The Little Mermaid

At the very bottom of the ocean, deeper than any human can dive, lies the kingdom of the Sea People – Mertopolis. Down there, the water is as blue as a summer sky and colourful seaweed forests grow on the ocean floor. Hidden in the heart of one of the forests, you'll find a palace with walls made of pearls and a roof of silver seashells. This is the home of Neptune, the Sea King, and his three mermaid daughters: Athena, Kai and Liberty.

If you're lucky, you might see the flash of their shimmering tails and glittering hair as they swim through the sea – and if you keep very quiet, you might hear Liberty, the littlest mermaid, singing a haunting mermaid song.



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When the Sea King's daughters were young, they spent their days playing hide-and-seek with the fish and looking after their beautiful gardens. Athena, the eldest, had a garden full of shells. Kai, the middle sister, had a garden shaped like a whale. Liberty, the littlest mermaid, filled her garden with things she'd collected from shipwrecks. In pride of place was a statue of a human boy.

Liberty longed to meet a human, and to see the world above the waves for herself, but she had to wait till her sixteenth birthday. Each evening at sunset, her sisters waved her goodbye and swam to the surface, while she was left alone in her garden, wishing she were with them. And each morning at dawn, when they returned, she begged them to tell her all about it – about the flowers that smelled sweet and the great glittering cities and, best of all, the mysterious people who had legs instead of tails.

At last, Liberty's sixteenth birthday arrived. Her family gave her glorious gifts – a new coral comb for her hair, and strange and wonderful plants from the tropical seas for her garden – but she barely noticed. She was too busy counting down the seconds until the sun had disappeared beneath the horizon. Finally, when the sea was as dark as the night sky above, she swam towards the surface without waiting for her sisters.

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Liberty burst out of the water and took a deep breath of air. She looked around: the sky was inky black and scattered with stars, and sailing close by was a ship with golden windows, like little suns. Liberty swam over to it and peered in at the windows, watching the people laughing and dancing and singing together. Real humans! She had never seen such beautiful creatures. Most beautiful of all was a prince with dark eyes and a friendly smile. He looked just like the statue in her garden.

But then – CRASH – thunder shot through the sky, and all of a sudden a great wave hit the ship

and snapped it in half. A wave swept Liberty backwards, tumbling her upside down, but she pushed herself to the surface again and swam towards the wreckage. 'I have to save the Prince!' she thought. But the night was so dark, it was impossible to see anything. Then a flash of lightning lit up the sea and the sky, and Liberty saw the Prince, floating in the water with his eyes closed, cold and still.



She snatched the Prince from the waves and swam and swam to find dry land. She was running out of time. The sun was coming up and she had to be home before morning…

At last, the water became warmer and shallower, and soon Liberty had reached a beach. She placed the Prince gently on the sand and woke him by singing a mermaid song. Her breath caught in her throat as she saw his eyes. They were as deep and as beautiful as the ocean. She couldn't bring herself to look away… but then she felt the sun on her skin, and she came to her senses. She had to go home.

The Prince pushed himself up on his elbows and reached for her hand. 'Who are you?' he asked.

But Liberty turned and dived beneath the waves, before the sun could burn her skin.

Back at the Sea King's palace, Liberty told her sisters about the Prince. Her heart hurt with longing for him.

'Forget about him,' said Athena.

'There are so many amazing things to see in the world,' said Kai. 'Don't waste your time worrying about a boy!'

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But Liberty was in love.

The ocean seemed dead and cold and boring to her now. She longed for the tickle of the wind on her skin and the warmth of the sun on her face. She wanted to taste the strange food humans ate, and to dance to the music of a string quartet. Most of all, she wanted to be with the Prince.

So one night, she slipped away from her sisters and swam to the coldest, darkest part of the ocean, where nothing ever grew. There she found a slime-covered cave, guarded by an army of toads. This was the home of Sycorax, the Sea Witch.

‘You want to live above the water. You want legs instead of a tail. And you want the handsome prince to fall in love with you.’

‘I know what you want,’ Sycorax laughed. ‘You want to live above the water. You want legs instead of a tail. And you want the handsome prince to fall in love with you.’

‘Yes!’ said Liberty.

‘I can make a potion to give you legs – but there’s a catch. You’ll have to pay me for it, and I don’t want money. I want your beautiful voice.’

Liberty drew back from the Sea Witch. ‘How can I win the Prince’s heart if I can’t even speak to him?’ she asked.

