little children, sitting on a stool with her back erect, chin lifted high, and her white throat showing.

DORA

(READING IN ITALIAN)

LAUGHTER OF SCHOOLCHILDREN.

CASSIE

(ASIDE) She's lovely.

NARRATOR

Yes... I thought so too. I often imagined her throat was as cool as the marble altar in our church and I wanted to rest my brow upon it as I had the altar. How she read in her low steady voice, the very voice you dream of calling to you when you're sick, saying you will be healthy again and know only the sweet fever of her body. I could've loved books if I had her to read them to me, besides me in my bed.

I knew every step of the stairs between Sulle Scale and Positano, long flights that descended through canyons and tunnels bored in Limestone, past orchards and the ruins of derelict paper mills, past waterfalls and green pools.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I walked those stairs when I slept, in my dreams. The trail my father and I walked most often led past a painted red gate, barring the way to a crooked staircase. I thought those steps led to a private villa and paid the gate no mind until the day I paused on the way down with a load of marble and leaned on it to rest and it swung open to my touch.

FX - HEAVY GRANITE DOOR CREAKS, MAGICAL TWINKLING, A HUMMING ENERGY BUBBLES UP FROM WITHIN. IN THE BACKGROUND, BOY'S FATHER CALLS OUT TO HIM

FATHER

(excited words in Italian, off)

NARRATOR

My father, he lagged thirty or so stairs behind me. I stepped through the gate onto the landing to see where these stairs led. I saw no villa or vineyard below, only the staircase falling away from me down among the sheerest of sheer cliffs.

YOUNG MAN

Father!

NARRATOR

I called out as he came near, the slap of his feet echoing off the rocks and his breath whistling out of him.

YOUNG MAN

Have you ever taken these stairs?

NARRATOR

When he saw me standing outside the gate he paled and had my shoulder in an instant. He hauled me back onto the main staircase and called out

FX - SOUND OF THE CLIFFS RISES UP IN THE MIX, BRINGS US INTO 'SCENE' SPACE

FATHER

How did you open the red gate?

YOUNG MAN

It was open when I got here. Don't they lead all the way down to the sea?

FATHER

No.

YOUNG MAN

But it looks as if they go all the way to the bottom.

FATHER

They go farther than that.
(MURMURS A PRAYER IN ITALIAN) The gate is always locked. Always.

NARRATOR

And he stared at me, the whites of his eyes showing. I had never seen him look at me so, had never thought I would see him afraid of me.

MUSIC - Changes in tenor

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Lithodora laughed when I told her and said my father was old and superstitious. She told me that there was a tale that the stairs beyond the painted gate led down to hell. I had walked the mountain a thousand times more than Lithodora and wanted to know how she could know such a story when I myself had never heard any mention of it. She said the old folks never spoke of it, but had written the story down in a history of the region, which I would know if I had ever read any of the teacher's assignments. I told her I could never concentrate on books when she was in the same room with me. She laughed. But when I tried to touch her throat she flinched.

My fingers brushed her breast instead and she was angry and she told me that I needed to wash my hands.

CASSIE

Sounds like some boys I know.
 Except today no one would have the
 decency to wash their hands. Hey.
 We're on the stairs again. Is that

-

NARRATOR

My father. It's a grisly little
 moment.

FX - Suddenly a cat MEOWS! Person (descending stairs) loses
 purchase, falls, screaming, wet THLACK! When head hits rock

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Rather than stop on the stray cat,
 my father stepped out into air and
 fell fifty feet. After that day, I
 found a more lucrative use for my
 donkey legs and yardarm shoulders
 than hauling those horrid tiles. I
 entered the employ of Don Carlotta,
 who kept a terraced vineyard in the
 steeps of Sulle Scale.

I hauled his wine the eight hundred
 odd steps to Positano, where it was
 sold to a rich Saracen, a prince it
 was told, dark and slender and more
 fluent in my language than myself,
 a clever young man who knew how to
 read things: musical notes, the
 stars, a map, a sextant. Once I
 stumbled on a flight of brick steps
 as I was making my way down with
 the Don's wine and a strap slipped
 and the crate on my back struck the
 cliff wall and a bottle was
 smashed.

FX - SMASH OF BOTTLE

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I brought it to the Saracen on the
 quay.

AHMED

What is this?

YOUNG MAN

Your bottle, sir, I slipped on the
 rocks --

AHMED

Or you drank it. Or you should have. That bottle was worth all you make in a month.

YOUNG MAN

Pardon, sir, but my wages -

AHMED

Are considered paid. And consider yourself paid well. (LAUGHS) Now go.

NARRATOR

As he laughed, his white teeth flashed in his black face.

5

INT. ITALIAN TAVERN - NIGHT

5

NARRATOR

I was sober when he laughed at me but soon enough had a head full of wine. Not Don Carlotta's smooth and peppery red mountain wine but the cheapest Chianti in the Taverna, which I drank with a passel of unemployed friends. Lithodora found me after it was dark and she stood over me, her dark hair framing her cool, white beautiful, disgusted, loving face. She said she had the silver I was owed.

FX - Loud tavern

YOUNG MAN

(drunk)

What do you mean you have the money? The pig told me --

DORA

I told Ahmed he had insulted an honest man, and that my family trades in hard labor, not lies. I told him was lucky that I had not --

YOUNG MAN

Did you call him a friend, A monkey of the desert who knows nothing of Christ the Lord?

FRIENDS in the tavern laugh

NARRATOR

The way that she looked at me then made me ashamed. The way she put the money in front of me made me more ashamed.

DORA

I see you have more use for this than you have for me.

FX - JINGLE OF CHANGE PURSE.

FRIENDS jeer

NARRATOR

I almost got up to go after her. Almost. One of my friends asked --

FRIEND 1

Have you heard the Saracen gave your cousin a slave bracelet, a loop of silver bells, to wear around her ankle? I suppose in the Arab lands, such gifts are made to every new whore in the harem.

FX - BOY RISES, HURRIED, KICKING OVER A CHAIR AND MAKING A COMMOTION.

Man Grabs Friend by throat, who gurgles.

YOUNG MAN

You lie! Her father would never allow her to accept such a gift from a godless blackamoor.

FRIEND 2

He speaks the truth! The Arab trader is godless no more. Lithodora has taught Ahmed to read Latin.

YOUNG MAN

No...

FRIEND 2

He claims now to have entered into the light of Christ, and he gave the bracelet to her with the full knowledge of her parents, as a way to show thanks for introducing him to the grace of our Father who art.

NARRATOR

When my first friend had recovered his breath, he told me

FRIEND 1

Lithodora climbs the stairs every night to meet with the Saracen in empty shepherds' huts or in the caves.

FRIEND 2

I heard it's among the ruins of the paper mills.

FRIEND 1

Or sometimes by the roar of the waterfall, wherever they can meet in secret, and in such places she is his tutor and he a firm and most demanding pupil.

YOUNG MAN

Tell me more of this.

FRIEND 1

He always goes first and then she ascends the stairs in the dark, wearing the jangling bracelet. When he hears the bells he lights a candle to show her where he waits to begin the lesson.

FRIEND 2

Perhaps she will teach another lesson tonight.

FX - TAVERN FADES, REPLACED BY THE WHIPPING WIND.

EXT. ITALY CLIFFS - NIGHT

CASSIE

We're on the cliffs again. What are we doing out here? It's cold.

NARRATOR

I was so drunk. I set out for Lithodora's house, with no idea what I meant to do when I got there. I came up behind the cottage where she lived with her parents, thinking I would throw a few stones to wake her and bring her to her window.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

But as I stole toward the back of
the house I heard a silvery
tinkling somewhere above me.