‘You’ll find a way,’ said Sycorax, shrugging. ‘Or you won’t. It’s all the same to me. Oh, and one other thing: if the Prince falls in love with you, you’ll get your voice back. But if he doesn’t, you’ll stay silent forever…’

‘If the Prince falls in love with you, you’ll get your voice back.’

That evening, Liberty swallowed the thick, black potion Sycorax had given her. She felt as though her throat was on fire and her body was burning – but that night, as she reached the water’s surface, she looked down and realized she had legs. She laughed with joy and ran onto the shore. ‘I’m human at last!’ she tried to say. But when she opened her mouth, no noise came out.

Liberty walked from the beach to the harbour, and then through cobbled streets, past tall houses. She peered at the people inside and wished she could sit with them by their cosy fires. Her legs were growing tired and it was getting late. But then she turned a corner, and there was the Prince’s palace, more magnificent than she could have imagined. The walls were made of polished stone that glowed golden in the sunset, and the gardens were filled with lemon and orange trees. She walked up to the front door. She was working up the courage to knock when someone opened it. The Prince!

‘Is it you?’ he asked, taking her hand. ‘Are you the girl who saved my life during the storm?’

Liberty tried to say, ‘Yes!’ But she couldn’t speak.

The Prince frowned, unconvinced. ‘Sing me the song you sang to wake me up,’ he said. ‘Then I’ll know it’s really you.’

Liberty tried as hard as she could, but she couldn’t make a sound.

The Prince let go of her hand and turned away. ‘The girl who saved my life had the most beautiful voice in the world,’ he said. ‘One day I’ll find her and ask her to marry me.’



Liberty opened her mouth to protest, but the Prince had already disappeared back inside, shutting the door in her face.

Liberty ran away from the palace and sat on a rock at the water’s edge. She thought her heart might break. She had given up her family, her home and her voice for a boy she hardly knew, and he hadn’t fallen in love with her. Now she would be silent forever…

But then – SPLASH! Two mermaids burst up from beneath the waves and beckoned to her. She didn’t recognize them at first – their hair was cut short – but then one of them cried, ‘Liberty!’ and she saw they were her sisters.

‘We sold our hair to Sycorax, so that she’d give you your voice back,’ Athena said. ‘Try to sing – you’ll see!’

She cried as she sang, and as the hot, salty tears touched her legs, they transformed back into a tail.

Liberty closed her eyes and tried to sing her mermaid song. Her voice was hoarse at first, but then it came flooding back, and she was so relieved that she started to cry. As the hot, salty tears touched her legs, they transformed back into a strong, shimmering tail. She laughed with relief. She was herself again.

But just as she slipped into the water to join her sisters, the Prince came running up the beach.

‘You are the girl who saved me! I recognized your beautiful song!’ he cried, flicking his hair from his eyes, which didn’t look as deep or as beautiful as Liberty had remembered them. ‘Come with me to my palace. We’ll get married in the morning!’

But Liberty shook her head. ‘I have my own palace, thank you,’ she said.

The Prince opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. He closed his mouth again. He looked a bit like a fish, which reminded Liberty – she had to go home. She waved as she dived down into the cool, refreshing water.

‘Wait!’ called the Prince, finding his voice at last, but Liberty didn’t look back. She flipped her tail in the spray and disappeared beneath the surface. She breathed in deeply. She had missed everything about the ocean – the fish that flashed through the water, the taste of salt, the freedom to swim and sing and be exactly who she was. She took her sisters’ hands and dived down to the pearly palace, where her father was waiting for her.

It was wonderful to be home.



Mertopolis

Welcome to Mertopolis, where Liberty, Kai and Athena live. Look out for Liberty's music school, the mermaids' gardens and Neptune's palace. But, whatever you do, beware of Sycorax's cave – it's marked by inky black water. Don't stray too far in...

Come up for air and visit the Prince's palace. The gardens are pretty but the conversation isn't great.

The garden that Kai tends is shaped like a whale.

The Sea King's palace – Neptune lives here. Knock to see if he's in.

Athena's garden – this is made of shells and shaped like a snail.

Liberty's garden – filled with objects from shipwrecks. Look out for the statue of the human boy.

Sycorax's cave – DON'T ENTER. GO BACK!

For Mattie and Frankie
– K. D.

To my parents who never tried to lose me in the woods
To my Prince Charming: thanks, I've been looking for that shoe everywhere
– L. C.



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