FX - TINKLING OF BRACELET FOLLOWS NARRATION - ethereal,
almost magical sounding

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

She was already on the stairs and
climbing into the stars with her
white dress swinging from her hips
and the bracelet around her ankle
so bright in the gloom. My heart
thudded, a cask flung down a
staircase:

FX - TO GO WITH NARRATION - THUMP THUMP THUMP

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Doom doom doom doom. I knew the
hills better than anyone and I ran
another way, making a steep climb
up crude steps of mud to get ahead
of her, then rejoining the main
path up to Sulle Scale. I still
had the silver coin the Saracen had
given her, when she went to him and
dishonored me by begging him to pay
me the wage I was properly owed.

I put his silver in a tin cup I had
and slowed to a walk and went along
shaking his Judas coin in my old
battered mug. Such a pretty
ringing it made in the echoing
canyons, on the stairs, in the
night, high above Positano and the
crash and sigh of the sea, as the
tide consummated the desire of
water to pound the earth into
submission.

At last, pausing to catch my
breath, I saw a candleflame leap up
off in the darkness. It was in a
handsome ruin, a place of high
granite walls matted with
wildflowers and ivy.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

A vast entryway looked into a room with a grass floor and a roof of stars, as if the place had been built, not to give shelter from the natural world, but to protect a virgin corner of wildness from the violation of man. Then again it seemed a pagan place, the natural setting for an orgy hosted by fauns with their goaty hooves, their flutes and their furred cocks. So the archway into that private courtyard of weeds and summer green seemed the entrance to a hall awaiting revelers for a private bacchanal. He waited on spread blanket, with a bottle of the Dom's wine and some books and he smiled at the tinkling sound of my approach but stopped when I came into the light, a block of rough stone already in my free hand.

AHMED

You have come.

NARRATOR

Yes.

CASSIE

No!

FX - whack! Whack! Whack! With brick

AHMED

(DIES)

MUSIC - Darker, somber (sober) tone

NARRATOR

I did not kill him out of family honor or jealousy, did not hit him with the stone because he had laid claim to Lithodora's cool white body, which she would never offer me. I hit him with the block of stone because I hated his black face.

After I stopped hitting him, I sat with him.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I think I took his wrist to see if he had a pulse, but after I knew he was dead, I went on holding his hand, listening to the hum of the crickets in the grass, as if he were a small child, my child, who had only drifted off after fighting sleep for a very long time.

What brought me out of my stupor was the sweet music of bells coming up the stairs toward us. I leapt up and ran but Dora was already there, coming through the doorway, and I nearly struck her on my way by.

She reached out for me with one of her delicate white hands and said my name but I did not stop. I took the stairs three at a time, running without thought, but I was not fast enough and I heard her when she shouted his name, once and again.

DORA

Ahmed! Ahmed!

NARRATOR

I don't know where I was running. Sulle Scale, maybe, though I knew they would look for me there first once Lithodora went down the steps and told them what I had done to the Arab. I did not slow down until I was gulping for air and my chest was filled with fire and then I leaned against a gate at the side of the path - you know what gate - and it swung open at first touch.

FX - Granite door swings open, low energy hum from within.

CASSIE

I don't want to go down there.

NARRATOR

But you know it's where the story goes. Besides, I thought, "No one will look for me here and I can hide a while."

CASSIE

No.

NARRATOR

No - I thought... These stairs will lead to the road and I will head north to Napoli and buy a ticket for a ship headed to the US and take a new name, and start a new -

CASSIE

No.

NARRATOR

(smiling)

No. Enough. The truth. I believed the stairs led down into hell and hell was where I wanted to go.

FX - Steps down deep cavern, cautiously.

INT. STAIRS TO HELL

NARRATOR

See how the steps are first of white stone? Soon they grow sooty and dark. And see all those other staircases? How they merge with this one? It's quite a mystery. Or, it was then. I had walked all the flights of stairs in these hills, except for this one, and I couldn't think for the life of me where those other staircases might be coming from.

FX - Soundscape of the caverns is increasingly ominous - some low groans from below.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I remember it quite clearly. The forest around me had been purged by fire in the not so far-off past, and I made my descent through stands of scorched, shattered pines, the hillside all blackened and charred. Only there had been no fire on that part of the hill, not far as long as I could remember. The breeze carried on it an unmistakable warmth. I began to feel unpleasantly overheated in my clothes.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I followed the staircase round a switchback and saw below me a boy sitting on a stone landing.

He had a collection of curious wares spread on a blanket. There was a wind-up tin bird in a cage, a basket of white apples, a dented gold lighter. There was a jar and in the jar was light. This light would increase in brightness until the landing was lit as if by the rising sun, and then it would collapse into darkness, shrinking to a single point like some impossibly brilliant lightning bug.

He smiled to see me. He had golden hair and the most beautiful smile I have ever seen on a child's face... and I was afraid of him - even before he called out to me by name. I pretended I didn't hear him, pretended he wasn't there, that I didn't see him, walked right past him. He laughed to see me hurrying by.

FX - SOUND DESIGN OF CHILD LAUGHING AS FOOTSTEPS HURRY PAST - BIG STONE STEPS, WARBLY HALLUCINOGENIC SOUND ENVIRONMENT

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

The farther I went the steeper it got. There seemed to be a light below, as if somewhere beyond a ledge, through the trees, there was a great city, on the scale of Roma, a bowl of lights like a bed of embers, I could smell food cooking on the breeze. If it was food. That hungry- making perfume of meat charring over flame.

FX - DISTANT HOWLS OF THE DAMNED, OTHER EERIE VOICES AS PER NARRATION

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Voices ahead of me: a man speaking wearily, perhaps to himself, a long and joyless discourse; someone else laughing, bad laughter, unhinged and angry. A third man was asking questions.

VOICE

Is a plum sweeter after it has been pushed into the mouth of a virgin to silence her as she is taken? And who will claim the child made from the rotten carcass of the lamb that laid with the lion only to be eviscerated?

NARRATOR

And so on.

At the next turn in the steps they finally came into sight. They lined the stairs: half a dozen men nailed on to crosses of blackened pine. I couldn't go on and for a time I couldn't go back; it was the cats. One of the men had a crack in his skull, a red seeping wound that made a puddle on the stairs, and kittens lapped at it as if it were cream and he was talking to them in his tired voice.

FATHER

Good kitties, good kitty-kitties, drink your fill, father will always feed you. Father will keep you warm.

NARRATOR

I did not go close enough to see his face. I returned the way I had come on shaky legs. The boy awaited me with his collection of oddities.

BOY

Why not sit and rest your sore feet, Quirinus Calvino?

NARRATOR

I sat down across from him, not because I wanted to, but because that was where my legs gave out.

INT. ON THE STAIRS - NIGHT

FX - SOUND DESIGN SEEMS TO REINFORCE 'GIVE OUT' - THE MELANCHOLY STOPS AND SETTLES IN A THROBBING THRUM.

CASSIE

Oh, Oh God...

NARRATOR

My regrets, Girl, but God did not enter this place.

BOY

Would you like a drink of water?

YOUNG MAN

No thank you.

BOY

Are you worried about taking something from me? No need. I would love to offer you a gift. It's no trouble at all.

NARRATOR

There was a light in a jar that grew, a single floating point of perfect whiteness, growing from a pinprick until it swelled like a balloon. I tried to look at it, but felt a pinch of pain in the back of my eyeballs and glanced away.

FX - DISTANT SOUNDS OF HELL

YOUNG MAN

What is that? It burns my eyes.

BOY

A little spark stolen from the sun. You can do all sorts of wonderful things with it. You could make a furnace with it, a giant furnace, powerful enough to warm a whole city, and light a thousand Edison lights. Look how bright it gets. You have to be careful though. If you smash this jar and let the spark escape, that same city would disappear in a clap of brightness. You can have it if you want.

YOUNG MAN

No I don't want it.

BOY

No, of course not. That isn't your sort of thing. No matter.

(MORE)

BOY (CONT'D)

Someone will be along later for this. But take something. Anything you want.

YOUNG MAN

Are you Lucifer?

BOY

Lucifer is an awful old goat who has a pitchfork and hooves and makes people suffer. I hate suffering. I only want to help people. I give gifts. That's why I'm here. Everyone who walks these stairs before their time gets a gift to welcome them. You look thirsty. Would you like an apple? They are most beautiful apples.

NARRATOR

I was thirsty - my throat felt not just sore, but singed, as if I had inhaled smoke recently, and I began to reach for the offered fruit, almost reflexively, but then drew my hand back for I knew the lessons of at least one book. He grinned at me.

YOUNG MAN

Are those from the garden --

BOY

They're from a very old and honorable tree. You will never taste a sweeter fruit. And when you eat of it, you will be filled with ideas. Yes, even one such as you, Quirinus Calvino, who barely learned to read.

YOUNG MAN

I don't want it.

BOY

Everyone will want it. They will eat and eat and be filled with understanding. Why, learning how to speak another language will be as simple as, oh, learning to build a bomb. Just one bite of the apple away.

FX - Boy picks up a lighter.

BOY (CONT'D)

What about the lighter? You can light anything with the lighter. A cigarette, A pipe. A campfire. Imaginations. Revolutions. Books. Rivers. The sky. Another man's soul. The lighter has an enchantment on it, is tapped into the deepest wells of oil on the planet, and will set fires that will burn for as long as the oil lasts, which I am sure will be forever.

YOUNG MAN

You have nothing I want.

BOY

I have something for everyone.

NARRATOR

I rose to my feet, ready to leave, though I had nowhere to go. I couldn't walk back down the stairs. The thought made me dizzy. Neither could I go back up. Lithodora would have returned to the village by now. They would be searching the stairs for me with torches. I was surprised I hadn't heard them already.

FX - MECHANICAL BIRD SOUNDS ACCOMPANY NARRATION

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

But there was one more thing - a mechanical tin bird that turned its head to look at me as I swayed on my heels, and blinked, the metal shutters of its eyes snapping closed, then popping open again. It let out a rusty cheep. So did I, startled by its sudden movement. I had thought it a toy, inanimate. It watched me steadily and I stared back. I had, as a child, always had an interest in ingenious mechanical objects, clockwork people who ran out of their hiding places at the stroke of noon, the woodcutter to chop wood, the maiden to dance a round. The boy followed my gaze, and smiled, then opened the cage and reach in for it.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

The bird leaped lightly onto his finger.

FX - Cage springs open and mechanical bird hops.

BOY

This bird sings the most beautiful song. It finds a master, a shoulder it likes to perch on, and it sings for this person all the rest of its days. The trick to making it sing for you is to tell a lie. The bigger the better. Feed it a lie, and it will sing you the most marvelous little tune. People love to hear its song. They love it so much, they don't even care they're being lied to. He's yours if you want him.

YOUNG MAN

I don't want anything from you.

FX - MECHANICAL BIRD CREAKS A BIT, THEN SINGS

MUSIC - Evil bird song

BOY

(GIGGLES)

FX - BIRD FLIES, LANDS ON BOY'S SHOULDER

BOY (CONT'D)

You see, it likes you. It looks rather nice on your shoulder.

YOUNG MAN

I can't pay.

BOY

You've already paid.

NARRATOR

Then he turned his head and looked down the stairs and seemed to listen. I heard a wind rising. It made a low, souging [soffing] moan as it came up through the channel of the staircase, a deep and lonely and restless cry. The boy looked back at me.

FX - LOW MOAN FROM DEPTHS OF HELL

BOY

Now go. I hear my father coming.
The awful old goat.

FX - METAL SOUNDS TO GO WITH BIRD, BELOW

BOY (CONT'D)

(EVIL LAUGH)

NARRATOR

I backed away and my heels struck the stair behind me. I was in such a hurry to get away I fell sprawling across the granite steps. The bird on my shoulder took off, rising in widening circles through the air, but when I found my feet it glided down to where it had rested before on my shoulder and I began to run back up the way I had come.

FX - FOOTSTEPS UP STONE STAIRCASE

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I climbed in haste for a time but soon was tired again and had to slow to a walk. I began to think about what I would say when I reached the main staircase and was discovered.

YOUNG MAN

(REHEARSED) I will confess everything and accept my punishment, whatever that is.

BIRD

(WHISTLES GAY AND HUMOROUS DITTY)

EXT. ITALIAN CLIFFSIDE - NIGHT

NARRATOR

I fell silent though as I reached the gate, quieted by a different song not far off: a girl's sobs. I listened, confused, and crept uncertainly back to where I had murdered Lithodora's beloved. I heard no sound except for Dora's cries. No men shouting, no feet running on the steps.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I had been gone half the night, it seemed to me, but when I reached the ruins where I had left the Saracen and looked upon Dora it was if only minutes had passed. I came toward her and whispered to her, afraid almost to be heard. The second time I spoke her name she turned her head and looked at me with red-rimmed hating eyes and screamed

DORA

Get away! (at lib fighting with narrator under...)

NARRATOR

I wanted to comfort her, to tell her I was sorry, but when I came close she sprang to her feet and ran at me, striking me and flaying at my face with her fingernails while she cursed my name.

I meant to put my hands on her shoulder to hold her stiff but when I reached for her they found her smooth white neck instead.

DORA

(her protests turn to screams, then, diminish)

MUSIC - terminates

FX - CRACKING OF THUNDER, LIGHT RAIN.

CASSIE

You... You killed her. All for...
Oh...

NARRATOR

Her father and his fellows and my unemployed friends discovered me weeping over her. Running my fingers through the silk of her long black hair. Her father fell to his knees and took her in his arms and for a while the hills range with her name over and over again.

MAN

Lithodora! LITHODORA!!!!

SOLDIER

What happened here?

YOUNG MAN

The Arab, that monkey from the desert, he did this. He lured her here and when he couldn't force her innocence from her he throttled her in the grass and I found them and we fought. I killed him with a block of stone.

SOLDIER

You killed him with --

BIRD

(WHISTLES, MOURNFUL SWEET MELODY)

SOLDIER

(entranced)

Oh, poor Lithodora.

SOLDIER 2

Take faith, we will avenge her.

NARRATOR

I held Lithodora in my arms as we walked down the steps. As we went on our way the bird began to sing again as I told them the Saracen had planned to take the sweetest and most beautiful girls and auction their white flesh in Araby - a more profitable line of trade than selling wine. The bird was by now whistling a marching song and the faces of the men who walked with me were rigid and dark.

FX - SHOUTING, GUNFIRE, TORCHES, FLAMES. A MOB DESCENDS UPON THE ARAB'S BOAT AND BURNS IT.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Ahmed's men burned along with the Arab's ship, and sank in the harbor. His goods, stored in a warehouse by the quay, were seized and his money box fell to me as a reward for my heroism.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

No one ever would've imagined when I was a boy that one day I would be the wealthiest trader on the whole Amalfi coast, or that I would come to own the prized vineyards of Don Carlotta, I who once worked like a mule for his coin. No one would've guessed that one day I would be the beloved mayor of Sulle Scalle, or a man of such renown that I would be invited to a personal audience with his holiness the pope, who thanked me for my many well-noted acts of generosity. The springs inside the pretty tin bird wore down, in time, and it ceased to sing, but by then it did not matter if anyone believed my lies or not such was my wealth and power and fame.

FX - MECHANICAL SOUND EFFECTS FOLLOW THIS PASSAGE,
CULMINATING WITH A RADIO TUNING IN TO ARCHIVAL SOUND OF
MUSSOLINI'S SPEECHES, MIXED WITH THE SINGING OF THE BIRD

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

However. Several years before the tin bird fell silent, I woke one morning in my manor to find it had constructed a nest of wire on my windowsill, and filled it with fragile eggs made of bright silver foil. I regarded these eggs with unease but when I reached to touch them, their mechanical mother nipped at me with her needle-sharp beak and I did not after that time make any attempt to disturb them. Months later the nest was filled with foil tatters. The young of this new species, creatures of a new age, had fluttered on their way. I cannot tell you how many birds of tin and wire and electric current there are in the world now - but I have, this very month, heard speak of our new prime minister, Mr. Mussolini. When he sings of the greatness of the Italian people and our kinship with our German neighbors, I am quite sure I can hear a tin bird singing with him. Its tune plays especially well amplified over modern radio.

FX - Mussolini speech hits a high note, cheers

MUSIC - Bird song's patriotic ditty hits a peak

SFX - sound design calms, quiets. Almost bucolic country charm now.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Oh, where are we now? Ah. The Villa. Would you like to come in?

CASSIE

No.

NARRATOR

You see, I don't live in the hills anymore. It has been years since I saw Sulle Scale. I discovered, as I descended at last into my senior years, that I could no longer attempt the staircase. I told people it was my poor sore old knees. But in truth, I developed a fear of heights.

MUSIC - Mechanical birdsong theme - sting, OUT.

24

INT. BACK OF GUSSY'S BOOKSHOP - NIGHT

24

SFX - Cliffside fades away to slow ticking of clock - in the back room of Mr. Gussy's again.

CASSIE

I'm... I'm back.

FX - Mechanical spppprrrrinnngggg! Mechanical crow comes alive

CASSIE (CONT'D)

Ahh! What the hell is THAT?!

MUSIC - Off-melody, mechanical tune CROW SONG fades

CASSIE (CONT'D)

Oh it's a... bird... A... Oh, shit.
Oh shit oh shit oh shit!

GUSSY

What the hell did you do, Cassie?

FX - CROW sings, a laughing, sarcastic, tune.

CASSIE
Mr. Gussy? What the hell are you
doing here?

GUSSY
Well, it's my bookshop.

CASSIE
You're supposed to be in the
hospital.

GUSSY
I figured you might be getting back
to mischief. No boy, no school, no
home to go to, you weren't sneaking
off to smoke pot with the big kids,
were ya? No, you were dabbling in
something a lot more dangerous.

CASSIE
You should've told me...

GUSSY
I did tell you. I told you to
bring the book to me.

CASSIE
Why? So you could escape the
hospital? You seem perfectly
capable of doing that without the
book!

GUSSY
No. No I need it so I can find
them.

CASSIE
Find... wait- what? No, Mr. Gussy.

GUSSY
You need to help me, Cassie.
They're gone from this world, but I
think with the Dark Tome... I might
be able to find them. I can't do
it by myself.

FX - The mechanical bird sings a sweet mocking tone.

CASSIE
Shut up! Shut up you horrible
bird! I don't ever want to open
that book again!

FX - CASSIE PICKS UP A BOOK AND THROWS IT AT THE BIRD, HITS IT, GEARS AND BOLTS AND BOOKS SCATTERING, BUT THROUGHOUT, THE BIRD'S SONG INTENSIFIES

GUSSY

The Dark Tome doesn't light up for me like it does for you. I guess I've gotten too old. Lost some of the magic. With you, Cassie, we can travel all sorts of places. Come on.

CASSIE

Bye, Mr. Gussy.

SFX - Cassie rushes off.

MUSIC - Energetic, mysterious

26

EXT. STREET, TO INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

26

CASSIE

(NARRATING) I had lost track of time. When I went into Gussy's bookshop, it was - maybe 4 - and now it was full dark. Since it was no longer safe in the place I ran away to hide, I figured it couldn't be any worse to go home. My mom would be pissed. Pissed drunk at least.

SFX - Door bursts open into apartment.

Cassie's mom is drinking alone, morose, in the center of their bare two bedroom shithole apartment.

MOM

Where have you been?

CASSIE

Nowhere, mom.

FX - Outside, a mechanical scratching of wings as the bird lands on the stoop

MOM

Don't you lie to me! You smell like you've been hanging out around a campfire. And have you been drinking?

Cassie appraises herself - wine spilled from tavern scene all over her.

CASSIE
You wouldn't believe me if I told
you.

BIRD
(Sings)

MOM
(DREAMILY) Oh, no of course not...

CASSIE
Where's Mark?

MOM
He's out getting pizza, I think.
That or more vodka. Oh shit, the
bottle.

FX - bottle sloshes as the mom reaches for it.

MOM (CONT'D)
He'll back in a minute. Why, you
got a problem with him?

CASSIE
It's not that. Hey, hold on a
second. I need to let something
in.

MOM
Oh, sure.

FX - window opens. Mechanical bird enters, flaps wings over
to Mom's shoulder.

MOM (CONT'D)
What the FUCK is this?

CASSIE
It's a mechanical bird, mom, he
came out of hell, I thought you'd
get along well with him.

MOM
It's a... the fuuuuuuuuuck.

CASSIE
Try telling it a lie. It loves
lies.

MOM
I never lie, Cassie, not to you,
not to anybody.

FX - Bird starts singing.

CASSIE
Holy shit, it works.

MOM
What?

CASSIE
Try it again.

MOM
What are you talking about?

CASSIE
Like, talk about your drinking.

MOM
What drinking? Fuck, Cassie, I
told you, I'm trying to quit.

FX - Bird starts singing sweetly again.

CASSIE
It really works. It's like I don't
even care anymore. Mark hits me,
you know.

MOM
He never hits you.

FX - Bird sings.

CASSIE
You and that bird, mom, I think
you're going to get along great.

MOM
You don't know what it's like for
me as a person. I didn't sign up
to be a single mom. I didn't even
want to be a mom in the first
place. Wait, that's not what I
meant to say.

FX - Bird starts trilling again.

CASSIE
I think it is.

Cassie starts walking.

MOM

Cassie! Cassie! I love you,
Cassie, don't forget that!
Everything I do, I'm thinking of
you, first!

BIRD

(Sings)

MOM

Would someone turn that horrible
thing... OFF!

SFX - Mom shrieks and throws vodka bottle against the wall,
it shatters.

SFX - Door slams.

27

INT. CASSIE'S ROOM

27

MUSIC - Theme of THE DARK TOME starts rising again

CASSIE

I got in my room and I didn't start
crying, like I thought I would.
Instead, I found myself thinking of
the Dark Tome. I started thinking
about Mr. Gussy. And most of all,
I started thinking about that damn
bird. I closed my eyes and the
sound of those seaside cliffs kept
coming back to me. I stared at the
ceiling and the shadows looked like
the charred trees on the staircase
to hell. I heard cars on the
street outside and I swore, beneath
them I could hear the laughing song
of the mechanical bird. From my
window I could see all of main
street, from the barber's to the
furniture store to the unremarkable
two-story tenement on the corner.
Gussy's. My window overlooked a
fire escape and my mom would be
passed out in an hour if she wasn't
already. And I didn't care what
she had to say anyway. I opened
the window, climbed out onto the
rusty metal stairs, and headed to
Gussy's again. I needed another
story.

MUSIC - DARK TOME theme, up and over.